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Bible Exposition & Application

In Nehemiah 7 the walls of Jerusalem were complete and the doors in place and so Nehemiah appointed Hanani, his brother, and Hananiah, the commander of the fortress, as rulers over all Jerusalem. He then commanded them to establish security measures over the city by appointing men to stand guard at the gates and to keep the gates shut until it was hot due to the continuing danger of enemy attack. As he walked about the newly restored city he observed it was large and spacious relative to the number of inhabitants. He considered this to be inconsistent with the will of God to rebuild the city. He therefore began to formulate a plan to populate the city by identifying those of Jewish heritage who might move into the city from the nearby Judean countryside. While researching the local inhabitants he discovered an older document containing a record of the Jews who had returned from exile to Babylon ninety years before under King Cyrus. This document is captured for us in chapter 7. For Nehemiah it provided information regarding the Jewish heritage of families who probably still lived in the area. Following up on this research he could formulate a plan to encourage some of them to move to Jerusalem. In Nehemiah 8 the Day of Trumpets arrived and consequently people from all over the Judean countryside travelled up to the newly restored city of Jerusalem. When they saw it their minds were filled with the prospect that the kingdom of God might soon be restored. 140 years before it had been destroyed by the Babylonians, but during the reign of King Cyrus they had been permitted to return. During the reign of King Darius they had rebuilt the Temple. Earlier in the reign of King Artaxerxes they had renovated the Temple. And now under the reign of King Artaxerxes they had been authorized to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. All these steps pointed to the soon restoration of the kingdom of God. And yet for the kingdom of God to come it was necessary that the nation confess their sin and return to God. As such the people

gathered before sunrise at the Water Gate and requested that Ezra bring out the word and read to them. For five hours Ezra read to an audience of perhaps 30-50,000 men, women and children who could understand and obey, the Law of Moses. Since many had already lost their native Hebrew tongue teachers under Ezra's tutelage circulated among the audience and translated from the original Hebrew into their spoken languages and gave an explanation so that the people understood. We mentioned that this procedure stands forever as the model of Bible exposition at its finest.

There are several elements involved in Bible exposition and I want to go through these for anyone here or anyone listening that may be thinking of going into some form of teaching and also for everyone else as a tool to evaluate whether the teacher should actually be teaching. First, as a prerequisite you must have the gift of teaching. This should be obvious. Every believer is given a spiritual gift or gifts. It stands to reason since God is the one who bestows the gifts and teaching is one of those gifts then you must have the gift of teaching as a prerequisite to Bible exposition. The gift of teaching, like several other spiritual gifts, is a gift that is once for all given at the moment of salvation but must be discovered and developed over time. That is to say, its full maturity does not come instantly at salvation and may not even be discovered for years and once it is discovered may take many more years of study and practice to develop to maturity. Second, as a prerequisite you must be humble. Humility before God admits that God is the one who is the knower and that we are seeking to think His thoughts after Him. We are not original in our thoughts, we are derivative. Arrogance, always too apparent, is an immediate turn off to an audience. Humility also involves recognizing the fact that God has given other gifted teachers down through history and that through their careful study we may glean thoughts and understanding. We are not the first people to discover or mine a truth. We must therefore be humble in our disposition as a prerequisite to Bible exposition. Third, as a prerequisite you must pray. The Psalmist says, "Open my eyes that I may behold wonderful things from Your law." This attitude of prayerful dependence is proper to Bible exposition. Without prayerful dependence we are proceeding on our own abilities apart from Him. Fourth, as a prerequisite you must consciously depend upon the Holy Spirit. We should recognize that the Spirit is the ultimate teacher and thereby is the One who illuminates our minds to the meaning of the Scriptures. This does not mean he gives a sudden flash of light to the interpreter. Normally he

illuminates our minds through thoughtful meditation on the word of God as we investigate it carefully. It should be kept in mind that the results are not inspired or inerrant. No human teacher is an inspired or inerrant interpreter of the Bible. We are all subject to error and should proceed with caution.

