



Last week we looked at some of the costs of avoiding Sabbath, in particular by looking at the rest that the land experiences during the Babylonian Exile. Israel refuses to observe Sabbath years for so long that the consequences accumulate to the point where they are unavoidable. They pay the price while the land “rests.” We pay similar costs when we refuse to “enter God’s rest.” Having said that, the Israelites don’t remain in that predicament. God continues to offer his rest to those who will submit and trust him.

Nehemiah 8 describes the renewal that the returning Jewish exiles experience when they receive God’s grace and “enter his rest.” For fifty-two days the people had worked hard to rebuild the wall, completing it on the 25th day of the sixth month, Elul (Neh. 6:15). A few days later, on the first day of the seventh month, Tishri, the people gather to listen to Ezra read from the book of the Law (8:2). They praise the Lord, worship him, and listen attentively as Ezra “gives the meaning so that the people understand” (8:8). The result is widespread repentance and weeping as the people recognize how much they have strayed.

The date is important because the first day of the seventh month is Rosh Hashanah, the beginning of the civil year and the traditional anniversary of the creation of Adam and Eve. It is also the first of the High Holy Days that culminate with the Day of Atonement. As such, Rosh Hashanah is a special Sabbath (Lev. 23:23-25). So when Nehemiah, Ezra, and the other leaders tell the people not to mourn or weep but to celebrate, it creates a very different picture of Sabbath than the typical sedentary day often expected.

Nehemiah and Ezra’s admonition restores the intent of Sabbath. The people are told to “go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared” because it is a sacred day and “the joy of the Lord is their strength” (8:10). They are to celebrate their recognition of God’s desires, their reconciliation with him, and the opportunity to begin anew their life as God’s people. Setting aside work is still part of observance as we see in the sharing of food with those unprepared, but the emphasis is on corporate celebration and community, not inactivity or mourning.

The impact of their repentance, celebration, and reconciliation with God is seen in their desire to listen to God’s Word and the energy with which they want to reform their lives. The very next day they hear about and make plans for celebrating the Feast of Booths. Two weeks later they begin the weeklong festival and celebrate it in a way that hadn’t been experienced since the days of Joshua. “Their joy was very great” (8:17). Fasting and repentance (Neh. 9) continue after the festival, but it all starts with joyful celebration of Sabbath.

Discussion Questions

Identifying the purpose of Sabbath as a hiatus from work puts the focus on us and what we do or don’t do. What changes when we see Sabbath like Nehemiah and the writer of Hebrews, as primarily about how we relate to God?

What does it mean to enter or enjoy God’s rest? What tangible actions can we take to enter his rest?

Nehemiah and Hebrews 4 both describe Sabbath as an experience in community. What does community add to the observance of Sabbath? What can we do to reclaim it together?