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NEHEMIAH 8: 1 All the people gathered themselves together as one man into the broad place that was before the water gate; and they spoke to Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded to Israel.

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Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites, read and interpret the laws to the people, Neh 8:1-7. The manner in which they do this important work, Neh 8:8. The effect produced on the people's minds by hearing it, Neh 8:9. The people are exhorted to be glad, and are told that the joy of the Lord is their strength, Neh 8:10-12. On the second day they assemble, and find that they should keep the feast of tabernacles; which they accordingly religiously solemnize for seven days; and Ezra reads to them from the book of the law, Neh 8:13-18.

Verse 1

The street that was before the water gate - The gate which led from the temple to the brook Kidron.

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NEHEMIAH 8: 2 Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly, both men and women, and all who could hear with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month.

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Verse 2

All that could hear with understanding - Infants, idiots, and children not likely to receive instruction, were not permitted to attend this meeting; nor should any such, in any place, be ever brought to the house of God, if it can be avoided: yet, rather than a poor mother should be deprived of the ordinances of God, let her come with her child in her arms; and although it be inconvenient to the congregation, and to some ministers, to hear a child cry, it is cruel to exclude the mother on this account, who, having no person to take care of her child while absent, must bring it with her, or be totally deprived of the ordinances of the Christian Church.

Upon the first day of the seventh month - This was the first day of what was called the civil year; and on it was the feast of trumpets, the year being ushered in by the sound of these instruments.

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NEHEMIAH 8: 3 He read therein before the broad place that was before the water gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women, and of those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

NEHEMIAH 8: 4 Ezra the scribe stood on a pulpit of wood, which they had made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, and Shema, and Anaiah, and Uriah, and Hilkiah, and Maaseiah, on his right hand; and on his left hand, Pedaiah, and Mishael, and Malchijah, and Hashum, and Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam.

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Verse 4

Stood upon a pulpit of wood - מגדל migdal, a tower, a platform, raised up for the purpose, to elevate him sufficiently for the people both to see and hear him; for it is said, Neh 8:5, that he was above all the people. This is the first intimation we have of a pulpit, or structure of this kind. But we must not suppose that it was any thing similar to those tubs or barrels ridiculously set up in churches and chapels, in which a preacher is nearly as much confined, during the time of his preaching, as if he was in the stocks.

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NEHEMIAH 8: 5 Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people; (for he was above all the people;) and when he opened it, all the people stood up:

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Verse 5

All the people stood up - This was out of respect to the sacred word: in imitation of this, when the gospel for the day is read in our churches, all the people stand up.

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NEHEMIAH 8: 6 and Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. All the people answered, "Amen, Amen," with the lifting up of their hands. They bowed their heads, and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

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Verse 6

Ezra blessed the Lord - In imitation of this, we say, when the gospel for the day is commenced, Glory be to God for his holy Gospel! and conclude this thanksgiving with, Amen.

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NEHEMIAH 8: 7 Also Jeshua, and Bani, and Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, caused the people to understand the law: and the people stayed in their place.

NEHEMIAH 8: 8 They read in the book, in the law of God, distinctly; and they gave the sense, so that they understood the reading.

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Verse 8

So they read in the book - For an explanation of this verse, see the observations at the end of the chapter, Neh 8:17 (note).

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NEHEMIAH 8: 9 Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest the scribe, and the Levites who taught the people, said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Don't mourn, nor weep." For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the law.

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Verse 9

Nehemiah, which is the Tirshatha - This puts it out of doubt that, when the Tirshatha is mentioned, Nehemiah himself is intended, Tirshatha being the name of his office.

Mourn not, nor weep - This is a holy day to God: a day appointed for general rejoicing in Him who has turned our captivity, restored to us his law, and again established among us his ordinances.

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NEHEMIAH 8: 10 Then he said to them, "Go your way. Eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to him for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Don't be grieved; for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

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Verse 10

Eat the fat, and drink the sweet - Eat and drink the best that you have; and while ye are feeding yourselves in the fear of the Lord, remember those who cannot feast; and send portions to them, that the joy and the thanksgiving may be general. Let the poor have reason to rejoice as well as you.

For the joy of the Lord is your strength - This is no gluttonous and drunken festival that enervates the body, and enfeebles the mind: from your religious feast your bodies will acquire strength and your minds power and fervor, so that you shall be able to Do His will, and to do it cheerfully. Religious joy, properly tempered with continual dependence on the help of God, meekness of mind, and self-diffidence, is a powerful means of strengthening the soul. In such a state every duty is practicable, and every duty delightful. In such a frame of mind no man an ever fell, and in such a state of mind the general health of the body is much improved; a cheerful heart is not only a continual feast, but also a continual medicine.

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NEHEMIAH 8: 11 So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, "Hold your peace, for the day is holy; neither be grieved."

NEHEMIAH 8: 12 All the people went their way to eat, and to drink, and to send portions, and to make great mirth, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

NEHEMIAH 8: 13 On the second day were gathered together the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests, and the Levites, to Ezra the scribe, even to give attention to the words of the law.

NEHEMIAH 8: 14 They found written in the law, how that the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths in the feast of the seventh month;

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Verse 14

In the feast of the seventh month - That is, the feast of tabernacles, which was held in commemoration of the sojourning of their fathers in the wilderness after they had been delivered from the Egyptian bondage. Now, having been delivered from the Babylonish captivity, and the proper time of the year occurring, it was their especial duty to keep the same feast.

