



Ezra-Nehemiah

a narrative study



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INTRODUCTION

THIS STUDY OF EZRA-NEHEMIAH originated as my prepared notes for teaching our local ABF (Adult Bible Fellowship) class on Sunday mornings. As with the other resources at our web site, we make it available to others simply because it already exists. I make no claim to scholarship, special insight, or extraordinary understanding of God's holy word. I have been called, in the local assembly, to teach (predominantly) senior adults from God's word. Following the example of the early churches, those of us in the kingdom are encouraged to "[share our possessions] with all, as anyone might have need." (Acts 2:45) If others can benefit from this study, then all the better.

Different from some of our earlier published studies, this study of Ezra-Nehemiah has not been overly modified or formatted, but is published in essentially the format of my original notes used in class. Scripture text has not been added after-the-fact; use these notes with your own Bible alongside.

This study comes with a companion booklet (PDF), which is a handy reference library, especially regarding historical information and maps.

As with all of our resources, we offer this free of charge, to the glory of God the Father, and the praise of Jesus Christ our Lord.

David S. Lampel
Winterset, Iowa
January 2015

EXPLANATIONS

SCRIPTURE VERSIONS

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Greek and Hebrew citations are from *Strong's Talking Greek & Hebrew Dictionary*, and the *NASB Greek-Hebrew Dictionary*.

ABBREVIATIONS

NASB: *New American Standard Bible*

NKJV: *New King James Version*

KJV: *King James Version*

KJVS: Both *King James Version* and *New King James Version*

NIV: *New International Version*

RSV: *Revised Standard Version*

YLT: *Young's Literal Translation*

ESV: *English Standard Version*

OT, NT: *Old Testament, New Testament*

PRINCIPAL EXTERNAL RESOURCES

Yamauchi: Edwin Yamauchi, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gæbelein, General Editor. Copyright © 1976, Zondervan Corporation, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

A History of Ancient Israel and Judah, J. Maxwell Miller and John H. Hayes. Copyright © 1986. The Westminster Press.

History of the Persian Empire, A. T. Olmstead. Copyright © 1948. The University of Chicago Press.

STANDARD CITATIONS

Barnes: Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Bible*.

Brown: *Brown's Dictionary of New Testament Theology*; Colin Brown, General Editor; English Language edition copyright © 1975, 1986, The Zondervan Corporation, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and The Paternoster Press, Ltd. Exeter, Devon, U.K.

Carson: D. A. Carson, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Frank E. Gæbelein, General Editor. Copyright © 1976, Zondervan Corporation, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Clarke: *Adam Clarke's Commentary on the Bible*.

Darby: John Nelson Darby, *Synopsis of the Old and New Testaments*.

Grudem: Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*.

Henry: *Matthew Henry's Commentary on the Whole Bible*.

JFB: *Commentary on the Old and New Testaments* by Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset and David Brown.

Vincent: Marvin R. Vincent, *Vincent's Word Studies*.

Vine's: W. E. Vine, *The Expanded Vine's: Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*.

SESSION 1: Introduction

I once read an article by a female journalist who was bemoaning the condition of modern Jewry. Her lengthy argument came down to this: That Jehovah had played a big joke on Israel by selecting them out as His chosen people, then letting all these bad things happen to them: exile, dispersion, persecution, annihilation, loss of homeland—and even now, after the return to their homeland in 1948, surrounded by nations wanting only for the Jews to be driven into the sea.

Her article closed on a sarcastic note: *Thanks a lot, God, for choosing us. Couldn't you have given this lousy gift to someone else?*

It has always amazed me that individuals of a nation, a people, that likes to think of itself as “the people of the book”—the people of the Torah—can be so ignorant of what that book actually says. If that journalist had taken the time to read her own Scriptures—the Torah, the histories, and the prophets—and if she were more familiar with history, she would have had her answer. And there would have been no reason for her to so embarrass herself in print.

Please turn to Deuteronomy 28.

We have to begin our journey somewhere. We could go all the way back to the Garden of Eden, but for a preface to this new class, let's start with the blessings and curses found in the fifth and closing book of the Torah.

Read selected portions of Deuteronomy 28.

Blessings (vs1-14):

overflowing blessings	1-2
man & beast will be fruitful	4-5
in all things	6
I will defeat your enemies	7
you will be distinctive & holy	9-10
the weather will always be in your favor	12

Curses (vs15-68):

overflowing misery	15
man & beast's fruit cursed	18
in all things	19
<i>summary</i>	20
the weather will work against you	24
you will flee before your enemies	25
what a nightmare!	28-29, 34
what was once yours is now taken	30-33, 38-42
exile!	36-37
<i>summary</i>	45-47
invasion!	49-50
siege!	52
cannibalism!	53-57
plagues, disease, sickness	59-61
dispersed!	64

OVERVIEW & PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The official title of this class is ***Ezra-Nehemiah: Rebellion, Restoration, Revival***. I believe that in this instance if we did a verse-by-verse, word-by-word study of these two books, we could miss the forest for the trees—not to mention the fact that it would take about two years to complete the 23 chapters! Here is a broad outline for how we will be approaching this study:

1. We'll not spend a lot of time there, but we are going to begin by considering the roots of the story: Israel's rejection of God's law. This will consist of just a brief survey of Israel's disobedience.
2. Next we will look at the four principal invasions of the divided kingdom: Israel and Judah. These accounts will be drawn from 2 Kings.
3. Then, primarily from the book of Ezra, we will look at the first major return of the exiles, led by Zerubbabel, to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. They worked from the inside out: first the altar, then the foundation, then the rest of the building.
4. Finally, primarily from the book of Nehemiah, we will see how the governor, Nehemiah, and Ezra the priest/ scribe led the people to systematically rebuild the Jerusalem walls.

In both Ezra and Nehemiah, the returning exiles experienced intense opposition from without. But they also experienced amazing, breathtaking revival, as they rediscovered the written law and a renewal of their relationship with Yahweh.

This represents one of the high points in the history of God's chosen people. Sadly, we know that they did not remain on this high point; even before our story draws to a close, they will already be rebelling again.

It is common for evangelicals to look back on Jewish history and see it all only by the big chunks. For example:

- Israel/Judah rebels against God's law
- Nebuchadnezzar invades and removes everyone to Babylon
- 70 years later they all return to the Promised Land

Not only does that leave out a lot of the subtleties—it's not even really true.

- Not everyone was removed to Babylon, and not all at once:
 - Babylon was not the only location for the exiles, and it did not happen just once.
 - There were at least four major invasions/removals, with less significant ones in-between
- Likewise, when they were finally permitted, not everyone *wanted* to return
 - Some had made comfortable, productive lives for themselves in foreign lands (as the prophet Jeremiah told them to do), and had no interest in returning to Judah
 - Those who did, did not return all in one group.

Before all that, however, a history of the middle east reveals that there were wars and invasions and resulting population dispersal going on all over the place. One nation went to war against other nations; in turn they went to war with others; captives were taken or slaughtered; cities were razed to the ground.

The Bible, rightly so, emphasizes the religious/spiritual aspects of this history, and leaves out a lot of what was happening on a more political level in and with surrounding nations. This was a period of *regional* turmoil, of which Israel/Judah was only a part.

BOOKLET

This class includes a booklet that was printed in hard copy for the original attendees, but is included in PDF form for this online version. You should keep it handy when going through these notes—especially during the first half.