Fifth, as a prerequisite to Bible exposition you must have an interest in and reverence for the word of God. If you don't have an interest then you are not going to be diligent in your study. If you don't have reverence then your treatment of the Bible will be careless. Both an interest and reverence for the Bible are therefore a prerequisite for solid Bible exposition. Sixth, as a prerequisite you must be willing to study. L. S. Chafer referred to this as "mental sweat." Paul requested that his books be brought to him. He studied and kept up to date with current thinking so he could cast down empty thoughts and vain speculations that turn believer's aside. He was always studying to show himself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed. He was always preparing so that he would be ready to give a defense of the faith. So you must be willing to put in the mental sweat in order to stay current and ready. Seventh, you need to have an understanding of grammar. The Bible is written in human language. Human language is composed of parts of speech like nouns, verbs, participles, prepositions, conjunctions, words, syntax, etc...Each has a particular function it serves in relation to the whole. Changing one word alters the meaning and often dramatically. So teaching the Bible requires understanding grammar.

Eighth, an understanding of the original languages is indispensable or at least the ability to read authors who know the original languages. This is not to say God has never used those who did not know the original languages but it is to say that greater precision is available to someone who does know the original languages. If we don't know the original languages then we are dependent on a translation of the original and the thoughts of other men. While translations may be good, none of them are perfect, they may give us the general idea and be sufficient for basic understanding but they cannot give us greater precision. So an understanding of the original languages or the ability to read those who are top men in the original languages is indispensable. Ninth, you need to have a sound understanding of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics are the rules or principles of interpreting language and in particular the Bible. The meaning is not always obvious simply from reading the text. Rules must be applied in order to decipher the meaning. Surely, in general the basic message of the Bible is plain but often the meaning of a particular text eludes us. So there are rules of language for

deciphering the meaning. For example, context, context, context. The immediate context is determinative of meaning, not another context, a rule that is very commonly abused. Another rule is that a text taken out of context is a pretext not a proof text and it is another principle very often violated that results in sloppy theology. There are also rules for how to interpret figures of speech, symbols, types, parables, allegories, prophecy, etc...Interpreting the Bible is not a free for all. A sound understanding of hermeneutics is therefore necessary to sound Biblical exposition. Tenth, you must be consistent in your exegesis. Exegesis is the application of the rules of interpretation in the study. This is where you are applying the rules and drawing out the meaning of the text in preparation for exposition. The difference between exegesis and exposition is that exegesis is what goes on privately in the study in order to draw out the original meaning whereas exposition is what goes on publically where you explain the results of the study in teaching. Eleventh, you must have an ability to communicate. I have often met men who have great knowledge but do not have the ability to communicate it. When they communicate they are obscure and leave their audience struggling to understand. This is not typically due to the audience's ignorance but the communicator's lack of ability to communicate clearly. To engage in Bible exposition you need to be able to communicate clearly so that people can understand. Alright, in those eleven points, and we could throw a few more in there, but generally speaking, what I have laid out are some of the prerequisites and practices of men like Ezra and those in verses 7-8 who engaged in Bible exposition in order to communicate to the people what the original Hebrew meant in their own language so they could understand precisely what God said to them.

Tonight we come to the people's response. Verse 8 concludes with the idea that "they understood the reading." That's good because people have to understand the sense in order to properly respond to the word of God. So having heard and understood the word of God, verse 9, their response. **Then Nehemiah, who was the governor, and 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 or weep." For all the people were weeping when they heard the words of the law.** The people were obviously responding emotionally to the intellectual content they had understood. This is the proper order. First we want to cognitively understand truth and second, then we may have an emotional response. In

