

**SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS**  
**Commentary by Michael Sigler**  
**August 4, 2013**

**The Joy of Obedience**

Read Nehemiah 8:1-3, 13-18

**Key verse: “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” (Nehemiah 8:17).**

The city of Detroit has declared bankruptcy. *The New York Times* reported: “Detroit, the cradle of America’s automobile industry and once the nation’s fourth most populous city, filed for bankruptcy on Thursday, the largest American city ever to take such a course....Detroit expanded at a stunning rate in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the arrival of the automobile industry, and then shrank away in recent decades at a similarly remarkable pace. A city of 1.8 million in 1950, it is now home to 700,000 people, as well as to tens of thousands of abandoned buildings, vacant lots and unlit streets.”

Detroit’s story could be a metaphor for the process of *spiritual* decline. You never stand still in the Christian life. Either you are moving forward and growing or you are losing ground and backsliding.

“People do not drift toward holiness,” said D.A. Carson. “Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom; we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.”

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem from Babylon, he found there not only broken walls but also broken lives. The people had fallen into spiritual decline. So, Nehemiah called the people together in the square, where they listened as Ezra read and interpreted God’s Word. (Ezra read from the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible.) Amazingly, Ezra read and preached “from early morning until mid-day,” and “all the people were attentive” (Nehemiah 8:1-3).

Next, Ezra led the leaders (“heads of ancestral houses,” “priests and Levites”) in a diligent study of God’s Word (Nehemiah 8:13). As they sought God’s will through the Scriptures, one of the things they saw was that they had neglected God’s command to them regarding the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles (Nehemiah 8:14-15).

This involved living during a seven-day period in booths made from tree branches. The Feast of Tabernacles was meant to remind the Jewish people of their rescue from Egypt and the time spent in shelters during Israel’s 40-year wandering in the wilderness (Leviticus 23:43).

So, Ezra and the leaders gave a call to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. And the people went out and cut tree branches, “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. 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 great rejoicing” (Nehemiah 8:16-17).

What is the application of Nehemiah 8:1-3, 13-18 for our lives?

First, we must regularly check our lives against the principles of the Bible, so that we do not fall into spiritual decline. Someone has said, “We Methodists believe in ‘backsliding,’ and we practice it often!”

Second, whenever we read or study the Bible or hear it preached or taught, we must act on what we read or hear. James 1:22 says, “Be doers of the Word and not hearers only.” The Word always calls for our response. Whenever we read the Bible or hear it preached, we should ask: “What should I *do* with this information from God’s Word?” “How should my life change?”

When the people of Israel heard God’s Word and then put it into practice, “there was great rejoicing” (Nehemiah 8:17). We too will find joy and blessing when we respond in obedience to God’s Word.

The converse is also true: Thomas a Kempis was said to have prayed, “Let not thy Word, O Lord, become a judgment upon us, that we hear it and do it not, that we believe it and obey it not.”

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