The booklet is not a "text book," but a reference library to be used throughout the class. It compiles in one, portable place reference material for dating, context, principal characters, and maps.

SESSION 2: *Rebellion*

Last week we looked at God's pronouncement of blessings or curses in Deuteronomy 28; in this God was telling Israel there were two ways it could go—and it all depended on their behavior, their response to His law, their obedience to Him. So let's see how they did:

- Moses first came down from Mt. Sinai and recited to the people of Israel the words dictated to him by Yahweh. They were not yet engraved on stone, but Moses recited to them the Ten Commandments. Commandment #1: "You shall have no other gods before Me."
Moses told them all that the Lord had told him, and the people affirmed their covenant with God:
Read Exodus 24:3.
Then Moses returned to the mountain for "forty days and forty nights." It wasn't long before the people grew impatient for his return, and what do we see:
Read Exodus 32:1-4.
Little more than a month after pledging their devotion to Yahweh, they're worshipping something made by man.
- Fast-forward to the time of the judges, where it states:
In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25)
- God did not want His people to have an earthly king; *He* would be their king. But, in rebellion against Him, Israel came to their aging judge/prophet Samuel and demanded a king "to judge us like all the nations." (1 Samuel 8:5)
 - This was troubling to Samuel—he took it personally—so he took it to the Lord
 - God assured Samuel that they were not rejecting his (Samuel's) leadership, but they were rejecting *His* leadership—the Lord's:
"Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day—in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also." (1 Samuel 8:8)
 - So Saul was anointed Israel's first king and, not surprisingly, that didn't work out too well. As is the way of flesh, Saul started to think too much of himself. Before a key battle He even got impatient with Samuel's arrival and assumed the role of priest. Then, after a battle in which the Lord had told him to slaughter every living thing, he kept the choicest livestock for himself and even spared the enemy king. Worst of all, he then lied about it to Samuel and the Lord. God's judgment?
"I regret that I have made Saul king, for he has turned back from following Me and has not carried out My commands." (1 Samuel 15:11)
Samuel told Saul,
"The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to your neighbor, who is better than you." (1 Samuel 15:28)
- Later even wise Solomon sinned against God and as a result God tore away most of the nation from the house of David (1 Kings 11:9-13). The Davidic line kept Judah and Jerusalem, but most of the rest became the northern kingdom, called Israel or, sometimes, Samaria.
- Then began an insidious cycle of rulers in both kingdoms. Time and again—almost every ruler—they rejected the ways of God in favor of foreign gods, married pagan women, worshipped and sacrificed to pagan idols.
- Until God finally reached His breaking point—and did just what He promised He would. As is manifestly clear in the OT, grace was not something the Lord invented for the NT; He showed remarkable, supernatural grace toward Israel and Judah with His longsuffering against their repeated rebellion. But God does not break His promises; He told them precisely what would happen if they turned away from Him—and now it was time to fulfill that promise.

JEREMIAH'S PROPHECIES

Jeremiah prophesied in Judah for better than forty years. **Turn to the time line on p6 of your booklet.** Jeremiah's ministry stretched from 625 BC to just after the fall of Jerusalem in 586. So on the time line you might place a tick mark just to the left of **604** for 625 BC, then draw a line over to a spot just after **586**, when Jerusalem fell. That represents the time of Jeremiah's prophecies. As we will see next week (and as the time line indicates), by this time the northern kingdom of Israel has already fallen. [\[Jeremiah probably died in Egypt \(see Jeremiah 43:5-7\)\]](#)

The Lord, speaking through Jeremiah, gives us His withering verdict against Jerusalem and Judah

from Jeremiah...

After itemizing how Israel (i.e., the entire nation) no longer sought Him, the Lord says...

Read 2:9.

What did Israel do that was so horrible, so bad that the Lord says the heavens shuddered?

Read 2:11-13.

v3 in *Bible in Basic English*:

For my people have done two evils; they have given up me, the fountain of living waters, and have made for themselves water-holes, cut out from the rock, broken water-holes, of no use for storing water.

Read John 4:13-14.

The Lord continues the water imagery in v17-19.

Read 2:17-19.

You no longer fear Me, He tells them; you are looking elsewhere for your life-sustaining water.

Read 2:29-30.

You have not accepted my chastening; it made no difference in your lives. And you have even killed my messengers the prophets.

In Chapter 5 the Lord describes the false security Israel and Judah assumed for themselves.

Read 5:10-13.

So He passes judgment on them.

Read 5:14-19.

Sound familiar? That is precisely what He told them would happen before they even crossed the Jordan, back in Numbers 28.

[Finally, turn to Chapter 16.]

Speaking of that journalist I mentioned last week, if she didn't want to bother reading all of Numbers 28, she only had to read four verses in Chapter 16 of Jeremiah for her answer.

Read 16:10-13.

APPLICATION

Let's close by returning to something the Lord said in v19 of Jeremiah 2.

Read v19.

"...and the dread of Me is not in you, declares the Lord God of Hosts."

God's word is timeless. We make a grave mistake when we dismiss all this history as something dissociated from us.

As He makes this last statement, one can hear the Lord rising up, His voice deepening, rumbling, thundering as He is named: [\[the manner in which God is named throughout Scripture always means something\]](#)

declares the **Lord** = *adonay* = the lord and **master**, the **controlling sovereign who rules**

God = *yhwh* (yeh-ho-vah') = **self-Existent or Eternal**; *Jehovah*, Jewish national name of God.

of **hosts** = *saba* (tsaw-baw') = **a mass of persons** (or figurative things), especially reg. **organized for war (an army)**; by implication a campaign, literal or figurative (specifically hardship, worship) :- appointed time, (+) army, (+) battle, company, host, service, soldiers, waiting upon, war (-fare).

Why is He described this way here? Because of what He is saying:

You have lost your fear of Me! You no longer respect Me!

And we must—we *must*—turn the spotlight around and shine it on us.

- Have we lost our fear of Father God?
- Has He become in our lives something smaller than who He truly is?
- Do we shudder with reverent fear at His presence—or does *heaven* shudder (v12), appalled by the extent to which we have exchanged His glory for our own?

When we think Him too small, we draw dangerously close to “forsaking” Him.

SESSION 3: Invasion

DIVISION

So Israel is now a divided kingdom: Israel (or Samaria) in the north, Judah in the south. [see map, p1 of your booklet] After King Solomon the Lord split apart His people because of their rebellion, sin, disobedience—specifically Solomon's, who in his later days married foreign wives, and not only permitted them to worship their pagan gods such as Molech (to whom children were sacrificed), but built high places for their sacrifices and worship. (1 Kings 11)

The Lord raised up a man not of the Davidic line—a servant of that house, in fact—**Jeroboam**, and gave him the ten northern tribes. To Solomon's son, **Rehoboam**, He left just the one tribe, Judah, which included Jerusalem.

Sidebar: Why just eleven tribes? Difficult to say for sure, but probably has to do with the tribes of Benjamin and Simeon migrating from their original parcels, and dividing their allegiance.