other words, our emotions are being induced and controlled by the truth, not the other way around. Emotions are not intrinsically wrong. Sometimes people deny all emotions. They get very emotional about this topic. Emotions, however, are not intrinsically wrong. Emotions are wrong if they are wrongly induced and emotions are wrong if they are triggered by something that is not truth, but if they are triggered by truth and controlled by truth they are not wrong. Let me give you an example that is wrong. Sometimes music can lead us to an emotion that is not cognitively driven, that is, it has no intellectual thought content behind it, or the thoughts that it conjures up are evil or arising from deception. For example, some music is intrinsically sensual or has an association with the sensual and arouses us. We all know music that is sensual. The question is in what context are we being aroused? What thoughts are being aroused? The music can draw out certain emotions that can lead to wrong thoughts. So this would be an example of emotions leading to thoughts rather than the other way around as we see here. Here it was the intellect that led to emotions. The people's emotional response was being controlled by the cognitive content of the word of God. That's the proper order. They were **weeping and mourning when they heard the words of the law.**

Now this is a very encouraging response. It shows that the people were sensitive to the word of God; it shows that they were convicted by the word of God. They had their relationship with God but why was it good to be convicted? Because conviction is a necessary prerequisite to restoration of fellowship. We have to confess in order to be restored to fellowship but we aren't going to confess something we're not convicted of. So conviction is a good response because it sets the people in a position where they can genuinely confess their sin and be restored to fellowship with God and move on in spiritual growth. So the gathering of the nation here and the proper response of conviction to the word of God is good, they were truly convicted of their sin, they are on their way to getting back in fellowship.

However, Nehemiah, the political leader, and Ezra, the spiritual leader, recognized from the law that this was a special day with special procedures and not a time for **mourning** and **weeping**. As the leaders say in the middle of verse 9, **This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.** I take it that a **holy day** was a "set apart day," a day different than all others. If they had had this response some other day they wouldn't have

stopped them. But it was a **holy day**. What day was it? If you scan back up to verse 2 you see it was “the first day of the seventh month.” On the Jewish religious calendar the seventh month was known as Tishri. And the Levitical law had set apart the first day of that month as a holy day known as the Feast of Trumpets. Actually it’s not called the Feast of Trumpets anywhere in Scripture, it’s just called “the blowing,” but they eventually called it the Feast of Trumpets because of the long blowing of Trumpets. Each month at the beginning of the month there would be a short blowing of the Trumpets but they looked forward to the seventh month when there would be a long blowing of the Trumpets. If you turn to Lev 23:24 you will see where God instituted this feast of blowing. “In the seventh month on the first of the month you shall have a rest, a reminder by blowing of trumpets, a holy convocation. 25 You shall not do any laborious work, but you shall present an offering by fire to the LORD.” So here they were in the seventh month on the first day of the month and four things were supposed to happen. First, they were supposed to “have a rest.” The Hebrew is “sabbath” and so this day was a special Sabbath where they were supposed to cease from all occupational labor. I take it that Nehemiah and Ezra interpreted the intense mourning and weeping as a violation of this Sabbath and that’s why they asked them to stop. It was a good response but not the right time. Second, there was also a reminder this day by the blowing of the trumpets. The blowing would remind them that the Day of Atonement was approaching on the tenth day of this month. That day is very strangely missing in the upcoming context of Neh 8 but the trumpets were to remind them that God would judge sin and so they needed to humbly present their sacrifices to atone for their sin in order to avoid judgment. Third, the day was a holy convocation or gathering, particularly to deal with religious matters. Finally, you shall present an offering by fire to the LORD. There were sacrifices to be offered. And so, putting this all together, it was not a time to mourn and weep but a time to enjoy this feast and carry out the religious obligations of the feast.

If we go back to Nehemiah 8:10, Nehemiah says, **Go, eat of the fat, drink of the sweet, and send portions to him who has nothing prepared; for this day is holy to our LORD. Do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.** He wanted them to enjoy the fruits of their labor. The Fall harvest had just come in and that’s why God scheduled this Feast in the seventh month. All the harvest had come in and the people were freed up to take a break and so God wanted them to come up to Jerusalem at that

