The words of the law

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[0:00] chapter read in the book of Nehemiah, chapter 8, and from verse 13.

And on the second day would gather together the chief of the fathers of all the people, the priests and the leaders and the scribes, even understand the words of the law. And they found written in the law, for the Lord commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in the Boots, in the feast of the seventh month, and so on.
We know that from very early times, the Jewish year was punctuated by the great festivals, the feasts of the Lord.
Some were timed to coincide with the changing seasons of the year, reminding the people that God had constantly provided for them.
And it gave the people an opportunity to return to God some token of all that he had given to them.
There were occasions of wholehearted delight, as we see here in this chapter in Nehemiah.
[1:38] There were occasions of great joy, together with being occasions of solemn gatherings, when the people sought the forgiveness and the cleansing of sins.

The purpose was primarily spiritual. Though, unfortunately, the Israelites tended to emphasize over the years the form of these observances, rather than the spiritual nature of them.
There were, as you know, three great feasts particularly. The feast of the Passover, the feast of the first fruits, which after a number of weeks became the feast of Pentecost, and the feast that I would like to turn to discuss with you a little today, the feast of Tabernacles.
These last two, the feast of the Ingathering and the feast of Pentecost, together with the feast of Tabernacles, these two were distinctly connected with and coincided with the Ingathering of the fruits at harvest time.
The feast of the feast of the feast of Tabernacles. The feast of Tabernacles was the last of these annual feasts, and it also was the longest of all the feasts.
[3:20] It lasted for eight days. It was, as I said, a notumnal festival at the end of the year, and when the people lived for seven days in these booths and the shelters that they erected, made up of branches of trees.

And this was to remind the people of the way in which God had led them through the wilderness, remind them of the temporary nature of their dwelling in the wilderness prior to their entrance into the permanence of the land of Canaan.
And it also reminded them, as they dwelt in these booths and these shelters, it reminded them of the mighty works of God on their behalf during their wilderness journey.
And as they celebrated this feast at the end of the harvest time, it gave them opportunity to thank God for the many wonderful ways in which he had provided for them during their wilderness journey.
And it also gave them the opportunity to look forward to the time when their temporary dwelling in the world would be replaced by the permanence of their dwelling in heaven above.
[5:03] And it might very well have been this thought that was at the back of Paul's mind when he penned in the first few verses of 2 Corinthians chapter 5, where he speaks of the temporary nature of our dwelling in this world, our tabernacle which is made with hands, this shelter where we dwell.

Of course, we are applying it. He's speaking of the, of the, as we know, he's speaking of the spirit dwelling in the body and the body dissolving, the body as it were falling apart just as these shelters fell apart in the course of time.
And it may very well have been, this is thought, it may very well have been in the back of his mind when he spoke in that nature in 2 Corinthians chapter 5. But our purpose today is to look just for a little, to look very briefly at this festival, at this Feast of Tabernacles and see what lessons we can

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draw from it and apply to our own situation as we gather here today for this service of Thanksgiving. Now, it took place at the end of the year when they had gathered in all the labors out of the field so that this feast embraced really the entire circle of the year's husbandry and also the produce which had been gathered.
And as I said, as it looked back, so for this people it helped them also to look forward. And the nature of it, the nature of the feast was symbolized in the way in which they lived for these seven days.
[6:59] and the feast began with a Sabbath and we know that it ended with a Sabbath. And together with the reference that we have in 2 Corinthians 5 to this, it may interest you to remember that this was probably the kind of shelter that Jonah built.

You know, you read in Jonah chapter 4 that when he went out to view the destruction of Nineveh, he took, he built himself a shelter, the same word, a booth.
made of the branches of the trees that were available to him at that time. But let us for a moment just look at what this feast commemorated for the Jews and apply it to ourselves here today.
Well, as they drenched in these shelters for seven days, that reminded them of the way in which they had lived in the wilderness on the way to a Canaan.
Reminded them of the temporary nature of their dwelling in the wilderness. It reminded them also of the unsettled nature of the journey that they took.
[8:13] Reminded them that they were wandering as people in the wilderness. as Psalm 107 tells us, going from place to place without sure abode.