CONTINUED CORRUPTION

We are familiar with what follows. Solomon died in 930 BC, and over the next two hundred years (approximately) the succession of kings in both kingdoms were, with only a few exceptions, mostly disobedient to Yahweh:

Now in the eighteenth year of King Jeroboam, the son of Nebat, Abijam became king over Judah. He reigned three years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Maacah the daughter of Abishalom. He walked in all the sins of his father which he had committed before him; and his heart was not wholly devoted to the Lord his God, like the heart of his father David. (1 Kings 15:1-3)

In the twentieth year of Jeroboam the king of Israel, Asa began to reign as king of Judah. He reigned forty-one years in Jerusalem; and his [grand]mother's name was Maacah the daughter of Abishalom. **Asa did what was right in the sight of the Lord**, like David his father. (1 Kings 15:9-11; emphasis added)

In the thirty-first year of Asa king of Judah, Omri became king over Israel *and reigned* twelve years... Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord, and acted more wickedly than all who *were* before him. (1 Kings 16:23,25)

Ahab the son of Omri did evil in the sight of the Lord more than all who were before him. (1 Kings 16:30)

[now fast forward]

Manasseh was twelve years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem; and his mother's name was Hephzibah. He did evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the abominations of the nations whom the Lord dispossessed before the sons of Israel. (2 Kings 21:1-2)

PREFACE TO INVASIONS DISCUSSION

Sidebar: Remember that the further back you go in time, the less precise the dates. As you see in your booklet, some dates can be nailed down to not just year, but month and day. But there will invariably be discrepancies in dates BC—or as some scholars prefer, BCE. You may see references in your bible notes or other books that differ slightly from the dates I cite; in this study that is both expected, and a small matter.

And the same goes for the spelling of certain names—which may change even from one Bible book to another. For example, take just one person: the Babylonian king, *Nebuchadnezzar* (neb-oo-kad-nets-tsar')—properly, *Nebuchadnezzar II*, is also spelled *Nebuwkadre'ttsar* or (commonly by scholars) *Nebuchadrezzar*.

He is referred to as the king of Babylon, or Babylonia, but he is actually Chaldean. It was his predecessor, Nabopolassar (also Chaldean), who wrested control of Babylonia from the Assyrian king, Sinsharishkun.

I cite this just as an example; you will be pleased, I am sure, that we will not be digging into the minutia to this extent. I may be enthralled by it, but I know most are not. This brings me to my second sidebar...

Sidebar: As I have already mentioned, there is much activity and political motives during this period in the Middle East that we will not be discussing. From childhood Sunday School we learned the big chunks: that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem and took young Daniel back home and threw him in the lion's den. From this we get a reasonably accurate, but monochromatic picture of the events.

In truth the history is richly detailed and in Technicolor and Panavision:

- populations of many nations were being moved about almost continually;
- populations were sometimes transplanted, sometimes wiped out;
- one plot of land might change hands repeatedly as one empire rose up and wiped out a previous empire;
- these same empires expanded and contracted;
- alliances with other states came and went—and **often these political alliances are the earthly means by which the Lord God worked His will.**

I bring this up only so that you understand that while in this study we may be delving deeper than you may have before, we will also be leaving out a lot.

Today we are going to look at the first two of the four principal invasions of Israel/Judah that culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

[\[Primary booklet pages: 2 & 6-9\]](#)

INVASION 1

You can see from the map on page 7 that the Assyrian king Tiglath-pilaser III was on the move during the decade before he invaded Israel. It was during his last campaign in 733-732 BC that he invaded Damascus and then Galilee. We find the event in **2 kings 15**.

Read 2 Kings 15:27-29.

Pronunciations

Pekah =	peh'-kakh
Tiglath-pileser =	tig-lath' pil-eh'-ser
Remaliah =	rem-al-yaw'-hoo
Ijon =	ee-yone'
Abel-beth-maacah =	aw-bale' bayte ma-a-kaw'
Janoah =	yaw-no'-akh
Hazor =	khaw-tsore'
Naphtali =	naf-taw-lee'

We may rightly ask why? Why was the northern kingdom invaded at this time? There is a typical pattern that was in play here:

- a local king would, for political reasons, ally himself with a larger, more powerful nation or empire
- he would become a vassal to the stronger king, paying not just homage but annual tribute
- to raise the money, the wealthy would be taxed
- as the local ruler got stronger, or as he allied himself with other strong nations, he might start withholding the annual tribute, or expressing some other antagonism against the empire
- to rectify this—to reestablish fealty and the taxes—the stronger king would invade to punish or, in the extreme, annihilate the offending vassal

In this instance, Pekah had acquired an anti-Assyrian policy from his predecessor (whom he assassinated); this brought Israel almost to the point of extinction. This was often the *political* reason, the temporal reason. For the *real* reason, the eternal reason, we need only look at v28:

And he [Pekah] did evil in the sight of the Lord.

As a result, Israel was invaded by Assyria; Pekah was killed, and a new king more friendly to Assyria (Hoshea),

installed on the throne; and some of its people were deported to Assyria

INVASION 2

In the second invasion we get a clearer picture of what was going on “on the ground” so to speak—both politically and spiritually. Chapter 17 of 2 Kings gives us the story. First the set-up:

Read 2 Kings 17:1-3.

First the *political* situation:

Hoshea was from the same mold—just not as bad as some of his predecessors. Tiglath-pileser died in 722 BC, and his son, Shalmaneser V, became king. At this time Sargon II was commanding general, but he later took the throne.

Initially Hoshea dutifully paid the tribute to Assyria, but he was not playing straight with Shalmaneser. He was looking for Egypt to bail him out—a bad call; the Egyptian throne couldn’t take care of its own internal problems, much less be any help to Israel.

Read 2 Kings 17:4.

By the way, “So” in v4 is the Hebrew pronunciation of the Egyptian capital at the time, Sais—not the name of the pharaoh, Tefnekht. Vs5-6 wrap up the political situation on the ground.

Read 2 Kings 17:5-6.

Now the *spiritual* situation:

Beginning with v7 we get a fairly detailed catalogue of the evils that brought this about. Let’s pick it up at v9.

Read 2 Kings 17:9-18. [Asherah/Asherim (pl.) = Astarte (Phoenicia), Ishtar, Ashtoreth]

But Judah wasn’t off the hook either.

Read vs19-20.

Finally, in vs24-25 we see that Shalmaneser did not leave Israel empty.

Read 2 Kings 17:24.

CONCLUSION

The flesh would tell us, as it convinced Israel when it settled into the Promised Land, that intermarriage with the previous residents and surrounding nations—pagans all—presented a marvelous opportunity for evangelism.

But that’s not how it works.

This is why the Lord told them not to intermarry—indeed, to wipe them out.

Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I will dwell in them and walk among them; And I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” Therefore, come out from their midst and be separate,” says the Lord. “And do not touch what is unclean; And I will welcome you. And I will be a father to you, And you shall be sons and daughters to Me,” says the Lord Almighty. (2 Corinthians 6:14-18)

SESSION 4: More Invasions

PREFACE

Please turn to Deuteronomy 17.

Immersed in the current state of Israel in our narrative—the narrative of their condition of rebellion against the Lord—we can forget how far they have come—how far they have fallen from the Lord’s ideal. Here is a reality-check:

Read Deuteronomy 17:2-5.

The Lord said that if they found any *one* person guilty of this, he or she should be executed by stoning. The picture we have from Scripture of Israel/Judah is that the cancer of idolatry had consumed the entire body, so that it might be a challenge to find just one person *not* guilty of that egregious sin.

[\[Please look at the time line on page 6 of your booklet\]](#)

Last week we began our survey of the four principal invasions/removals from Israel and Judah. By the end of the second, Israel is wiped out: Shalmaneser king of Assyria and his general Sargon invaded, removed most of the native Israelites to Mesopotamia and beyond, scattering them about the Assyrian empire, and in their place settled Babylonians and Arameans.

