

# The Israelites Listen to the Word



**Nehemiah 8:1–9:3; 9:38; 10:29-39.**

After 70 long years of captivity in a very distant land, the people of Judah finally returned to their home in Jerusalem. They rebuilt the walls of their city and began to live in their own homes. Soon the time for celebrating came. They celebrated the beginning of a new year with the Feast of Trumpets. They also celebrated the autumn harvest with the Feast of Tabernacles. This was a time when they remembered how God always took care of his people. On the first day of the month, on the Feast of Trumpets, all the Israelites gathered in the plaza near one of the gates of the city, which was called the Water Gate.

Ezra, the priest and teacher of the Law, brought out the Book of the Law of Moses and began to read it. He was standing on a high platform, and read all morning, from sunrise to noon. The people listened attentively, while the Levites explained the meaning of the Word of God. Suddenly, the people began to cry. Upon hearing the commandments and laws of God, they realized that they had not obeyed God. They had acted very badly.

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, “This day

is holy to the Lord your God. Don’t mourn or weep.”

Nehemiah said, “Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Don’t grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength.”

The people obeyed. The next day, they came together again to hear the Word of God. This time, Ezra read God’s instructions on how to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. “Go out into the hill country and bring back branches from olive and wild olive trees, and from myrtles, palms and shade trees, to make temporary shelters, as it is written.”

With great enthusiasm, they searched for the branches of the trees and built the shelters on the flat roofs of their houses. For seven days they lived in those shelters, and they remembered God’s kindness to them in the past. Every day they met and listened to Ezra read and explain the Word of God. Not even the oldest people remembered a joyous celebration like this one!

Later in the same month, the town met again. This time they didn’t celebrate, but they fasted and dressed in sackcloth. They put dust on their heads to show how sorry they were for having