time and enjoy Him. Observe that God wants us to enjoy the fruits of our labor that He has given us. God's not against us having a good time. So many people think God is out to destroy all our fun. That's a false caricature. They might want to read the Bible sometime rather than get their theology from PBS or Time Magazine. God wanted these people to enjoy the fruits of their labors; He wanted them to have a good time and enjoy Him. It's important to have a **joy of the LORD**. If you don't have a joy of the Lord then you are going to be a very unhappy and a weak Christian. Just enjoy Him, appreciate Him. He wants you to enjoy Him. He is enjoyable. And if you're all uptight all the time how can you enjoy Him? It's the joy of the Lord that **is your strength**. I know that the word of God is serious, but hey, here is a day Nehemiah says, just relax, enjoy the Lord, enjoy the fruit of your labors which the Lord has given and share with others who are in need. **The joy of the Lord is your strength.**

So, verse 11, **the Levites calmed all the people, saying, "Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved."** We weren't there so it's hard to envision what was going on but this verse indicates the people were all in a tiff, I mean, they needed to calm down, they were grieving intensely and so they said, "Hey, relax, this is a special Sabbath. You need to put off your grief and just enjoy the Lord. So verse 12, **All the people went away to eat, to drink, to send portions and to celebrate a great festival, because they understood the words which has been made known to them.** They went off and had a big day. The people took a break, they relaxed, they celebrated, and they feasted and gave gifts to others. There's nothing wrong with this. There's nothing wrong with taking a day to relax where you have a big festival and give thanks to the LORD! Why not? It might loosen the cork a little bit. Some Christians you meet have the cork in a little too tight, I call them constipated Christians, they can't relax for five minutes, they need to loosen up.

Then, verse 13, on the second day, this would be the second day of the seventh month, the very next day, **the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites were gathered to Ezra the scribe that they might gain insight into the words of the law.** These people were hungry. And not for bread, they wanted to feast on the word of God. And so Ezra complied. This is great, I can see his face, "These people want to know the word of God! Wow! I've been studying and practicing and

expositing and now people want to hear.” I’ve got a captive audience. Verse 14, **They found written in the law how the LORD had commanded through Moses that the sons of Israel should live in booths during the feast of the seventh month.** What feast are they talking about here? The Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. Now I don’t think this was anything to Ezra because 14 years earlier he led them in celebrating the Feast of Booths but it was new to these people. Notice the beginning of verse 14, **They found written in the law**, as if it had been lost and now they found it. I just want you to notice how out of touch these people were with the word of God. That’s like so many Christians, they don’t know what’s in here, they’re just do-gooders, nice, moral people, and they think that’s Christianity. They don’t know what Christianity is because they don’t know what’s in this book! They may be a believer, they may have gone to church all their life but they have never heard anyone exposit the text and so they’ve been getting fluff and so if they come into a place like this and they hear the Bible taught as it is supposed to be taught they go ballistic. If I’ve heard it once I’ve heard it a hundred times, “I never knew all this stuff was in the Bible!” I’ve even heard people say, “I thought I knew everything the Bible taught!” It just goes to show they never heard the Bible taught properly. It’s not that they didn’t get anything but in comparison to what they hear in churches like ours they realize they weren’t getting anything but skim milk. So when they start tasting some meat they get excited. Hey, the word of God is fascinating. And you never get to the end of it. It just goes on and on and on. So these people found the word of God and they were like, whoa.

So what are they going to do now? In verse 15, what do the teachers command them to do? Go apply the text! Do what God says. **So they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, “Go out to the hills, and bring olive branches and wild olive branches, myrtle branches, palm branches and branches of other leafy trees, to make booths, as it is written.”** In other words, go do the word of God now. Get the branches with leaves and build the booths! I think it’s very interesting the progression this chapter has taken. So before we look at what they are to do, just notice the progression. In vv 1-8 we have the word of God taught and explained, that’s the intellectual. Then in vv 9-12 we have the response of the people to the word of God, that’s the emotional. Once that gets calmed down and they’re able to relax they hear a bit more of the word of God and then you see the volitional response, go do the word of

God. Isn't that the way it usually works for us? We hear the word of God and we have some emotional response to that, when we calm down we might go back and review the word a bit more and then act on it. This chapter lays out that progression and it's what people have to go through. You can't expect people to act on the Scriptures when they haven't heard the Scriptures. It's the wrong order. Here we see the proper order. They heard, they responded, they acted.