INVASION 3

Now we move forward about twenty years. There is a new king in Assyria: **Sennacherib**. After Shalmaneser, Sargon ruled until 705 BC, at which time Sennacherib began his reign.

Read 2 Kings 18:13.

[\[You will find the map of this campaign on page 9 of your booklet \(and in this instance you might wish to follow along\).\]](#)

Hezekiah is the current king in Judah, and here we have the evidence that God was not administering justice to His chosen people by knee-jerk reaction to the moment. The opening verses of Chapter 18 inform us that Hezekiah was a *righteous* king. In the Lord’s eternal economy, He would mete out justice based on the historical track record of Israel—not on the passing behavior of one person, whether good or bad.

Look at v7.

Hezekiah returned Judah to the commandments of the Lord and, as a result...

Read 2 Kings 18:7-8.

Rebelling against God has consequences; rebelling against the king of Assyria has consequences as well. Now Sennacherib is on the march, coming down the coast toward Judah. According to Sennacherib’s account, he has swept down the coast, taking city after city, has looped down to Lachish, and is preparing to head north toward Jerusalem. This is when Hezekiah sends word to the invading king. The king of Judah is now rethinking his strategy.

Read v14.

And, as with all flesh, of course, “righteous” is a relative term; just because Hezekiah “did right in the sight of the Lord,” it does not mean he did *everything* right. Grateful that Sennacherib has accepted his terms, grateful that he might just come out of this alive, Hezekiah says, “You only want my gold watch? Here’s my wallet, too!”

Read vs15-16.

However, we will see that the Lord, speaking through the prophet Isaiah, honored the prayer of Hezekiah for help. After the king of Judah sent all the gold and silver to Sennacherib, the Assyrian army came north and laid siege to Jerusalem. [\[Hmm... that didn’t work out so well\]](#) A lengthy dialogue ensues between the representatives of the two sides. Sennacherib’s messengers point out the folly of Judah relying on the Lord and on their ally, Egypt. They then return south, to Libnah, where Sennacherib was fighting. And the king of Assyria sends them back to

Jerusalem with another threatening message. And we now have a foretaste of what is coming up in Nehemiah, for the written message is handed to Hezekiah, and he immediately takes it to the Lord.

Read 2 Kings 19:14.

Just picture it—a moving scene. Hezekiah pushes open the heavy doors of the temple and, as if presenting a sacrifice, unrolls the papyrus scroll, stretching it across the floor of the temple. He then prostrates himself before the Lord and, after declaring His sovereign majesty, entreats the Lord for help.

Read v19.

Sidebar: What a beautiful illustration of living “right in the sight of the Lord.” No matter what comes our way, whether threat or blessing, we go to Him *first*. Hezekiah did not call a council meeting, he didn’t poll the population; he took it to his Lord.

And the Lord honors the prayer—as well as Hezekiah’s priorities.

Read v20.

His answer is that Sennacherib will be turned away before Jerusalem. Let’s cut to the punch line.

Read 2 Kings 19:32-34.

That night the angel of the Lord struck down the Assyrian army and Sennacherib returned home.

INVASION 4

We have looked at three events so far: the first two resulted in the demise of the northern kingdom, Israel; the third resulted in the capture of most of the fortified cities in Judah, but came short of taking Jerusalem. Now we come to the fourth, and most tragic invasion: that of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

It is only natural that modern readers would compress the timeframe of ancient events, so first we need to briefly explode the time line for this final invasion of God’s chosen people.

1. The fourth and final invasion began almost 100 years after the third—essentially the span from our day back to the beginning of World War One. Judah had 100 years to sink deeper and deeper into a state of rebellion against God.
2. During that time, what had 100 years earlier been the Assyrian Empire was now the Neo-Babylonian Empire, ruled by the Chaldeans. This had been accomplished by Nabopolassar in 616 BC. Now his successor, Nebuchadnezzar II, is king.
3. The event itself—this last invasion/removal—stretched out over a span of 18 years (2 Kings 24:1 to 25:21), and itself included four distinct removals.

Turn please to 2 Kings 24.

604-601 BC

The opening of Chapter 24 of Kings records the first movement of Nebuchadnezzar against Judah.

Read 2 Kings 24:1.

Jehoiakim is king of Judah, and for three years he was an obedient vassal of Nebuchadnezzar—at least on the surface. Some things never change, and once again Judah is (futilely) looking for help from Egypt (Neco). When Nebuchadnezzar found out about this in 601, since his own forces were weakened after three years of fighting Egypt, he sent in some mercenaries to deal with his treacherous subject.

Read 2 Kings 24:2.

There is the political view; now for the eternal view:

Read vs3-4.

V6 tells us that in all of that Jehoiakim was killed, and replaced by his son, Jehoiachin. And what we learn from the first chapter of Daniel is that it was during this first event that much of the wealth of the temple was removed to Babylon, and Daniel and his three chums were removed as well (604).

Sidebar: One historian posits that aside from God’s eternal reasons for Daniel and his friends not just being taken to Babylon, but into the court of the king, was a more pressing temporal reason: Aramaic had become the *lingua franca* of Assyria and the civilized world. The Chaldean king did not speak it, but the scholars from Judah did. He imported the best of them to teach him the language.

It is important to note the year of this event—604/605—for it is the start date of the Jews’ “seventy years of exile” in Babylon (Jeremiah 29:10). Gleason Archer, in his commentary on Daniel, also points out that

the interval between the destruction of the first temple by Nebuzaradan in 586 and the completion of the second temple by Zerubbabel in 516 was about seventy years.

597 BC

Jerusalem is besieged again seven years later, in 597 BC. Nebuchadnezzar sends his advance troops to get the ball rolling, then shows up later.

Jehoiachin and his family and court surrender themselves to Nebuchadnezzar and are taken captive. The Chaldean king removes more wealth from the temple and takes captive to Babylon thousands of the best fighting men and skilled craftsmen.

The deportation of these latter served a dual purpose: as their skills were added to Babylon, they were removed from Judah, thus dramatically diminishing its economy and ability to arm itself. The deportation of the soldiers certainly removed their ability to re-form and fight against Nebuchadnezzar from Judah—but one wonders what, if anything they would contribute positively to their new home. If they were indeed “mighty men of valor,” would they not continue the fight as covert rebels in Babylonia?

Nebuchadnezzar placed Mattaniah/Zedekiah (Jehoiachin’s uncle) on the throne of Judah, expecting him to behave. Well, he had learned nothing from the two invasions, so he remained apostate to the King of Heaven, and he eventually didn’t behave regarding the king of Babylon.

Read 2 Kings 24:19-20.

588 BC

The prophet Jeremiah had repeatedly told Judah to go willingly, make new homes for themselves in Babylon. But the die was cast; Judah through its kings would not obey the Lord, and they would not listen to His prophets.

V20 reveals the Lord’s hand behind all this—not that He made Zedekiah evil, but that He used Zedekiah’s resident evil and heart of betrayal to accomplish His will of punishing Judah for their rebellion against Him.

So in 588 BC Nebuchadnezzar returned with his full army. This time Jerusalem was under total siege, total blockade, for two years. Listen to how Jeremiah describes the situation in his Lamentations:

Read Lamentations 4:3-11.

In desperation, Zedekiah and his army break out at night, hoping to make it through the Babylonians. They do—for a moment. They are pursued and the king captured. Zedekiah is taken to Nebuchadnezzar’s headquarters at Riblah; there he is forced to witness the executions of his sons before his eyes are put out.

