

We're back from the Feast. Now what?

(Using the Feast as a Springboard)

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by Philip Shields

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We're back from the Feast of Tabernacles. Is it going to be business as usual, or will we have "post feast blues" – or will you let this period after the Feast be a springboard to a closer walk with God? This very practical sermon examines Nehemiah's Feast of Tabernacles and shows us what they did right after their powerful Feast (Nehemiah 7, 8, 9, 10), as an example for us to follow.
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Greetings, members of Abba's House and dear brethren in Jesus our Messiah. We're back from the Feast of Tabernacles. Now what?

Is it back to the usual grind – or can we use the Feast as a springboard to a closer walk with our Abba and our Master, Jesus the Messiah? No matter what kind of Feast you had, we can choose to make the next 12 months a season of growth and of pleasing the Eternal.

If your feast was below par, do all in God's power in you to have a more meaningful Feast next year, and a season of growth in the next few months. If your feast was incredibly inspiring, then use that inspiration to propel you to new levels of living this life, this Way.

We heard God's words to us. Those words can provide us with faith ("faith comes by the hearing of the word" – Romans 10:17). But unless we mix the faith from those messages with actions that show we were changed by those words, they will mean little. Scripture tells us doers of the Word will be justified, not just hearers of the word (Romans 2:13).

Instead of getting back to "business as usual" without any changes, and instead of sinking into any kind of "post-feast blues", let's choose a better way. Let's learn from an example of another group of God's children and how they responded to their Feast of Tabernacles. It was so dramatic that the Almighty recorded it for eternity for all people who came along after them.

So let's look this particular Feast of Tabernacles thousands of years ago, and how those children of Israel used the Feast's messages to change their lives. That's how I want to spend the rest of this sermon. God tells us about the Israelites as we can learn from them (1 Corinthians 10:11).

Nehemiah's Great Feast

The story of Nehemiah centers around the period after the captivity and scattering of Judah. The Persian empire has conquered Babylon, and the Persians allow some Jews to return to their homeland. First, Zerubbabel returns with 50,000 Jews to rebuild the Temple, followed by Ezra, who helps restore respect for God's Law and worship, and finally by Nehemiah, whose main task is rebuilding Jerusalem's wall. Nehemiah's part takes place during the reign of Artaxerxes I, a little

over four centuries before Christ's birth. I will give a sermon in the future on the incredible meaning of rebuilding the wall (Nehemiah 5:16; 6:16), which is completed in a scant fifty two days, about the time corresponding to our late August- early September. This is just before the autumn festival and holyday season, beginning with Yom Teruah, the Feast of Trumpets on the 1st day of the Hebrew seventh month.

On the first day of Tishri, at the first sighting of the faint crescent of the new moon, "all the people gathered as one man in the open square" (Nehemiah 7:73; 8:1) Please take the time to read all of Nehemiah 8 to get the full force of what happens. Ezra the Scribe brings out the Book of the Law and reads it aloud to the congregation on Yom Teruah, the Feast of Trumpets, the feast of shouting and alarm, from morning to midday (8:1-3). The brethren bow their heads and worship the great God, with their faces to the ground (verse 6).

Keep in mind that "the Law" in Hebrew is the "Torah". Torah does not just mean "the Law" as we tend to think of it, using just the English word "law". Many will think, when given the English word "law", of police, judges, courts, fines, penalties, jail and bail bonds, when we think of "the law". It's a focus on legal issues, but Torah really refers to all the Teachings of God. Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon says it includes God's law, and it also includes all of God's teachings. This would have to include all the teachings on God's mercy, the coming Messiah, teachings about God's grace and God's way. "Torah" in Nehemiah 8 specifically refers to the first five books, since it talks about "the Law (Torah) of Moses, which the Eternal (YHWH) had commanded Israel", but in its broader sense, Torah means "teachings".

Let's continue now with Nehemiah 8. In verses 7-8 we see that Ezra did not monopolize the teaching. There were many teachers who helped groups of people understand its meaning and how it applies to everyday situations. Even today, God instructs us that He speaks to His entire body by ALL His body parts – not just one or two parts. God has not gone mute. He still speaks today, and He speaks by and through the various parts of His body. Read it for yourself in 1 Cor. 14:26-33, where it clearly says "you can ALL prophesy [preach, teach] one by one..." All of them. All 120 disciples spoke in other languages in Acts 2. All of them did. Now let's get back to Nehemiah 8.

