

# Festival of Booths

Bible Background • NEHEMIAH 7:73B—8:18

Printed Text • NEHEMIAH 8:13–18 | Devotional Reading • EXODUS 23:12–17

## Aim for Change

By the end of the lesson, we will: UNDERSTAND the significance of celebrating God’s blessings; REFLECT on our own attitudes toward celebrating God’s blessings; and PLAN to celebrate God’s blessings.

## In Focus

“Happy Birthday!” Michelle and other volunteers yelled at the group of new believers as they blew celebration horns. The church hosted a Happy Birthday Celebration once a month to celebrate new believers who were reborn into the Kingdom of God. Invitations were sent out to family and friends, through the new believers. There were decorations, cone-shaped hats, games, cake and ice cream, and even gifts. However, Michelle’s favorite part of the celebration was listening to the new believers share their testimonies on how God kept them and loved them even before they realized it and their journey to salvation.

The testimonies often encouraged family and friends to give their lives to Christ at the birthday event or at least visit the church for Sunday services. After one of the volunteers closed the meeting in prayer, Michelle encouraged the guests of the new believers by saying, “I look forward to celebrating your ‘reborn day’ with you real soon!” Today’s lesson reminds us that as Christians, we can have joy and celebrate life while acknowledging God as the source of every good and perfect gift.

## Keep In Mind

“And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness” (Nehemiah 8:17, KJV).

## Words You Should Know

**A. Scribe** (Nehemiah 8:13) caphar (Heb.) — A person with expertise at enumerating, recounting, telling, narrating, praising, and speaking to celebrate.

**B. Booths** (vv. 14-17) cukkah (Heb.) — Huts or arbors made of interwoven leaves and branches meant as temporary housing.

## Say It Correctly

**Jeshua.** JESH-yoo-uh

**Nun.** NUHN

## KJV

**Nehemiah 8:13** And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law.

14 And they found written in the law which the Lord had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month:

15 And that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written.

16 So the people went forth, and brought them, and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the street of the water gate, and in the street of the gate of Ephraim.

17 And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness.

18 Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according unto the manner.

## NLT

**Nehemiah 8:13** On October 9 the family leaders of all the people, together with the priests and Levites, met with Ezra the scribe to go over the Law in greater detail.

14 As they studied the Law, they discovered that the Lord had commanded through Moses that the Israelites should live in shelters during the festival to be held that month.

15 He had said that a proclamation should be made throughout their towns and in Jerusalem, telling the people to go to the hills to get branches from olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees. They were to use these branches to make shelters in which they would live during the festival, as prescribed in the Law.

16 So the people went out and cut branches and used them to build shelters on the roofs of their houses, in their courtyards, in the courtyards of God's Temple, or in the squares just inside the Water Gate and the Ephraim Gate.

17 So everyone who had returned from captivity lived in these shelters during the festival, and they were all filled with great joy! The Israelites had not celebrated like this since the days of Joshua son of Nun.

18 Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God on each of the seven days of the festival. Then on the eighth day they held a solemn assembly, as was required by law.

## The People, Places, and Times

**Levites.** The Levites were chosen by God to serve in the Temple. They were descendants from the tribe of Levi and their job was to do the work in the Temple, which included preparing the materials, artifacts, and spaces of worship. In the days of Moses, the Levites carried the Tabernacle in the wilderness and were responsible for setting it up at each camp (Numbers 1:47–53). Under David, Jerusalem was the center of national worship. The Levites, who no longer had to carry the Tabernacle, continued the upkeep of the Tabernacle and the items of worship. David also engaged them as musicians and singers who led the worship of the people (see 1 Chronicles 15:14–28).

**Festival of Booths.** In Hebrew, Sukkot was instituted in Leviticus 23:33–42 by God through Moses as a celebration complete with a holy convocation and joyful celebration. This celebration is a harvest festival, as well as commemorating God's care for the Children of Israel while they wandered in the desert.

Celebrated for seven days in the fall (September/October), Sukkot calls the people to build and dwell in a booth and to present burnt, grain, and drink offerings to the Lord over and beyond their regular gifts and offerings. They were to honor God by giving their best and celebrating Him to the utmost.

## Background

Israel was in exile for nearly 150 years and Judah for 70 years. When Judah was conquered, the Babylonians took the scrolls from the Temple and the Temple artifacts. The captives were forced also to abandon their native language in favor of the language of the captors. Aramaic was the language of business for Babylon and later Persia. As was the case in most cultures, only the most elite in society were literate. With the scrolls of God's Word taken and a new language spoken, the people only knew God's Word through the stories of their families and other captives. They had neither seen the words given to Moses nor heard them. Their faith in God was largely based on the accounts that were kept by those who remembered the Word.

