

# The Feast Is Over . . . Now What?

by Staff

***Forerunner*, November 1999**

This year the Feast of Tabernacles was a great one—again. We have come home uplifted, encouraged, inspired and corrected. We are filled with resolve to grow and overcome. We recognized God's Spirit in both the ministry and the brethren. We heard expounded a great deal of God's Word, and much of our fellowship centered on spiritual matters. During the Feast we may even have committed ourselves to certain actions. We only wish everyone in the world could have heard what we heard and experienced what we have just experienced. We wonder how a Feast could be any better.

It is a great *feeling*, but now what? We are home now, back in the trenches, back to the daily grind. Is it business as usual, or have the Feast messages made a difference in our lives?

If we are not careful, a feeling is all it will be. Feelings are fine if they motivate us to righteous action. Paul reminds us that it is not the hearers of the Word who will be justified but the doers (Romans 2:13). So what should we be doing *now*?

## **Nehemiah's Great Feast**

What example among God's people in the past can be our model? In the history of God's people, we are certainly not the only ones who have experienced a great Feast of Tabernacles. Another such feast occurred in the days of Nehemiah. We can learn many things from the example they left for us (I Corinthians 10:11).

The story of Nehemiah happens after the captivity and scattering of Judah, when the Persian Empire allows the 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.

Rebuilding the wall is "the work of God" at this time for the Jews (Nehemiah 5:16; 6:16). Under Nehemiah's leadership, they complete the wall in an incredible fifty-two days, finishing in the month of Elul—corresponding to our August-early September, just before the autumn holy day season begins (6:15).

When Tishri, the Hebrew seventh month, comes—the first day of which begins the fall holy days—"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 the Feast of Trumpets, 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). Other leaders continue expounding and explaining the law, giving its meaning so the brethren could understand how it applies to their day-to-day situations (verses 7-8). The reading of the law convicts God's people—whether today or back then (verse 9)—so they repent deeply.

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). The twenty-fourth day of the seventh month is two days *after* the Last Great Day! They are still there en masse!

What are they doing immediately after the Feast? They are *fasting* and *repenting* as a group, together! What an impressive example for us end-time believers! What might God do for us, for the church, for the world even, if His called people would humble themselves and fast and pray and seek Him after hearing His words at His Feast?

Notice what God tells Solomon in II 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." This is exactly what the Jews under Nehemiah were doing.

But it does not end there. These children of Israel now *do* something about what they have heard all feast long. And what they do is in many respects far harder than overcoming some of the problems that face us!

"Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners [dissolving their marriages with pagan mates]; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers" (Nehemiah 9:2). Their children faced the same tests ours face today: a shortage of converted potential mates. Many of them had started dating and marrying "outside the church." Most of those they married never converted to God's truths but remained pagans. This led to whole families forsaking God's way of life. They forsook Israelite culture to the point that Nehemiah later writes that "half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod [a Philistine city], and could not speak the language of Judah" (Nehemiah 13:24). Boaz' marriage to Ruth, a foreigner of Moab, proves to be the exception, not the rule.

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 law under a new formal covenant or agreement (Nehemiah 10:28-29). They commit themselves to stop intermarrying with the surrounding nations, to start keeping the Sabbath 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).

This is not a fairy tale; it is a true piece of history. These people really did these things, and they did them sincerely and wholeheartedly. What an example for those of us fighting the Laodicean attitude!

## Restored Commitment

What is the lesson for us today?

The excitement we feel from this most recent Feast will be absolutely meaningless unless we come home with a restored commitment and a plan of action to *apply* what we have heard. Like those in Nehemiah's day, it would be a good idea to:

- » Fast and confess our sins to our great God. Our list of areas in which we have been unfaithful to God may be different, but confessing those to God is a good start.
- » Gather our families around us and make a renewed covenant to fear God. Get everyone in the family contributing insight about where the family has gone off track and what individual family members can do to get back on track. With the whole family involved, progress and encouragement and real togetherness will develop.
- » Bow before our God and ask Him to form Christ in us (Galatians 4:19). It is time to dedicate ourselves to holiness borne from an active Holy Spirit leading and guiding us (Romans 8:14). While it is still fresh in our minds, we need to take what we have learned at the Feast and put it into practice.
- » Commit now to living in the Spirit, so we can please God (Romans 8:8-10). We must set our minds on things above (Colossians 3:1) and on the things of the Spirit rather than carnal, physical matters. Those of us who insist on keeping our focus on things of the flesh will never please God (Romans 8:5, 8).

So what is the lesson we can learn from the Feast of Tabernacles in Nehemiah's day?

Very simple. We need to *do* something about our feelings from this most recent Feast. We can repent and recommit to God those areas of our lives that fall short of His expectations. Make a list of what needs to be changed this coming year, then list the steps to take to make those changes happen. If you feel it would be helpful, ask for advice from an elder or a long-time, faithful member. The bottom line, however it is accomplished, is to convert the feelings from the Feast into concrete actions that result in real change over the coming year.

That is what these Jews during Nehemiah's day did. They converted their inspired feelings from the Feast into inspired *actions*. They turned their zealous emotion into positive, spiritual *growth*. Emotions will fade, but godly character formed in us will last for eternity!

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!

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. Everything depends on whether we will respond to God's appeal for action—now, before we forget.