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NEHEMIAH 8: 15 and that they should publish and proclaim in all their cities, and in Jerusalem, saying, "Go out to the mountain, and get olive branches, and branches of wild olive, and myrtle branches, and palm branches, and branches of thick trees, to make booths, as it is written."

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Verse 15

Fetch olive branches - For every thing concerning this feast of tabernacles, see the notes on Leviticus 23 (note), and the other places there referred to.

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NEHEMIAH 8: 16 So the people went out, and brought them, and made themselves booths, everyone on the roof of his house, and in their courts, and in the courts of God's house, and in the broad place of the water gate, and in the broad place of the gate of Ephraim.

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Verse 16

Upon the roof of his house - It need scarcely be repeated, that the houses in the East are generally built with flat roofs. On these they reposed; on these they took the air in the heats of summer; and on these they oftentimes slept.

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NEHEMIAH 8: 17 All the assembly of those who had come again out of the captivity made booths, and lived in the booths; for since the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the children of Israel had not done so. There was very great gladness.

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Verse 17

Since the days of Joshua - No feast of tabernacles since Joshua's time had been so heartily and so piously celebrated. The story of the sacred fire now discovered, which had been hidden by the order of Jeremiah in a dry well, and now, some of the mud from the bottom being brought upon the altar, was kindled afresh by the rays of the sun, which suddenly broke out, though before covered with clouds, etc., is worthy of no credit. Those who wish to see the detail may consult 2 Maccabees 1:18-36.

On the subject in Neh 8:8, I beg leave to make a few observations: - So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. The Israelites, having been lately brought out of the Babylonish captivity, in which they had continued seventy years, according to the prediction of Jeremiah, Jer 25:11, were not only extremely corrupt, but it appears that they had in general lost the knowledge of the ancient Hebrew to such a degree, that when the book of the law was read, they did not understand it: but certain Levites stood by, and gave the sense, i. e., translated into the Chaldee dialect. This was not only the origin of the Chaldee Targums, or translation of the law and prophets into that tongue but was also, in all probability, the origin of preaching from a text; for it appears that the people were not only ignorant of their ancient language, but also of the rites and ceremonies of their religion, having been so long in Babylon,

where they were not permitted to observe them. This being the case, not only the language must be interpreted, but the meaning of the rites and ceremonies must also be explained; for we find from Neh 8:13, etc., of this chapter, that they had even forgotten the feast of tabernacles, and every thing relative to that ceremony.

As we nowhere find that what is called preaching on or expounding a text was ever in use before that period, we are probably beholden to the Babylonish captivity for producing, in the hand of Divine Providence, a custom the most excellent and beneficial ever introduced among men.

What the nature of preaching or expounding the word of God was, at this early period of its institution, we learn from the above cited text.

I. They read in the book of the law of God. - The words of God, the doctrines of Divine revelation, are the proper matter of preaching; for they contain the wisdom of the Most High, and teach man the things which belong to his peace and happiness.

II. They read distinctly - מפרש mephorash, from פרש parash, to expand; they analyzed, dilated, and expounded it at large, showing the import and genuine meaning of every word.

III. They gave the sense - ושום שכל vesom sechel, they put weight to it; showed its value and utility, and how intimately concerned they were in all that was revealed: thus applying verbal criticism, and general exposition to their true and most important purposes.

IV. They caused them to understand the reading - ויבינו במקרא vaiyabinu bammikra: and they understood - had a mental taste and perception of the things which were in the reading, i. e., in the letter and spirit of the text. Thus they knew the Divine will, and approved the things that were more excellent, being (thus) instructed out of the law, Rom 2:18.

This was the ancient method of expounding the word of God among the Jews; and this mode is still more necessary for Us: -

1. Because the sacred writings, as they came from God, are shut up in languages no longer vernacular; and no translation ever did or ever can reach the force of the original words, though perhaps our own in general, comes nearest to this of all versions, whether ancient or modern.
2. Ninety-nine out of a hundred know nothing of these languages; and consequently cannot, of themselves, reap all the requisite benefit from reading the Scriptures.
3. Sacred things are illustrated in the Bible by a reference to arts and sciences, of which the mass of the people are as ignorant as they are of the original tongues.
4. Provincial customs and fashions are mentioned in these writings, which must be understood, or the force and meaning of many texts cannot be comprehended.
5. There is a depth in the word of God which cannot be fathomed except either by Divine inspiration, or by deep study and research, for which the majority of the people have no time.
6. The people in general trust to the piety, learning and abilities of their ministers, and maintain them as persons capable of instructing them in all the deep things of God; and believing them to be holy men, they are confident they will not take their tithes, their food, and their raiment, under a pretense of doing a work for which they have not the ordinary qualifications. Where there is not such preaching as this, the people "sit in darkness, and in the valley of the shadow of death;" sinners are not converted unto God; neither are believers "built up on their most holy faith."

Reader - Art thou a Christian minister? Dost thou feed the flock of God? Let thy conduct, thy conscience, and the fruits of thy ministry answer for thee.

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NEHEMIAH 8: 18 Also day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read in the book of the law of God. They kept the feast seven days; and on the eighth day was a solemn assembly, according to the ordinance.

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