From what follows about a month later, one gets the impression that Nebuchadnezzar has now lost all patience and is ready to deal the final blow to Jerusalem. He sends the captain of his own imperial guard, Nebuzaradan, to oversee the city’s final destruction. And now we have recorded for us in Scripture the dark mirror image of Ezra-

Nehemiah; these are the events that *necessitate* the events of Ezra-Nehemiah.

The implication from the text is that the destruction was accomplished from the inside out:

1. the heart of the city, the spiritual nucleus—the **temple** was destroyed;
2. then the **king's palace**, then all the houses;
3. finally the **walls** were demolished—not to get out, but to render the city defenseless.

Read 2 Kings 25:8-10.

And now, after the destruction, the third batch of people are taken into exile.

Read 2 Kings 25:11.

Next the Chaldeans took possession of all the gold, silver and bronze components of the temple—all the fine utensils used in worship, and even the larger items that had to be broken up for transport back to Babylon: the great sea and the bronze pillars made in the time of Solomon. Everything of value—an incalculable amount—was removed. But as we will see later, many of the fine utensils were not destroyed.

Stragglers

Finally, there was one last batch of people to be removed from the city. The implication from Scripture is that there were some officials who had not escaped or been included in the mass exodus from the city. Perhaps they had gone into hiding, hoping to be overlooked. But Nebuchadnezzar was having none of that.

I imagine his soldiers scoured the ruins of the city, looking for stragglers. But I'm sure they also had a list of names—officials for which there was no accounting. These had to be found and removed—but not into Babylonian exile. They would meet a different fate.

Read 2 Kings 25:18-21.

POSTSCRIPT

c.560 BC

In a postscript to this tragic account we see two instances of God's mercy and grace. Even as His righteous judgment descends upon the last remaining tribe of His people, we see Him tempering justice—first with grace, then with mercy.

- First, **grace** shown to the **land**.

Read 2 Kings 25:12.

Just as in the northern kingdom, a remnant of the poor was left behind to keep the land.

- Second, **mercy** shown even to **Judah's last king**, who "did evil in the sight of the Lord."

Read 2 Kings 25:27-29.

["Evil-merodach king of Babylon" does *not* mean "the evil king of Babylon." *Evil* (ev-veel') just means "man of" or "soldier of" Merodach (mer-o-dak').]

SESSION 5: EZRA 1: Preparations for Return

PREFACE

Although this class is entitled Ezra-Nehemiah, the two OT books that record the **restoration** of Judah after its exile, for the last few weeks we have examined the **rebellion** that caused the Lord to send them into exile in the first place:

- the disobedience of Solomon that caused the division of the tribes into Israel in the north and Judah in the south;
- those kingdoms' continued, persistent disobedience;
- subsequent invasions and removals;
- culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by Nebuchadnezzar's forces and the execution or removal of almost all its people to the Babylonian (Chaldean) empire.

Why has this class been titled "Ezra-Nehemiah" instead of "Ezra and Nehemiah"?

These two books in our modern translations have had quite a journey to their present place in our canon. Unlike some other writings, their rightful place in the canon has never been disputed. However...

- Internal evidence indicates that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are two separate compositions.
- Supporting this, the 2nd chapter of Ezra is repeated in Nehemiah (which surely would not be the case if they had been written by the same hand at the same time).
- But from at least the third century BC, they were regarded as one book. The earliest MSS of the Septuagint (LXX; 300-200 BC) treat them as one book, called "Esdras B". Later MSS of the LXX, perhaps because of Christian influence, treat them as two separate works.
- In the earliest Hebrew MSS from the tenth to fifteenth centuries the two books were known under the single title, "Ezra". In AD 1448 they began appearing as two books in some Hebrew MSS.
- Wycliffe, in his Bible (1382), refers to "The First and Second Books of Esdras," but Luther adopted the title, "Nehemiah."

So while the two books probably had different authors, and have had a colorful journey together, most of the time they have been considered together, as one work. Hence, "Ezra-Nehemiah."

Who wrote them?

There is a close relationship between 1 & 2 Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, which has produced a plethora of opinions regarding who wrote what. For our purpose we will not dip our toe into that murky pond.

No one really knows for sure, but we will be in agreement with many evangelical scholars if we conclude that someone—some third party (many believe it was Ezra himself)—compiled the Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah, using the personal memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah, along with other narrative sources.

What was life like for Judah in Babylon?

Read selected text from *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, p433f.

The exiles were not forced to live in inhuman conditions. There seems to have been no opposition to them or limitation of their privileges because of their origin or religion. They were treated like the exiles from any other nation. Something of the nature of exilic conditions can be seen in Jeremiah's recommendations to the Judeans carried away in 597 B.C.E.: "Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to Yahweh on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer. 29:5-7; see also II Kings 18:31-32, where the Assyrian Rabshakeh describes the conditions of exilic life).

Exiles were settled by both Assyrians and Babylonians not only in ruined cities that needed rebuilding and in areas that needed agricultural development but also in administrative centers. The appearance of the term "tel" in various place-names where Judean exiles lived (Tel-Melah, Tel-Harsha, Tel-Abib) could suggest that Judeans were sometimes settled on abandoned sites, since "tel" may mean "mound" (often a city ruin). The prophet Ezekiel lived in Tel-Abib on the River Chebar (Ezek. 1:3; 3:15). Thus the Jews received land to till and sites to rebuild and settle and as tenants to the king would have provided labor, paid taxes, and served in the military. The appearance of Jewish names in about 8 percent of the prosaic business texts of the Marashu firm illustrate that Judean exiles became involved in various commercial activities. Biblical texts indicate that they could own property (Jer. 29:5); even slaves (Ezra 2:65), and many became quite wealthy (Ezra 1:6; 2:68-69). Administrative positions were open to them as to the exiles of other nations.

The exiles remained relatively free and certainly should not be understood as slaves. They would have been under no overt pressure to assimilate and lose their identities. Like many other exiled groups, the Jews preserved some communal cohesion and national identity and may have formed their own ethnic corporations in various towns. References to "the elders of Judah/Israel" (Ezek. 8:1, 14:1, 20:1, 3) and "the elders of the exile" (Jer. 29:1) indicate a state of limited internal autonomy in which they were able to live and govern themselves according to traditional customs and to preserve their family structures. The presence of Davidic family members probably contributed to the sense of identity and to some optimism about the future. Years were reckoned by reference to Jehoiachin's reign (Ezek. 1:2; 33:21, 40:1). While the practices of ritual purity, Sabbath observance, and circumcision tended to isolate Jews from the local culture, they also contributed to the people's sense of distinctiveness and communal cohesion.

Transferred peoples could continue to practice their national religion in the land of their exile, although there was also the tendency to combine this with some form of worship of the gods of the lands in which they dwelt (see Ezek. 14:3; 20:29). The foreigners who were settled in Samaria, for example, continued the worship of their gods while also serving the god of Israel (see II

Kings 17:24-33). Many Judeans taken to Babylonia probably continued their ancestral religion and traditional worship. For some this meant the continuation of syncretistic worship and the service of many gods (see Ezek. 14; 20:31, Deut. 4:27-28; 28:36, 64). Many of the exiles, strongly Yahwistic, continued to advocate the worship of only one god.