Now the action they are to take, in verse 15 is all related to what event described in the law? The Feast of Booths or Tabernacles. So do we know where Ezra was reading in the law? Sure, Leviticus 23:34. It's no mystery. So let's turn there and see what they were reading. Now why they didn't find the Day of Atonement in verse 26 I don't know. I can't answer that question. Maybe the scroll they picked up to read started with the Feast of Booths or maybe they did keep the Day of Atonement but Nehemiah just didn't record it. I don't know. But what he definitely records they kept starts in verse 34, "Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, 'On the fifteenth of this seventh month is the Feast of Booths for seven days to the LORD. ³⁵On the first day is a holy convocation; you shall do no laborious work of any kind. ³⁶For seven days you shall present an offering by fire to the LORD. On the eighth day you shall have a holy convocation and present an offering by fire to the LORD; it is an assembly. You shall do no laborious work.'" That basically is the feast, if you skip down to verse 39 you get more detail, 'On exactly the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the crops of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the LORD for seven days, with a rest on the first day and a rest on the eighth day. ⁴⁰Now on the first day you shall take for yourselves the foliage of beautiful trees, palm branches and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God for seven days. ⁴¹You shall thus celebrate it *as* a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It *shall be* a perpetual statute throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. ⁴²You shall live in booths for seven days; all the native-born in Israel shall live in booths, ⁴³so that your generations may know that I had the sons of Israel live in booths when I brought them out from the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.'" So, they came across this passage and it was the second day of the seventh month, this was to be celebrated on the fifteenth day of the seventh month and so they had time to prepare. As we go back in verse 15 **they proclaimed and circulated a proclamation in all their cities and in Jerusalem** so the people would

come up and they gave the commands to gather all these branches. What are they going to do with these branches? They're going to build these little booths, little huts to live in for seven days. Did they do it? Verse 16, **So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, 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.** People filled the city. Verse 17, **The entire assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in them. The sons of Israel had indeed not done so from the days of Joshua the son of Nun to that day. And there was great rejoicing.** The expression they **indeed had not done so from the days of Joshua** does not mean that other generations had not kept the Feast of Booths. What it meant was it had not been celebrated on such a large and festive scale since **the days of Joshua**, no celebration of the feast matched the scale of this celebration for an entire millennia. And why did God give this feast? So that they would remember that God had the sons of Israel live in booths when He brought them out of the land of Egypt. What is the Feast of Booths all about? In short it was a visible reminder that God had worked in the past on their behalf to set them free from bondage to Egypt and that while they temporarily wandered about ultimately God would work on their behalf in the future to bring them into their permanent dwelling in the kingdom. "Consequently it would have had special significance for the returned exiles who now again had entered into the Promised Land after being absent from it for years. They had come through a kind of wilderness experience themselves. They even had to travel through a literal wilderness to get back to their land."¹

Verse 18, **He read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.** So for **seven days** Ezra read from the law of God and we can assume under the procedures already referred to in vv 1-8, on a large wooden podium in the square so that all could see and with teachers circulating through the audience translating to give the sense and explaining so that all could understand. The final day, the **eighth day**, was a day of **solemn** reflection on the things they had heard.

What exactly had Ezra read? If you turn to Deut 31:10 you'll see that in all likelihood he read the Book of Deuteronomy since God told Moses that at the end of every seven years the nation was to gather and hear the law. Deut 31:10, "Then Moses commanded them, saying, "At the end of *every* seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at" what feast? "at the Feast of Booths, ¹¹when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which He will choose, you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing. ¹²"Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law. ¹³"Their children, who have not known, will hear and learn to fear the LORD your God, as long as you live on the land which you are about to cross the Jordan to possess." This was to produce generational loyalty to the word of God. That's why it's best to have the entire family present for the word of God; men, women and children, otherwise, if you split off the children they don't hear the same word of God that you're hearing and they tend to grow up and want to do their own thing, which is slide away from the standard, head toward apostasy. That is always the problem and that is a problem the church does not want to face. They would rather do things their own way and all I'm saying is that it's rebellion. The nation Israel as well as the Church is composed of families because family is a divine institution. Family preceded both Israel and the Church. And so both in Israel and in the Church you've got to have families around the word of God to keep the generational loyalty. We are holding to the truth, holding the line, listening and hearing the word of God and passing the torch to the next generation in a family context. Continuity is the key.