It reminded them that there was a connecting link between the bondage out of which God had delivered them and the inheritance into which God was leading them.
It reminded them also of God's faithfulness to them along the way. God's great goodness and of God's wonderful love in providing for them year by year.
It reminded them also of their own covenant dedication and consecration to the Lord. Just as the Lord in covenant had united himself to them and in covenant had made provision for them and in covenant had given them the law, so they in covenant had consecrated themselves to the Lord.
It reminded them of God's revelation of grace even as they dwelt in these booths, in these shelters year by year.
[9:33] So God in his grace tabernacled among them. He came and dwelt with them in his own tabernacle as they lived, dwelt in these shelters, in these booths.

And the feast also reminded them of the disciplines of the wilderness, the trials and the hardships and the disappointments, together with the displays of God's power and God's love and God's faithfulness and God's grace.
The feast also reminded them as they dwelt in these booths, of the evil of their own hearts, as well as of the goodness and the grace of God to them.
Remember that Moses made this abundantly clear in that wonderful chapter in Deuteronomy, chapter 6 and chapter 8. when they looked back over the wilderness years, they were to remember not just God's goodness to them, but the evil and the unfaithfulness and the unsteadfastness of their own hearts in that wilderness.
The Lord led you, he says in that way, to show you, not just his goodness to you, but you're undeserving of any goodness from him because of the evil of your own hearts.
[11:09] And they were reminded of that then as they observed this festival. And together with that, of course, they were to remember God's wonderful provision for them in the wilderness.

You see, it wasn't just that God provided for them generally. God had provided for them in a particular way. God had miraculously provided for them.
He had sent them manna, bread, from heaven to eat. This was the extraordinary intervention of God on their behalf in a place where they wondered how they would be provided for.
God wonderfully answered their plea and their question and their perplexity. He sent them bread from heaven to eat.
Remember how Jesus, during the temptation of wilderness, told to the devil when the devil told him, Why are you in that need? If you are the Son of God, you have got power to change these stones into bread.
[12:16] And Jesus answered him, quoting from the book of Deuteronomy, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God. In other words, in the

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situations which man finds it difficult to understand how he can be provided for, he must live by faith in the God who can provide in spite of evidence that may suggest to him that God will never make provision for them.

So as they looked, as they dwelt in booths, so they could look back and they could recollect God's wonderful provision for them along the wilderness way.
And also, as they looked back to these provisions, so they were encouraged to look forward in faith that God would still continue to provide and that God would still continue to prosper.
And of course they had the encouragement as they looked forward to what God had done for his people after forty years. He had in accordance with his promise brought them out of these conditions of wandering into the promised land.
And as they looked forward in a spiritual sense, so and this remember was a spiritual festival, so they could look forward to God providing for them in that wonderfully spiritual way.
[14:03] Now then, as we apply all these things to our own situation here today, they've got lessons, this has good lessons to teach us. We are reminded each one of us as we gather in his church today, that just as Israel's dwelling in the wilderness was of our temporary nature, so is ours in this world.

This is not our rest. We are here today and gone tomorrow. Psalm 103 reminds us of that. The place that knew us one day will one day know us no more.
We are here as they were in the wilderness, as they were in the world, strangers and pilgrims on the earth. I wonder how much of that pilgrim spirit perverts our spirit today.
It also has this lesson to teach us, that we today can look back over a year in which God's goodness has yet again been manifested to us in a most wonderful way.
We are here to acknowledge God's goodness and God's faithfulness and God's love to each one of us. I wonder how much of that spirit indwells our heart.
[15:28] And together with that, we are here to recollect our own undeserving, undeservedness of any good thing from God, our own sins and our own failings and our own shortcomings.

We are to remember that as well. We are to remember God's covenant engagement. He hasn't broken that engagement. in accord with a promise.
He has been faithful. But we are to remember as well that we too have covenanted to consecrate ourselves to God. And as we look back, we cannot but wonder at the many evidences that we have that we have not been as consecrated to God as we ought to have been.
together with that we look back and we remember the revelation of God's grace to us just as he had revealed his grace to them as they dwelt in booths in these temporary frail tabernacles.
So God came down and tabernacled with them and revealed himself to them in a very wonderful way. It's the same with us. we ought today to be able to recollect with thanksgiving the revelations of God's grace to us during the past year of plenty in providence.
[17:13] Because we gather here today not just to acknowledge God in his providence but surely also God in his grace. and something else that they recollected they recollected the disciplines of the way the disappointments of the way and the chastisements of the way and the difficulties of the way the upsets of the way they remembered these things and they remembered the necessity of these things in their lives.

