

PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

NEHEMIAH 8:13-18 | On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law. ¹⁴ And they found it written in the Law that the LORD had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month, ¹⁵ and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, "Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written." ¹⁶ So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, 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. ¹⁷ And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. ¹⁸ And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.

Once you've tasted the pure Word of God, you will always hunger for more. On the first day of the month, a holiday, Ezra feasted Israel on the Bread of Life for half the day. On the second day, not a holiday, the priests, Levites, and *heads of fathers' houses* came back for more (:13).

Great teachers don't just teach. They create an appetite for the Word. And they don't stop there. They teach people to feed themselves with the Word of God. Ezra's newly formed Bible study fellowship immediately began digging into the Word for themselves. *And they found it written...!* (:14)

Great teachers don't just impart knowledge. They inspire obedience. They close the gap between theory and practice. No sooner had Ezra's students *found it written* than tents sprang up all around Jerusalem (:14-17). They wasted no time preparing for the upcoming Feast of Booths

that commemorates Israel's wilderness journey. Since the days of Joshua, there had not been a Festival of Booths like this one. *There was great rejoicing* (:17). Obedience to the Word brings great joy.

Great teachers not only teach others. They also teach others who teach others who teach others. This is the life and legacy of Ezra the scribe. *No nationwide attempt to teach the Law had been made since the exile... A massive programme of educating people in the divine law was very urgently needed* (J.I. PACKER).

Ezra met this urgent need. He reset the nation from the ground up by putting the Word of God into the hands of the laity. He started with faithful men who would *be able to teach others also* (2 TIM 2:2). The *heads of fathers' households* who studied under Ezra in the Water Gate Revival were not just heads of immediate families. They were leaders of ancestral clans (:13). They were, in effect, successors of the Patriarchs. They had the stature and bandwidth to disseminate and impart the knowledge of God to all the families of Israel, postexile.

Judaism rightly recognises Ezra as a *Second Moses*. Apart from the Lawgiver himself, Ezra did more than any other to transform the Jewish people into *The People of the Book*, as they are known to this day. Will the Singapore Church be known as *The People of the Book*?

WALL OF DUTY

■ Is this your cry? *O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God!* (JOHN WESLEY). Blessed are those who hunger for the Word. And blessed are those who, like Ezra, teach the Word in ways that make us hungry for more.

■ Do you know? The men who studied the Word under Ezra were anything but novices. They were the *heads of fathers' houses* (:13). Their predecessors included mighty men of valour, commanders of armies, and leaders of whole tribes (1 CHRON 26:32; 2 CHRON 26:12-13). They were trustworthy men of outstanding ability. They could influence and teach many others who, in turn, could do the same. Pray for the Singapore Church. Ask God for a nationwide movement of Biblical

education from the ground-up. Veterans of the Word teaching next generation leaders. One-to-one mentoring, life-on-life discipleship, passing down their wealth of Bible knowledge and expository skills to the young. Ask God to knit their hearts, amplify their voices, and anoint them mightily to teach others who teach others who teach others.

■ Do you realise? The online world has become a dumpster for false teaching, as predicted: *For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths* (2 TIM 4:3-4). Watch and pray. May all our churches ramp up efforts to intentionally disciple digital natives in the Word. May God stir our young to dig deep into the Scriptures for themselves, and *find it written*. May they engage critically and confidently with an increasingly secular generation—to counter half-truths, lies, liberal worldviews, strange teachings, and weird practices. May they heed the Word: *Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. By the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you* (2 TIM 1:13-14).

■ Can you see? The pandemic is not a death sentence. It is an opportunity to rethink, reimagine, and remake church. A trumpet call to keep the main thing the main thing. Pray: O God, help us to uphold the centrality of Christ and your Word. Bring us back to the roots of the Early Church: Discipleship in community. In-person gatherings, large and small, that prioritise your Word (ACTS 2:42-47). We take full ownership of this sacred duty to mould minds, shape values, and tutor hearts to hear and obey your Word. Make us a *People of the Book*. Turn every local church into a centre of excellence for biblical preaching, teaching, and practice.