Nehemiah 8:5-8

And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. Then all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah,

Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. 8 So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading.

Nehemiah 8:9-12

And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep." [this was the Feast of Trumpets, Yom Teruah] For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law. 10 Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." 11 So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved." 12 And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.

The Feast should be a time of great rejoicing. It pictures the grand harvest of lives when God sets His hand to convert the world. It is not the time for sad, corrective, demeaning sermons or discussions. It is a time of joy, peace, happiness, plenty.

Something majestic happens next. They read how they should keep the Feast of Tabernacles in temporary booths, so they immediately obey God's command and build booths (verses 14-17). Nehemiah is careful to point out that this is the first time the Feast was kept in booths since the days of Joshua. During this whole time, the brethren are thrilled to be hearing and doing what God has commanded. "And there was very great gladness" (verse 17).

It is obvious, in reading Nehemiah 8, that these early brethren have had a great, inspiring and moving fall festival season. The question remains: "Now what?" What should they do now?

Now What?

"Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month, the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads" (Nehemiah 9:1).

That twenty-fourth day of that seventh month is two days after the holyday, the 8th day Feast, what many call "the Last Great Day". They are still there en masse! Unlike what we so often see nowadays, with people already checking out and driving home on the 8th day, on holy time, these children of Israel did not do that. They stayed on as a group.

What are they doing immediately after the Feast? They are fasting and repenting as a group, together! They decided – as led by the Levite Jeshua (same name as the Greek form Jesus or Ieosis) to separate from their pagan foreign mates and to focus entirely on what God taught them. What an impressive example for us end-time believers! What might God do for us, for the church, or the world even, if His called people would humble themselves and fast and pray and seek Him after hearing His words at His Feast?

I should note here that in the new covenant, Paul and Peter teach us that if our unconverted mate is pleased to dwell with us, we should not separate from them but rather be a light in the home (1 Cor. 7:10-16; 1 Pet. 3:1-6). In fact, the believing mate sanctifies the unbelieving mate (1 Cor. 7:14).

So the Jews in Nehemiah's day fasted and sought God, just as God tells Solomon back in 2 Chronicles 7:14:

"If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land."

But it does not end there. These children of Israel took actions that dealt with the errors and sins in their lives at that time. We today are not to separate from foreign spouses, but the lesson to be learned here is to take dramatic action after the feast in whatever areas we have that need to be cleaned up.

The rest of Nehemiah 9 contains a long prayer of confession and repentance, including an oath to recommit themselves to the great God of heaven (Nehemiah 9:36-38). The people now follow the righteous leaders' example and commit themselves to obeying God's instructions under a new formal covenant or agreement (Nehemiah 10:28-29). They commit themselves to stop intermarrying with the surrounding nations, to start keeping God's sabbath day holy, to observe the seventh-year land rest and the laws regarding debt forgiveness (verses 30-31). From there they also recommit to observing the laws of firstfruits and tithing carefully—and that they "will not neglect the house of our God" (verses 35-39).

Keep in mind, they were not just individual believers, but a nation (though under Persia) trying to live by God's laws. When Yeshua returns as King of Kings, His laws will once again be enacted around the world.

This is not a fairy tale, but a true piece of history.

Can we not do similar things and deal with the issues in our lives that have kept us from fully following our God?

Restored Commitment

The excitement we feel from this most recent Feast will be absolutely meaningless unless we have come home with a restored commitment and a plan of action to apply what we have heard. Or, if you are returning from a feast site where the sermons were mediocre, you can still use this time to re-dedicate yourself to God and evaluate the areas of our lives where we need to refocus.

Those “areas where we need to refocus” will not be the same for everybody. We’re individuals, with our own set of unique strengths and weaknesses. With that in mind, I will list a few examples just as a means of priming the pump of your thinking. You may come up with your own entire set of areas where you know you need to let Christ live in you more powerfully than you ever have before.