Alright, what have we seen in chapter 8? Jews from all over the Judean countryside travelled up to the newly restored city of Jerusalem. On the first day of the seventh month they gathered and requested that Ezra bring out the word of God and read it to them. For five hours Ezra read to an audience of perhaps 30-50,000 men, women and children who could understand and obey the Law of Moses. Since many had already lost their native Hebrew tongue teachers under Ezra's tutelage circulated among the audience and translated from the original Hebrew into their spoken languages and gave an explanation so that the people could understand. In response the people mourned and wept because they were living contrary to the word. But the leaders commanded the people to stop weeping and to enjoy the day since it

was the Feast of Trumpets. They therefore celebrated a great feast, provided gifts for the poor and enjoyed the Lord. On the second day of the month they gathered again for the reading of the word of God and in it they found that on the fifteenth of the month they were to celebrate the Feast of Booths.

Therefore they made a proclamation for everyone to come to Jerusalem and gather branches in order to build booths. When they arrived they built booths all over the city to remind them of the wilderness generation. The celebration was the largest since the days of Joshua and each day, in accordance with the Law, Ezra read from the law. On the eighth day the people solemnly reflected on the law. Next time we'll see their response to the law.

For this time what can we take away from the exposition? First, are you sitting under solid Bible exposition? They had Bible expositors who were able to bring people close to the voice of God in the Scripture. We need more men who are called with the gift of teaching and the humility and prayerful dependence upon the Holy Spirit to diligently study and learn the original languages in order to communicate the truth to men so they can know God and enjoy God. This is, as far as I can tell from the Scriptures, the proper way to bring the word of God to bear upon men's lives. Second, are you hungry for the word of God? The people desired to hear the word of God, even standing for five hours on one day and for several hours on other days. They were famished from not hearing the word of God. Occasionally I meet believers who come here who are so hungry that when they first come and hear they report that they can't stop listening to the word of God. Every day they listen to Bible exposition. They have a hunger and that hunger is being met by Bible exposition. Third, are you responding to the word of God? The people genuinely responded, they were sensitive to the word of God and convicted by it. If more people would allow themselves to be sensitive to the word of God it would go a long way toward enhancing their spiritual growth. But if they listen to it coldly and all they can think is how important this is for so and so's life over there in pew no. 9 then that's the wrong attitude. You need to be sensitive and allow the word of God to bring about a genuine response to God. Fourth, are you enjoying the Lord? The Lord wants you to enjoy Him. He is enjoyable. He is not a big stone faced meanie in the sky. The Lord is good. Come and taste the Psalmist says, and see that the Lord is good. Don't be uptight all the time. Relax, have a good time, enjoy the Lord. You ought to come here to enjoy the Lord. He's what it's all about. Fifth, are you applying the word of God? When the word of God is known and you've sufficiently

responded to it, get to it and apply it. There's no use sitting around here like this is an academic institution. And if that's all it is for you then it's a waste of time. You're going to sit, soak and sour. We don't need another church that sits, soaks and sours, we need a church that sits down and does theology. As one author said, "Today...not just the pastors and 'experts' but all believers should 'do theology,' reflecting together on the application of biblical, ethical principles to every area of life. To do theology or theologize is to apply biblical principles to every aspect of life."ⁱⁱ I can only say to that a hearty, amen.

ⁱ Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Ne 8:13). Galaxie Software.

ⁱⁱ Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible* (Ne 8:13). Galaxie Software.

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