You see these things are necessary because as it were they peg us back they remind us of our dependence upon God and they remind us of our own insufficiency every single one of us who is sufficient for these things God has ways of reminding each one of us that we are dependent upon him and that we are to look to him and these ways aren't always the easiest to accept from his hand but they are necessary and we acknowledge that as well today as we acknowledge the wonderful goodness of God to us and I wonder how many of us can then go on and take this next step as we look back upon God's goodness to us in providence and in grace so can we look forward in hope and in faith to a
God who will continue in accordance with his promise not because of anything that we deserve certainly not but in accordance with his promise to continue to give to us out of the richness of his bounty and of course beyond above and beyond all that look forward to a day when everything that is temporary will have passed away and all that is permanent will have dawned in our experience well these were some of the lessons that the feast of tabernacles had to teach the children of Israel and perhaps in a way in a measure at least in their application show us what we can derive from

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such a time as this in our own experience there was something else at the feast time as it was commemorative so it also had this element of joy in it remember what
Ezra told the people in their own day that this day is holy of the Lord mourn nor weep for all the people wept when they heard the words of the Lord sorry this day is holy unto our Lord neither be ye sorry for the joy of the Lord is your strength hold your peace for the day is holy neither be ye grieved you see don't let us forget that when we gather in this kind of way today we are supposed to be thanking God we are supposed to have the joy of the Lord in our hearts these festivals were associated with rejoicing of spirit in the presence of God it is I think that this is part of the thing that one of the things mentioned last night connection with our studies in Ezra that when a spiritual slothfulness settles over our people when they lose sight of the greatness and the goodness and the grace of God when they enter into a sort of what is almost akin to backsliding an awful spirit of legalism settles over our people and one of the fruits of legalism one of the effects of legalism in a community is that it dampens the spirit of rejoicing the spirit of joy well whatever else was present in the feasts of the
Lord there was joy present Ezra Nehemiah called the people away from the spirit of mourning and weeping to the spirit of joy the joy of the Lord is your strength there was zeal and there was devotion and there was rejoicing in these feasts and that element of joy was symbolized with the waving of palm branches in these days you remember you have that in John 12 the people waving branches as the king entered Jerusalem and you have a graphic picture of it in Revelation chapter 12 where again the church in heaven is pictured in this symbolical way waving branches palm branches symbolizing the joy of the church in the presence of the Lord how much joy characterizes our worship I wonder how many of us leave our homes in the spirit in which David left his home when he said
[22:36] I joy went to the house of God go up they said to me joy in the presence of the Lord isn't something to be suppressed but to be encouraged how many of us would dare say that we have sufficient of this in our own day and generation we hardly have it at all the joy of the Lord in our acts of worship how much of it wells up in your own heart and in mind today as we gather here to thank God for his goodness to us in harvest to hear some people speak you would think that joy isn't a part of the Christian's life there is no man on the earth who has more joy than the Christian or who ought to have more joy than the Christian and there are times when the criticism that is leveled against the Christian church of being sullen not sullen but sullen is perfectly justified we gather here today as people who have reason to thank God who have reason to rejoice in the presence of God do we have that as we gather in his name this morning and then there is a third element in these feasts

I am nearly finished the element of responsiveness from the people the feast of tabernacles particularly demanded that the people respond in a way in which they didn't need to respond during the other feasts for example double the usual offerings were offered during the feast of tabernacles in other words this feast was intended to call forth the grateful sense of the Lord's goodness in bestowing upon this people the gifts of his hand and they were to respond in offering more than they were normally asked and the offerings signified therefore their surrender their responsiveness their dedication as worshippers to God in the light of
God's goodness to himself you've heard the story I'm reminding you of the story of Benjamin Franklin who went to hear George Whitefield when he went to preach in the United States of America and as you know his missionary was connected very often to a large extent to the raising of funds for the homes that were set up for the orphans there Benjamin Franklin went to hear George Whitefield and he discovered before he started to preach that an offering was to be taken a collection was to be taken that day and I determined says Benjamin Franklin I determined that I would give nothing to this man nor for this cause then he said he began to preach and shortly after he began to preach I decided that I would give him a few of the coppers I had in my pocket because I had coppers and silver and some gold pieces in my pocket and I determined that I would give him the coppers I had and as the sermon unfolded without a stroke of his oratory
I determined that I would give the silver which was in my pocket and before that man's sermon finished he said the power of the truth that so affected my heart that I had determined that I would empty my pockets into the offering and you see there was a man who was compelled to respond in that way by the evidence of the power and the love and the grace and the goodness of God through the world what about yourself today how much of that overflowing spirit characterizes you as you