Little is known about the practice of Yahwism in exile. The Jews at Elephantine in Egypt possessed their own temple where sacrifice was offered, but whether similar conditions prevailed in Babylonia is uncertain. Ezekiel 11.16 is sometimes taken to refer to a "temporary sanctuary." According to Ezra 8:15-20, Temple personnel were congregated at the "place" Casiphia. Since *maqom* (= place) can denote a temple precinct, this text has been understood as specifying a temple. Such argumentation, however, is founded as much on conjecture as on evidence. Jews in Mesopotamia probably worshiped in a non-sacrificial cult in which prayer, praise, and the reading and exposition of the law were characteristic. Sermons, such as those found in Ezekiel and the prose passages of Jeremiah, were perhaps also commonplace. This type of worship could function anywhere, requiring only a meeting place ("synagogue" in Greek). Exilic worship no doubt possessed many of the characteristics of the later synagogue services.

Jewish life in an alien culture naturally led to some cultural assimilation even among the most conservative. The use of the Aramaic language and the square Aramaic script became widespread, although they did not totally replace Hebrew and the older script. The presence of Babylonian names among the exiles illustrates some accommodation to the host culture, although many Jews continued to give their children Hebrew names, and the fact that a Jewish person bore a theophoric name referring to a god other than Yahweh does not in itself denote conversion. Babylonian names for the months replaced the old Canaanite-Hebrew names used in Palestine. Political and economic pressures no doubt were influential in the level of assimilation among persons of prominence. Undoubtedly many Judeans, like most of the Israelites exiled by the Assyrians, assimilated the culture so thoroughly as to lose their Jewish identity.

Prophets as radically different as Ezekiel and Second Isaiah (the author of Isa. 40-55) wrote and preached during the exile. Ezekiel, with his priestly orientation, especially condemned his contemporaries for their abominations and impurities, their adherence to idolatry, and their syncretistic worship of other gods in addition to Yahweh. Ezekiel held out hope to the exiles that they would return to the land and purge it of its detestable things and abominations (see Ezek. 11 14-25). Like Jeremiah, in his earlier preaching, Ezekiel saw the exiles as the hope for the people—they were the "very good figs, like first-ripe figs" and those left in Judah were the "very bad figs, so bad that they could not be eaten" (Jer. 24:2; but compare Jer. 42:7-22). Like Ezekiel, Jeremiah or his followers and editors spoke of the transformed persons that would live in the renewed land (see Ezek. 11 19-20; Jer. 31.31-34; 32:36-41) when Israel and Judah would exist together again as one. Ezekiel or his circle of associates proceeded to draw up a blueprint for the idyllic life in a transformed Palestine

We are now ready to look at the beginnings of Judah's restoration.

CYRUS II

Read Ezra 1:1.

The year is 539/8 BC

[The literal pronunciation for his name would be *Koresh*, but for several reasons (not the least, the reminder of the tragic Camp Davidian cult), I will use the more familiar pronunciation, *Sigh'-rus*.]

One way to organize the book of Ezra is in two parts:

1. The rebuilding of the temple: 1:1 to 6:22
2. The ministry of Ezra: 7:1 to 10:44

(Another way is by ruling Persian kings, which we will look at later.)

Jeremiah prophesied that Judah would be in exile in Babylon for seventy years [29:10]. But it was through the prophet *Isaiah* that Jehovah revealed the very name of the king who would initiate the restoration.

- Prophesied: c. 740 BC to 680 BC
- Judah taken into exile (final): 586 BC
- Cyrus founds the Persian Empire: 559 BC
- Cyrus' proclamation: 538 BC

So something like 140 years before Cyrus came to power (which means, of course, long before he was even a twinkle in the eye of his dad, Cambyses I), and 160 years before it was time for him to initiate the rebuilding of

Jerusalem, the prophet Isaiah declared that it would be he who would get the ball rolling, and the exiles begin their long-awaited restoration.

Read Isaiah 44:24-28.

As v1 tells us, Cyrus spoke this proclamation (which would have been in his own language) and had it recorded in Hebrew and sent throughout the kingdom.

Read v1 again.

We might ask, *Why did Cyrus do this? What were his motives?* Well, consider one of our political parties today.

One party nurtures the reputation that they stand up for the poor, for the little guy, the immigrant, the low-wage worker. Do they do this because they are, at heart, generous and loving toward their fellow man? No, they do it to buy votes for sustaining or acquiring power. That is, they put out propaganda, making them seem benevolent, for political reasons.

Middle-eastern rulers of that day—Assyrians, Persians, etc.—loved to present themselves as benevolent, understanding, gracious liberators, respecting the beliefs of the foreigners in their midst. Now, these were the same guys who would initiate wars, put to the sword and raze whole cities, so it is an odd balancing act. In any case, we must accept that Cyrus' proclamation was as much (if not more) for his own propaganda, as it was to "fulfill the word of the Lord." In vs2-4 we have the text of his proclamation.

Read vs2-4.

Sidebar: It occurs to me that there is an odd dichotomy to this situation. Regarding His followers, those who call upon His name, the Lord concerns Himself more with the condition of the heart than outward actions. But the reverse seems to be true regarding those who do *not* call upon His name. These He uses for His eternal purpose, no matter the condition of their heart. He just disregards it. The prophet Isaiah put it like this in Chapter 45 of his prophecy about Cyrus:

Thus says the Lord to Cyrus His anointed,
Whom I have taken by the right hand,
To subdue nations before him
And to loose the loins of kings;
To open doors before him so that gates will not be shut:
"I will go before you and make the rough places smooth;
I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars.
"I will give you the treasures of darkness
|And hidden wealth of secret places,
So that you may know that it is I,
The Lord, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name.
"For the sake of Jacob My servant,
And Israel My chosen one,
I have also called you by your name;
I have given you a title of honor
Though you have not known Me.
"I am the Lord, and there is no other;
Besides Me there is no God.
I will gird you, though you have not known Me;" (Isaiah 45:1-5)

[Back to our story.](#)

Jehovah “stirred up the spirit of Cyrus”—the spirit of someone who did not know Him—to do one thing: rebuild the temple, the place of worship of Himself. Don’t miss the specificity of that. God did not just say, “Hey, let my people go. Let them return to Judah, and see if anything comes of it.” Neither did He tell Cyrus to rebuild Jerusalem; just the temple.

Application: It is with that same specificity that He stirs up *our* spirit sometimes—and even more so, since we *do* know Him, have a relationship with Him, and our spirit has the advantage of sharing space with *His* Spirit, residing within us. Cyrus did not have that.

Our God is not a God of random acts; His will is specific, precise, orderly.

And we have here an echo from the original exodus from Egypt when Cyrus commands the friends and neighbors of those leaving for Judah to contribute wealth and goods to support those making the trip—as well as contributing freewill offerings for the temple itself. And vs5-11 itemize that support.

God was stirring a lot of spirits in that day. He stirred the spirits of

- the heads of the households of Judah and Benjamin
- the priests and the Levites
- and those He had selected to return and rebuild the temple

Then the Lord stirred up those who would fund the excursion, and they were “encouraged” [v6; lit. & kjv: “strengthened their hands” / niv: “assisted”] by their neighbors’ gold and silver, cattle, and additional freewill offerings.

And King Cyrus impresses us again when he assigns to his own government/kingdom the same duty of support for the Jews. He sends his men into the temple of his own gods to remove the temple booty of Jerusalem that Nebuchadnezzar had brought back.

Read Ezra 1:7-8.