In 538 B.C., 70 years after Israel had been in exile, the first group of Israelites returned to Judah under the leadership of Zerubbabel. A number of years later, in 458 B.C., under the leadership of Ezra, a second group returned. Under Ezra's faithful teaching most of the people turned from their sins and agreed to reestablish their relationship with God and follow His will for their lives. In 444 B.C., 14 years after Ezra, Nehemiah returned and succeeded in rebuilding the walls. The book of Nehemiah overlaps the book of Ezra, as indicated in today's lesson where the covenant renewal occurs.

### At-A-Glance

1. Festival of Booths Reinstated (Nehemiah 8:13–16)
2. Festival of Booths Marks Great Celebration (vv. 17–18)

## In Depth

### 1. Festival of Booths Reinstated (Nehemiah 8:13–16)

In the preceding verses, Nehemiah and Ezra read aloud the books of the Law to the people while the levitical priest taught the people and provided interpretation (Nehemiah 8:8–9). As the people heard the Law and recognized their own waywardness, they began to weep and mourn. God charged the people not to weep and mourn but to celebrate that they are back in fellowship with Him. The Lord commanded them not to be grieved on this holy day but to celebrate with great rejoicing (vv. 11–12). After this moment of silence and reverence on the second day of this momentous occasion of rededicating the Temple, a contingency representing the heads of the ancestral houses of the Children of Israel came together to study the Law—this time concerning God's direction concerning the Festival of Booths. God originally instituted the Festival of Booths (also known as the Feast of Tabernacles) as a reminder to the Israelites of His goodness as He kept them during the 40 years they wandered in the wilderness.

Ezra discovered that according to the Lord's ordinances, during the seventh month (September/October) the people were to live seven days in booths: huts made of olive branches, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees. Immediately they gathered themselves to reinstate the Festival of Booths. They realized that God had provided for them as they wandered in a strange land away from their ancestral home. The alert was sounded by messengers on foot and by the sounding of the alarm or ram's horn. Special instructions were given regarding the materials that were to be gathered for the building of the booths or temporary dwellings.

### 2. Festival of Booths Marks Great Celebration (vv. 17–18)

The obedience was so great that booths were built in the streets and on housetops. The people gathered before the Temple and at the gates. Their worship was not with tears but with joy, an

overwhelming gladness for what God had done. They worshiped God and they celebrated His covenant. In accordance with the Law, they spent each day learning more of God's Word and purposing in their hearts to be obedient to the Law. The Festival had not been celebrated as one nation since the time of Joshua, which was several hundreds of years earlier. On the eighth day, they held the "solemn assembly" as instructed by Moses (v. 18). On that day, they officially entered the covenant and offered prayers and sacrifices to God in accordance with His word. They worshiped God, the covenant giver, and determined to be covenant keepers as they carried His word in their hearts.

### **Search the Scriptures**

1. What were the people to live in during the Festival of Booths (Nehemiah 8:14)?
2. What was read to the people during this celebration, and how long did the celebration last (v. 18)?
3. What did the people gather in order to make the booths (v. 15)?

### **Discuss the Meaning**

1. Why is it important to celebrate significant historical/cultural events?
2. What was God's direction for the Festival of Booths?
3. Why was it important that the ancestral leaders studied the Law to execute the Festival of Booths celebration?

### **Liberating Lesson**

How soon we forget when we are delivered from trials and trouble. Today's lesson teaches us that God is concerned about how we receive His blessings, deliverance, and restitution. The Festival of Booths was a joyous occasion, and God wanted His people to keep Him at the center of attention. It lets us know that God wants His people to have a good time. As Christians, we can have joy and celebrate life while acknowledging God as the source of every good and perfect gift. However, great celebration should also be coupled with reverent honor of God and His holiness so that He is not taken for granted and our celebrations please Him. God's Word should be at the forefront and incorporated into every celebration, not to display our self-righteousness, but with humility.

### **Application For Activation**

When you have a celebration, is God invited? Would He be a welcomed guest? Would He attend your festivities? As you gather with family and friends, think about how you can plan to incorporate God in every aspect of your joyous occasion in a way that He would be glorified; it would be a great witness to unsaved family and friends.

### **Follow the Spirit**

What God wants me to do:

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### **Remember Your Thoughts**

Special insights I have learned:

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## More Light on the Text

### Nehemiah 8:13–18

**13 And on the second day were gathered together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, unto Ezra the scribe, even to understand the words of the law.**

**14 And they found written in the law which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month:**

The second review of the Law of Moses required a smaller number of participants including a representative from each tribe along with the priest, Ezra, and Nehemiah. The purpose was to understand the exact directions on how the Festival of Booths was to be executed. All of these came before Ezra, the scribe, “to understand the words of the Law.” The term “understand” used in verse 13 is from the Hebrew *sakal* (saw-KAL) and means to “gather wisdom and instruction” from the “law” (Heb. *towrah*, to-RAW). The leaders were there to fully comprehend the words of the Pentateuch, specifically Deuteronomy, so they could implement its rituals and commands in the life of the nation. They wanted to know how God wanted the Jews to behave and to conduct their affairs. They had been rejected and taken into captivity in a foreign land. Having returned to their homeland, they never wanted to be faced with such a challenge again. Most importantly, they wanted to honor God with their obedience.

