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A Meeting At The Water Gate

Nehemiah 8:1-18

A spiritual revival

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah take us back to a wonderful time of spiritual revival, when a remnant of the people of God returned from the Babylonian captivity to the land that God had promised to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. They returned to Jerusalem, the place where the LORD chose to make His Name abide, in order to restore the temple worship and to rebuild the city.

The order in which this was undertaken is very interesting, indeed. From a human point of view it would have been a matter of logic to start from the outside, that is, with the city wall and then to proceed with the restoration of the temple. But they did exactly the opposite: they started from within. They started with the center of worship and rebuilt the altar on its foundations. After this they laid the foundation of the temple, which, thanks to the actions of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, was completed after a long interruption and much opposition. Finally, in the days of Nehemiah, the work on the walls and city gates was started, and Nehemiah saw the success of his efforts when Jerusalem's walls were consecrated with music and singing (Neh. 12).

However, there is yet another important feature of this time of return and revival: a renewed interest in the Word of God! God's Word was granted its due place, and its light was put on the lampstand again. In Nehemiah 8 we see a people gathered around the Word and listening attentively to its message. No one was missing. All

the people had gathered like one man and during many hours they listened to the law being read. The ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law (Neh. 8:3). So the return of the remnant to Jerusalem was at the same time a return to God's Word and will. The people woke up when they heard the trumpet-call of the Word.

The Water Gate

In all this Ezra the scribe played an important role (cf. Ezra 7:10). He came to the fore in order to put the Word of God before the Israelites, so that it might get their full attention and be impressed upon their hearts. It is also important to note the place and the time of gathering of the people to hear the reading of the Word, as these circumstances were in perfect harmony with the purpose of the meeting. It took place on the square in front of the Water Gate, which speaks of the cleansing work of the Word of God (cf. John 15:3; Eph. 5:26). The gate was also the place where justice was administered and oaths were taken.

So metaphorically speaking, the people put themselves under the authority of the Word and subjected themselves to the washing of water by the Word. And they gathered in front of the Water Gate on the first day of the seventh month (vv. 1-2), which was an important day in the cycle of annual feasts as it marked the beginning of the final series of feasts after the ingathering of the harvest. On this day they celebrated the Feast of Trumpets, which was followed by the Day of Atonement on the tenth and the Feast of Tabernacles from the 15th to the 22nd of the same month.

According to Leviticus 23:23-24 this first day of the new month was heralded by the blowing of trumpets. Applying this straight away to ourselves, we may say that the trumpet of the Word was being heard again, causing a spiritual reawakening among the remnant of faithful believers, those who have ears to hear what the Spirit has to say to the church (Rev. 2 and 3). It was the first day of the seventh month: a new beginning followed by increasing light, in a time when God's ways were nearing their completion (the number seven speaks of perfection).

The Feast of Tabernacles

Although in Nehemiah 8 the Day of Atonement is not specifically mentioned, the Feast of Tabernacles is prominent. And this feast was kept seven days by God's people, in accordance with the commandment read to them on the second day (vv.

13-18). This was the last one of the seven feasts of the LORD, an occasion of gratitude and joy because of all the blessings received in the Promised Land, when they also remembered God's goodness in the past as well as the redemption from Egypt (Ex. 23:16; Lev. 23:43; Deut. 16:15).

On this first day of the seventh month the Word of God got a special place in the midst of God's people. A platform of wood was made for Ezra and his assistants, and all the people stood up in reverence when the book of the law was opened (v. 5). Everyone witnessed this solemn act and then they humbly bowed with their faces to the ground (v. 6). What an impressive sight this must have been! Such reverence and gratitude for the opening of God's Word is very meaningful for us as well. In the assistants of Ezra we see a picture of the various gifts the Lord has given to the Church: the shepherds and the teachers who explain the Word (vv. 4, 7). Ministering the Word of God is true Levitical service. And from the many names listed in these verses we learn that God appreciated the work of every one of them.

Another point to which I would like to draw our attention is the impact of the Word of God on those who listened. For as a result of what they heard, they became true doers of the Word. On the one hand, they humbled themselves because they realized their unfaithfulness, and turning away from God. They mourned and wept, when they heard the words of the Law (v. 9). On the other hand, they rejoiced in the LORD because of what He still granted to the remnant of His people. There was great gladness in obeying the Law, His revealed Word (vv. 10, 12, 17).

In this respect, this chapter bears a striking resemblance to Ezra 3, where we find both shouting for joy and weeping with a loud voice when the foundation of the new temple was being laid. Does the Word of God not always have this twofold impact? On the one hand we need to be admonished and on the other hand, to be comforted. On the one hand, we need to humble ourselves, on the other hand, we need to be strengthened and edified in our faith. For the joy of the LORD is our strength (v. 10). God's Word is as sweet as honey in our mouth, but in our hearts it produces bitter regret and godly sorrow (cf. Ezek. 2:8-3:3; Rev. 10:9-10).

The interest in the Word of God was not a temporal thing. One day of Bible study was not enough! The next day, there was another gathering (v. 13), during which they searched the Scriptures and found the instructions concerning the Feast of Tabernacles. They immediately acted in accordance with what they had read and set out to make preparations to keep this feast. As we have already noted, the Day of Atonement is not mentioned here. But the remnant of Israel did show readiness to humble themselves, as prescribed for that Day (cf. Lev. 23:27-32), namely on the very first day of the seventh month (v. 9).

For Israel, the fulfillment of this great event is as yet a thing of the future. The great Day of Atonement will come when Christ returns from heaven, when His people will look on Him whom they have pierced and will mourn for Him (Zech. 12:10). After that, the great Feast of Tabernacles will follow: a millennium of gratitude and joy because of all the blessings that God has prepared for His people.

The gathering in front of the Water Gate resulted in the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles both in Jerusalem and in other places. So the trumpet-call to hear God's Word had wonderful results. And it continued to occupy a central place. Day by day, from the first day until the last day of the feast, Ezra read from the book of the law of God (v. 18). May God grant us the same desire to hear His Word, so that our prayer will be: Let me hear Your Word continually!

Physically, we can be in the place after God's mind, separated from the idols of Babylon. We may set up the Lord's Table, and gather to His name alone in the acknowledgement of His authority and the liberty of the Holy Spirit. We may try to rebuild the house of God and the city of God, the temple of the living God, so that others see what the Church should be like. But will it be to our benefit, if at the same time, we do not have this intense desire to hear the Word of God and to act accordingly? For that is what characterizes a true spiritual awakening.

Oude Sporen 2019