It was customary for victorious armies to remove statues of the gods of conquered lands—just one more way to kick them in the teeth and render them ceremonially impotent. But there were no graven images of Yahweh, so Nebuchadnezzar’s men removed the wealth of the temple instead. This was recorded in 2 Kings 24.

Read 2 Kings 24:13.

Sidebar: Cyrus may have been endearing himself to the Jews in the return of all this gold and silver, but he certainly *wasn’t* endearing himself to the local priests. I can well imagine the grumbling Mithredath did under his breath as he carried out these pieces of temple wealth.

The treasurer’s name, Mithredath means “given by Mithra,” the name of one of the Persian gods, and I can’t imagine he was any too pleased giving up this treasure from his vaults.

Regarding Sheshbazzar

This is not the first, nor the last, time we will have to choose whom we will believe regarding the facts of this story. Scholars do not agree about the identity of “Sheshbazzar, the prince of Judah.” Some say

- a Persian official
- a Jewish aristocrat/leader
- Zerubbabel’s uncle
- Zerubbabel himself

What makes the most sense to me [as seen in the chart on p3 of your booklet] is the last position, which is taken by the well-respected Keil & Delitzsch:

This officer counted them out to the prince of Judah Sheshbazzar, undoubtedly the Chaldee name of Zerubbabel. For, according to Ezr_5:14, Ezr_5:16, שֶׁשׁבַצְאָר was the governor (פֶּהָרָה) placed by Cyrus over the new community in Judah and Jerusalem, and who, according to Ezr_1:11 of the present chapter, returned to Jerusalem at the head of those who departed from Babylon; while we are informed (Ezr_2:2; Ezr_3:1, Ezr_3:8, and Ezr_4:3; Ezr_5:2) that Zerubbabel was not only at the head of the returning Jews, but also presided as secular ruler over the settlement of

the community in Judah and Jerusalem. The identity of Sheshbazzar with Zerubbabel, which has been objected to by Schrader and Nöldeke, is placed beyond a doubt by a comparison of Ezr_5:16 with Ezr_3:8, etc., Ezr_5:2 : for in Ezr_5:16 Sheshbazzar is named as he who laid the foundation of the new temple in Jerusalem; and this, according to Ezr_5:2 and Ezr_3:8, was done by Zerubbabel. The view, too, that Zerubbabel, besides this his Hebrew name, had, as the official of the Persian king, also a Chaldee name, is in complete analogy with the case of Daniel and his three companions, who, on being taken into the service of the Babylonian king, received Chaldee names (Dan_1:7). Zerubbabel, moreover, seems, even before his appointment of שֹׁשְבַזְאָר to the Jewish community in Judah, to have held some office in either the Babylonian or Persian Court or State; for Cyrus would hardly have entrusted this office to any private individual among the Jews.

Read Ezra 5:16.

Read Ezra 3:8.

So as we leave the scene, those who will be making the journey back to Jerusalem are saying their good-byes, closing off their Babylonian life—many of these people they will not see again. Business dealings put in order, property sold. They are packing their bags—not all the Jews in the Diaspora, but tens of thousands, [as we will see in Chapter 2](#). It is a righteous purpose that drives them—the restoration of Yahweh's holy temple. For all, this will be a life-changing journey, and we can imagine the mixture of anticipation, excitement and trepidation that filled the hearts of this first group as they made their final preparations to return.

FOLLOW-UP ON THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME, “JEWS”

from M.G. Easton M.A., D.D., Illustrated Bible Dictionary, 1897

The name derived from the patriarch Judah, at first given to one belonging to the tribe of Judah or to the separate kingdom of Judah (2Ki_16:6; 2Ki_25:25; Jer_32:12; Jer_38:19; Jer_40:11; Jer_41:3), in contradistinction from those belonging to the kingdom of the ten tribes, who were called Israelites.

During the Captivity, and after the Restoration, the name, however, was extended to all the Hebrew nation without distinction (Est_3:6, Est_3:10; Dan_3:8, Dan_3:12; Ezr_4:12; Ezr_5:1, Ezr_5:5).

Originally this people were called Hebrews (Gen_39:14; Gen_40:15; Exo_2:7; Exo_3:18; Exo_5:3; 1Sa_4:6, 1Sa_4:9, etc.), but after the Exile this name fell into disuse. But Paul was styled a Hebrew (2Co_11:22; Phi_3:5).

The history of the Jewish nation is interwoven with the history of Palestine and with the narratives of the lives of their rulers and chief men. They are now dispersed over all lands, and to this day remain a separate people, “without a king, and without a prince, and without a sacrifice, and without an image [R.V. ‘pillar,’ marg. ‘obelisk’], and without an ephod, and without teraphim” (Hos_3:4). Till about the beginning of the present century they were everywhere greatly oppressed, and often cruelly persecuted; but now their condition is greatly improved, and they are admitted in most European countries to all the rights of free citizens. In 1860 the “Jewish disabilities” were removed, and they were admitted to a seat in the British Parliament. Their number in all is estimated at about six millions, about four millions being in Europe.

There are three names used in the New Testament to designate this people,

- (1.) Jews, as regards their nationality, to distinguish them from Gentiles.
- (2.) Hebrews, with regard to their language and education, to distinguish them from Hellenists, i.e., Jews who spoke the Greek language.
- (3.) Israelites, as respects their sacred privileges as the chosen people of God. “To other races we owe the splendid inheritance of modern civilization and secular culture; but the religious education of mankind has been the gift of the Jew alone.”

SESSION 6: EZRA 2: *Setting Off*

PREFACE

Last week we had the proclamation by Cyrus, king of Persia and Babylonia, releasing the Jews—“everyone whose spirit God had stirred”—to return to the ruined city of Jerusalem to rebuild the temple of Yahweh. This week they set out on their journey.

EZRA 2, NEHEMIAH 7

Read Ezra 2:1.

Once again the KJV has it more correct:

people, children^{KJV} = *ben* (bane) = from <H1129> (banah); a son (as a builder of the family name), in the widest sense (of literal and figurative relationship, including grandson, subject, nation, quality or condition, etc.

A cursory reading of this verse (in most translations) leaves the impression that the people returning were the people who were originally exiled. We must remind ourselves that these were not the same people who had been exiled by Nebuchadnezzar; three generations had passed since then. Realistically, only someone who had been a baby at the removal would have been alive by the return.

We, of course, are not going to “study” the list of names and numbers that itemizes those who returned. [That could be classified as “cruel and unusual punishment.”] But I do want to point out that although these lists seem relatively unimportant to us, they were very important to the Jews. By these they knew how many from each tribe and family group, and where they were to settle. And from them they determined who was legitimately in the priestly line.

So we’ll just briefly look at the organization and categories of the names in Chapter 2, and I’ll point out a few interesting tidbits that we find there.

LEADERS

Before everyone else, v2 lists the leaders, and I’ll just point out a few details:

These came with

- **Zerubbabel:** as we discussed last week, same as Sheshbazzar (in v1:8); in the Davidic line; principal leader and governor
- **Jeshua:** high priest; son of Jehozadak, who had been carried into exile, and grandson of Seraiah, the high priest put to death by Nebuchadnezzar
- **Nehemiah:** not *the* Nehemiah [though some claim it is]
- **Mordecai:** a name based on the name of the god Marduk of Babylon; *not* the Mordecai in Esther

GENERAL POPULATION

Then what follows is a list showing the number of the men [12 or older] of the people of Israel. In vs3-20 they are organized **by family name**.