Now, having listened to the Word of God, they discovered something they did not know needed to be done. They had built the Temple and restored the walls, but they had not been obedient to God’s direction. The Feast of Tabernacles was to be celebrated on the 15th day of the seventh month, which was the month they were currently observing (see Leviticus 23:34; Deuteronomy 16:13). The Festival of Booths, which lasted for seven days, was an observance of the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. This event also marked a time of harvest. During this time, the Children of Israel were to leave their houses and dwell in “booths” (Heb. *cukkah*, sook-kaw) or temporary shelters. By doing this, they recognized God’s provision for them. This was the same provision He had given to Moses and the Children of Israel when they were in the wilderness. In much the same way, He also had provided for these families when they were taken from captivity and returned to their homeland.

**15 And that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, Go forth unto the mount, and fetch olive branches, and pine branches, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written.**

**16 So the people went forth, and brought them, and made themselves booths, every one upon the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of the house of God, and in the street of the water gate, and in the street of the gate of Ephraim.**

The Festival of Booths was to be celebrated by all of the people. In order to gather, there was a need to “publish” (Heb. *shama`*, shaw-MAH) the news. This was to be done in two ways. First, a shofar, or ram’s horn, was to be blown throughout the nation to proclaim the observance. Secondly, messengers were sent from household to household to ensure that everyone was made aware of the coming event. The messengers also ensured that they gathered the materials for the celebration of God’s provision. The people complied with the directive to dwell in booths. There were so many people who had come out of captivity and were eager to be involved in proper worship of the Lord

that those who owned homes created booths on their housetops or in the courtyards of their houses. Others placed their booths in the courtyards of the Temple or in the streets before one of the gates of the city. They were truly dancing in the streets.

**17 And all the congregation of them that were come again out of the captivity made booths, and sat under the booths: for since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun unto that day had not the children of Israel done so. And there was very great gladness.**

**18 Also day by day, from the first day unto the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. And they kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according unto the manner.**

Although other celebrations are noted in the Old Testament Scriptures (Judges 21:19; 1 Samuel 1:3), the outpouring was greater than the Festival of Booths had been at any time since the days of Joshua when the nation had entered the Promised Land.

They not only complied with the Law, they were excited about the Law and the opportunity to celebrate God's deliverance. Gladness permeated the entire event, which is described in verse 17 as "very" (Heb. me`od, mehe-ODE) "great" (Heb. gadowl, gaw-DOLE) "gladness" (Heb. simchah, sim-KHAW). There was intense joy. This was a solemn matter, but it was also a joyous occasion. The people had been delivered from captivity and were now free to share in worship, to rebuild the celebrations of the Law and God's mercy as they recommitted themselves to their covenant relationship with Him. They rejoiced at what had been done in their lives. At the realization of how connected they were through the religious rituals to the ancestors who had been brought out of Egypt (see Leviticus 23:42–43).

The celebration of the Festival of Booths continued for the required seven days—from the 15th of the month to the 22nd of the month. Each day, Ezra read from the Book of the Law proclaiming the goodness of God. Each day they learned more about God's Law. The more they learned, the more they rejoiced over hearing the Word of God. The more they learned, the greater was their assurance that God was able to strengthen them because He had proven this time and again.

On the last day of the Festival, they kept a solemn "assembly" (Heb. `atsarah, ats-aw-raw; see also Leviticus 23:36). This Hebrew term means "to gather," as on a holy day. However, the reference is followed by a call to do no work (labor) and to offer a sacrifice. Obviously, the solemn assembly was a Sabbath day of worship and praise. The tone for this day seems to have been different from the first seven days, yet the entire experience was part of the renewal of their covenant with God.

In today's lesson, the captives have returned home and renewed their covenant with God as a result of finding the Law and obeying it. Unlike the returning Hebrew believers, we have a more secure covenant with God based on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. By grace we are kept in covenant relationship with the Father; however, there are things that we can do to enhance our walk with God. We see also in this lesson that obedience to God's way will bring results that glorify Him. Let us examine our covenant relationship with God, apply His Word to our lives, and purpose in our hearts to renew our commitment to give Him glory.

# Daily Bible Readings

## **MONDAY**

Rhythms of Work and Worship  
(Exodus 23:12–17)

## **TUESDAY**

First Bring Your Offering  
(Leviticus 23:9–14)

## **WEDNESDAY**

Celebrating God's Bounty to Us  
(Deuteronomy 26:1–11)

## **THURSDAY**

Fostering the Memory of God's Deliverance  
(Leviticus 23:33–44)

## **FRIDAY**

Gathering to Hear God's Word  
(Nehemiah 7:73b—8:6)

## **SATURDAY**

Responding to God's Word  
(Nehemiah 8:7b–12—the Levites)

## **SUNDAY**

Discovering a Neglected Festival  
(Nehemiah 8:13–18)