

On 5 June we thought about 'Grief and Joy', from Nehemiah chapter 8. We saw that, in spite of all the pressing practical needs, there were important matters to sort out first. We considered three things:

(a) Listening to God's Word: All the people, including children old enough to understand, gathered to hear God's laws being read and explained. Instead of the ceremonies of the Temple, there was a simple setting suited to the practicalities of making sure the people received and understood God's word clearly. To hear God's word is to hear the voice of God, which is why we stand in the same tradition.

(b) Learning to Rejoice: the people wept as they listened. There is a place for sadness and grief in the Christian life, as the terrible effects of sin are exposed, but God's ultimate purpose is that we should find joy in him – a joy which is not dependent on happy outward circumstances. Old Testament religion is often caricatured as a grim business of sacrifices and fasting, but there are many commands to rejoice in God and his goodness, as we find in the Psalms for example. Bible passages noted which can help us to rejoice in the Lord as we should include Romans 8:31-39 and John 10:1-14.

(c) Living in Outside Shelters: The people were instructed to collect branches and build shelters to live in during the festival. This was a command of the law which seems to have been neglected. Its purpose was to remind every generation of Israelites that their ancestors had lived in tents in their wilderness journeys, and in a deeper way to teach the truth that God's people are always a pilgrim people who are dependent on him to sustain them. For ourselves, we need to acknowledge that our homes, our jobs and our outward circumstances are all temporary. We are travelling to a heavenly destination, and it is God who provides for us.