So here are a few ideas to consider:

- Start with a day of fasting, as they did in Ezra’s day. Confess our sins before our Redeemer and our Abba who loves us deeply. Confessing is a good start.
- It may be a good idea to review your notes from the Feast. When I take notes, I put an asterisk beside the notes that especially speak to me and which I wish to focus on more later.
- Perhaps have a family discussion of ways that the whole family can be more pleasing to God. Fathers, though you lead this discussion, I suggest you create the atmosphere where every person feels able to contribute. It should be a “safe” area for everyone. No one is laughed at, ridiculed or poked fun at – but everyone can contribute, even a 4 year old. Out of the mouths of babes we often find clarity, in fact.
- Bow down and ask Jesus to help us see how we must become smaller and He must become fully formed in us (Galatians 4:19). As this is happening, our lives will reflect Messiah-in-us and we will start to live more holy lives, as His holiness becomes more and more evident. We can’t just strive to be like him, but instead let Him live in us as He would like – and His presence is what makes us holy. Let’s ask Yeshua – our King Jesus – to teach us how to use God’s breath, God’s Holy Spirit to put to death the deeds of the flesh (Romans 8:13-14).
- Commit now to living in the Spirit, so we can please God (Romans 8:8-10) as we set our minds on spiritual things above (Colossians 3:1-3), and not on things of the flesh, or on physical matters.
- Commit to seeking first the kingdom of God and its righteousness (Matthew 6:33).
 - God is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6)

- Evaluate specific areas where we have become lax and determine to take concrete steps right now to change in these areas.
 - For example: evaluate how we keep the Sabbath holy. Are we watching TV on the Sabbath? Are we shopping or going out to eat on the Sabbath? Are we pushing work activities to the last minute late Friday afternoons, and spilling over into the Sabbath, after the sun has set?
 - Evaluate our personal life's example to people at work and in our neighborhood. Would our neighbors and work associates want to be around us? Is Christ in us so obvious that when we speak, they hear the Messiah's words? When we act, they see the Anointed's actions? Would people want to associate with other brethren you know because they are inspired by the way we each live? (I know I have a long way to go here).
 - Evaluate your own family and marriage. Does your marriage reflect the Holy Spirit living and guiding it? Are your children watching a godly marriage – or a couple of hypocrites, who act one way among brethren but are totally different at home, behind closed doors?
 - I'd recommend we take a look at our priorities. Do we go to bed early enough so we can get up early enough to gather our manna? I recommend you hear my sermon on manna – it's about putting God first in your day, doing your daily Bible study and praying, so we fill our minds with God's words, every single day without fail. We don't fail to eat physical food, so why should we fail to eat our even more important spiritual food? The flesh is weak. If we don't bulk up on God's meat of His word, we will not be able to resist sin very well.
 - Are we learning to live by faith of Jesus!? That was my part 3 to the 3 part series on Gal. 2:20. I pray you will all hear it. I'm still trying to practice that sermon myself. I preach to myself, always.
- Another big area: have we accepted the work of Yeshua, our King, in our lives? Are we seeking God's righteousness by faith, which is gifted to us (Romans 5:17; Phil. 3:8-9) – or are we still making the huge mistake of the Israelites who seek to establish their own righteousness by the law instead of by faith? Read it for yourself in Romans 9:30-34 and Romans 10:1-4. GOD alone is truly righteous and God alone has a righteousness exceeding that of the Pharisees – God's holiness, God's perfection. He is willing to grant it to us. AS we receive His righteousness by faith, we will now live a new way. Faith IS proven by works that prove we have God's righteousness (all of James 2). I can't make myself righteous, but Jesus can if I accept His righteousness for me, in faith, and trust He's covered me with HIS righteousness.

You get the point. Let's learn from the Jews in Nehemiah's day. What did they do? They used the Feast to be a springboard to higher spiritual living. For us in the new covenant, that means getting ourselves out of the way and letting the Living Word live in us again, powerfully, minute by minute.

How to Evaluate how Good your Feast was

God continually warns His people not to be just hearers of the Word but doers. The zealous are those who learn they have dirt on their faces and do something about it—immediately. Those who do not react immediately soon forget the dirt they know is there, and it remains, unwashed (James 1:23-25). Delay can reduce a powerful message's effect to no more impact than a melodic piece of special music (Ezekiel 33:30-32). Swift action beats procrastination any day!

How can you tell what kind of feast you had? In short, if this past Feast results in positive changes, overcoming and growth as it did in Nehemiah's day, then it truly will have been a great Feast.