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gather here today to express your thanksgiving to God for his own goodness as the multiplicity of offerings in connection with the feast of tabernacles indicated Israel's responsiveness to the God whose goodness they celebrated how much of that spirit is in your heart and mine today as we present ourselves in the presence of God oh wouldn't it be good if you and I were to respond to the psalmist what shall I render to the Lord for all his gifts to me finally in the course of time there were two ceremonies which became associated with the feast of tabernacles in which the new testament speaks of with great fullness as does for example
Zechariah chapter 14 the last chapter in Zechariah and these were ceremonies which became connected with the ideas of water and light seems that at the feast of tabernacles if not on the last day of the feast and the day preceding it the priest came and took water in a golden pitcher and poured it out upon the altar as a symbol of the fullness of life that was in God for the people and you remember how in the new testament on the last day of this feast Jesus cried and said in the temple if any man thirst let him come unto me and drink and then the other ceremony that was connected with it was one which is associated with light in the new testament maybe this right as you have in the very next chapter after
[29:25] Jesus said that John chapter 7 you have in John chapter 8 I am the light of the world again in connection with this feast a part of the temple was always lit during the eight days of the festival reminding the people again of the light that was available to them in God and remember that all these things were associated with the rejoicing that they made now then the question is this do you and I here today rejoice in the Lord Jesus Christ who is the water of life and who is the light of life who is the light of the world do we thank God today that we have all that we need by way of sustenance and provision by way of light and life do we thank God today that we have that available to us in the

Lord Jesus Christ because there was a very significant element in the observance of this feast it was this the book of Ezra and the book of Nehemiah make this very clear for example the book of Ezra when they finished when they built when they laid when they finished the building of the altar of burnt offering after the return from captivity those of you who come to witness night pray me to know about this when they finished that building of the altar they held this a sort of a mini feast of remember a feast of tabernacles but never since the days of Joshua had they held a feast in such fullness as they held it in the days of Nehemiah many years about six eighty years after they had built the altar of burnt offering in Jerusalem after the captivity when Ezra came and the temple was complete and the building of the city was complete Ezra came and and they read the law and the light of that law they remembered that the people of
Israel had observed this feast so they kept the feast of tabernacles now the point is this Israel after they entered Canaan were to remember the way that God had delivered their fathers and led them through the wilderness into the promised land but you see in Nehemiah's day and in Ezra's day there was another dimension to this feast for the people of Israel and Jerusalem they were remembering not just how God had delivered their fathers and led them through the wilderness into Canaan they were a people now who knew what it was to be delivered personally by God they had been delivered from the captivity of Babylon and brought back into the security and the blessedness and the peacefulness of Jerusalem this is a thing about the feast for us today this is a thing about our thanksgiving we gather here not just to remember
God's goodness to others but God's goodness to ourselves we are the people who are passing through this world we are the people who know something of God's goodness we are those who ought to respond in thanksgiving to God for all that he has done and for all that he has given and for all that he has yet promised to give and as I said earlier I wonder how many of us are able to respond passionately to God and to say to him from the depths of our own heart thanks be unto God for his goodness to me and thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift to me let us make this more than a religious observance let it be the response of a thankful heart to God for his great goodness to us let us pray oh Lord do thou bless to us thy goodness we fear that we are so destitute of the spirit that ought to characterize our gathering here today oh give us grace that like Israel of old we may anew dedicate and consecrate ourselves to thee in a covenant engagement we bless thee for the covenant that thou hast made with us and for the very wonderful way in which thou hast honored it and fulfilled it thou art a faithful God accept our thanks pardon thy blessing and continue with us this day for Jesus sake Amen

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