International Bible Lesson Commentary
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 13-18

International Bible Lessons
Sunday, August 4, 2013
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The **International Bible Lesson** (*Uniform Sunday School Lessons Series*) for **Sunday, August 4, 2013**, is from **Nehemiah 8:1-3, 13-18**. **Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further** follow the verse-by-verse *International Bible Lesson Commentary* (formerly, *Bible Lesson Forum*) below. **Study Hints for Thinking Further** discuss the five questions below to help with class preparation and in conducting class discussion; these hints are available on the *International Bible Lesson Commentary* website. The weekly *International Bible Lesson* is posted each Saturday before the lesson is scheduled to be taught and in *The Oklahoman* newspaper.

International Bible Lesson Commentary

Nehemiah 8:1-3

(Nehemiah 8:1) all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel.

Ezra, who had set his heart to study, to obey, and to teach the law of Moses, fulfilled his heart's desire in a magnificent way when he had the opportunity to read and explained the law of God to everyone in Jerusalem at a gathering of all the people. The Bible in this passage and other passages affirms that the Lord was the One who had given the law to Israel and not Moses by himself.

(Nehemiah 8:2) Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month.

Ezra read and interpreted the law of God based on decades of his study and obedience to the law of God. The Holy Spirit used Ezra's years of faithfulness and obedient study to help and inspire him to teach men, women, and children with the ability to reason, understand, and learn how to apply the law of God in their family, community life, and spiritual life.

(Nehemiah 8:3) He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

The Bible emphasizes the importance of our human, God-given reason. God has said, “Let us reason together.” A biblical faith involves understanding truths that can be taught and obeyed in this life. The Bible does not encourage a blind faith; nor does the Bible teach that people should “just believe.” One reason God gave us the Bible was to help us learn how to reason and understand God, our world, reality, other people, and ourselves in ways that will bless and make truly happy God, others, and ourselves.

Nehemiah 8:13-18

(Nehemiah 8:13) On the second day the heads of ancestral houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to the scribe Ezra in order to study the words of the law.

Everyone, from the highest political and religious leaders to men, women, and children of the general population were expected to study, understand, and obey the law of God. The law of God was given by God for people to obey, and as with any true law there are consequences that follow from obedience and there are consequences that follow from disobedience.

(Nehemiah 8:14) And they found it written in the law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the people of Israel should live in booths during the festival of the seventh month,

It seems that even though this festival may have been celebrated in the past that the part about living in booths had been forgotten. In the Law of Moses, the Lord commanded the people to live in booths to remind them of their historical heritage. After God had freed them from slavery in Egypt, they had sinned and rebelled against God; therefore, God punished them and they wandered in the wilderness until the rebellious generation had died. During their wilderness wandering they had lived in booths made from the branches of nearby trees.

(Nehemiah 8:15) and that they should publish and proclaim in all their towns and in Jerusalem as follows, "Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written."

The people who heard the law read and interpreted by Ezra began to obey the law of God as soon as they understood what the law meant; furthermore, their obedience helped them come to understand the law better and better. Then, throughout all Judah and in all of the towns around Jerusalem, they began to teach others the law of God and encouraged them to obey God very specifically. They learned to obey God as the law had been written rather than try to find ways to “legally” avoid obeying God’s law—as the scribes and Pharisees in Jesus’ day tried to do with some of their rules and regulations.

(Nehemiah 8:16) So the people went out and brought them, and made booths for themselves, each on the roofs of their houses, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim.

The people did what the law of God taught as Ezra interpreted the law and commanded people to obey the law of God. They did not all go to Jerusalem, but wherever they lived they obeyed God and did what a true celebration required of them. Their flat roofs could hold booths and those with different housing built their booths in the public square. Those visiting in Jerusalem built booths even in the temple courts.

(Nehemiah 8:17) And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them; for from the days of Jeshua son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing.

Even though they had previously celebrated the feast, they had not fully obeyed God by building booths. God wants complete obedience, not partial obedience. They experienced great joy when they fully obeyed God to the fullest of their understanding. They had been taught the law of God, had understood the law of God, had obeyed the law of God, had taught others to obey the law of God, and consequently they rejoiced greatly in their hearts and with others around them.

(Nehemiah 8:18) And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the book of the law of God. They kept the festival seven days; and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance.

The people met day by day to learn more of the "book of the law of God," and the time of Ezra marks the true beginning of God's people becoming "the people of the book" or "the people of the Bible." By the time of Jesus, the correct interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures had become of vital importance and Jesus gave the correct interpretation of the Scriptures – much as Ezra had done almost 500 years earlier – for Jesus' teaching led the people to true obedience to God. As with Ezra, the people knew that Jesus both obeyed and taught the Law of God. Jesus was not a hypocrite, and He taught with the authority of one who obeyed God.

Five Questions for Discussion and Thinking Further

1. Why do you think it is important to know that the Law of Moses was given to him by the LORD rather than being a set of laws written by Moses or others with legal training?

2. Why do you think Nehemiah 8:2-3 emphasizes understanding?

3. Why do you think all of the people were attentive as Ezra read and explained the Law of God?

4. Why do you think Nehemiah 8:13 emphasizes that they studied “the words of the law”?

5. How might the nations of the world be different if all political and religious leaders and everyone in every nation studied the words of God’s law or the Bible?

Begin or close your class by reading the short weekly *International Bible Lesson*.
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