- **Parosh:** the largest family of priests returning from Babylon

Beginning at v21 the men are organized **by city**. The best explanation I could find for the difference is that the first list represents families from Jerusalem, while the second would represent families from the outlying cities around Jerusalem.

Sidebar: Your translation may not reveal it, but two words are used seemingly interchangeably: “sons” (or “children”^{KJV}, “people”^{NKJV}) and “men”. They are different Hebrew words, the first denoting family, the second just denoting a male person. I could find no one willing to explain why they are used interchangeably in the city list. Perhaps because it is not significant (so I shouldn’t be wasting our time with it).

PRIESTS AND LEVITES

One might ask, what's the difference between priests and Levites. After all, weren't they all from the Levitical tribe? Well, all the priests were Levites, but all the Levites were not priests—that is, while they all could be *generally* classified as priests, at this time only the direct descendants of Aaron were serving in the priestly role [i.e., *before the altar*]. All other Levites were subordinate to them, serving in other capacities. [Numbers 16:39-40]

Illustration: I have a nephew who serves in the State Department. Technically, officially, he is a “diplomat.” But he does not sit at large tables negotiating treaties, or resolving disputes between opposing nations. His actual duties are administrative: he is in charge of running the facilities, new construction projects, purchasing, etc.

Four families of serving priests are mentioned in vs36-39, followed by different categories of Levites serving in other capacities.

- v40: Levites who assisted in the cultic worship (assistants to the high priests named in vs36-39)
- v41: the singers (12 Psalms are attributed to the sons of Asaph)
- v42: gatekeepers
- vs43-54: sundry temple servants
- vs55-57: Solomon's servants

Note the second name in v55: *Hassophereth* (or *Sophereth* in Nehemiah). This is a feminine form that means “the scribe.” Women scribes were rare, but not unknown. I found the following amusing:

The colophon of an exact and beautifully written codex [early form of a bound book] of the Pentateuch from Yemen, written by Miriam, the daughter of the renowned scribe Benayah, contained this remark: “Please be indulgent of the shortcomings of this volume; I copied it while nursing a baby.”

QUESTIONABLE LINEAGE

- vs59-60: those who could not prove they were Israelites
[note “Tobiah”: listed here are the descendants of an earlier Tobiah; in the next book we will rediscover that name in a prime nemesis of the governor, Nehemiah]
- vs61-63: those who claimed to be in priestly lines, but whose names could not be found in the official registries
[note “*Tirshatha*” (teer-shaw-thaw')(governor) in the KJV is not a name, but is simply the literal transliteration of the Persian word for “governor”]

All these were permitted to return with the company, but were on parole, as it were, until further proof of their lineage could be established.

One more note about the “release” of the Jews by Cyrus. We tend to think of the Jews being released from their exile as the first priority, but a close examination of the proclamations by Cyrus indicate that at least to him the priority was the rebuilding of the temple. There is no mention of a wholesale release of all Jews from the entire of the Persian kingdom. In fact, in the second version of his decree, found in Ezra 6:3-5, there is no mention at all of releasing Jews—just the importance of rebuilding the temple. Those who left were just necessary for the rebuilding.

So, unlike the exodus from Egypt, where the pharaoh said, “OK, the lot of you—get outta here before I change my mind,” this was more like Cyrus saying, “There's a job to be done; do I hear any volunteers?”

Lesson: The Cost of Rebellion

Let us pause here to consider the true cost of Israel's rebellion against the Lord.

Read Ezra 2:63.

K&D: Zerubbabel expected that a high priest would arise with Urim and Thummim to pronounce a final decision with regard to those priests who could not prove their descent from Aaron's posterity. This expectation, however, was unfulfilled. Zerubbabel's temple remained unconsecrated by any visible token of Jahve's presence, as the place where His name should dwell. The ark of the covenant with the cherubim, and the Shechinah in the cloud over the cherubim,

were wanting in the holy of holies of this temple. Hence, too, we find no single notice of any declaration of the divine will or the divine decision by Urim and Thummim in the period subsequent to the captivity; but have, on the contrary, the unanimous testimony of the Rabbis, that after the Babylonian exile God no longer manifested His will by Urim and Thummim, this kind of divine revelation being reckoned by them among the five things which were wanting in the second temple.

In His grace, the Lord permitted the Jews to return to their homeland to rebuild the temple and, subsequently, Jerusalem itself. **But the Shechinah glory of God never again dwelt in the temple.** God was no longer in their midst. The equivalent for us today would be that we would sin so egregiously that even though the Lord might forgive us and restore us, He would remove His Spirit from us.

I believe His word says this cannot *literally* happen to the Christian. But I do believe it can *figuratively* happen. King David, after *his* egregious sins, cried out in Psalm 51,

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
And renew a steadfast spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from Your presence
And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of Your salvation
And sustain me with a willing spirit.
(Psalms 51:10-12)

We can reach a point of *effective equivalence* with the Jews who reestablished Jerusalem: our sin, our rebellion can reach a point where we no longer experience the wonder and joy of the Lord's salvation. Technically He may have forgiven and restored us positionally, but we have inflicted upon ourselves so many scars from our rebellion that He has withdrawn (or we can no longer feel) that awe-inspired joy that once was the mark of our daily walk with Him.

vs64-67

We need not linger over the numerical details of this company—except for this:

- Note the absence of flocks (vs66-67: horses, mules, camels & donkeys); because it would surely slow them down, they did not bring with them the sheep, goats, cattle they would need for the temple sacrifices.

THE JOURNEY

Without fanfare, v68 finds the company in Jerusalem, at the site of the temple.

Read Ezra 2:68.

No mention is made of their journey: Were there any deaths along the way? any births? How long did it take? Did they take a direct path, or was it circuitous? Did all these people travel as one large group, or did they leave at intervals?

Duration & Route

Please turn to p12 in your booklet. On the left-hand side you will note that Cyrus II begins his first regnal year in Babylon in October of 539 BC. Some time during his first year Cyrus issues his proclamation, releasing the Jews to return to Judah.

By the spring of 537 the Jews are back in Judah, and about three months later they gather in Jerusalem and soon begin work on the temple altar. We can't be more specific than that regarding the duration of their journey. They certainly didn't leave the next morning after Cyrus made his decree. Many details had to be worked out, arrangements made, property sold, beasts of burden obtained, etc. This would take weeks, if not months. Their journey surely took several months—actually quite speedy, considering their probable route.

It would have been foolhardy for them to travel as the crow flies, crossing the desert. They surely returned by the standard route, following the fertile crescent: the normal trade route, and the way taken by the invading armies of

Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar. It isn't very well detailed on the maps in your booklet, but look at the map on p16, which shows the two rivers, Euphrates (left) and Tigris (right), branching up from Susa and Babylon (slightly north of the convergence).

The Jews would have traveled NW, following the Euphrates to a point near Aleppo, where it meets the Orontes River, which descends south. They would have then headed south, either passing through the Baqa'a Valley in Lebanon or more east through Damascus, continuing south, down to Judah.

Aside from these general timeframes and educated guesses, we know little of their journey—*which makes perfect sense*, for I believe God had the same priorities as Cyrus. Compare it again to the exodus from Egypt:

- In the original exodus the journey itself was the thing, for it was during this that Yahweh handed down His laws, punished those who rebelled, and trained their descendants in proper tabernacle worship.
- Here, leaving Babylon, the journey itself is just the means to an end: rebuilding the temple and reestablishing corporate, sacrificial worship in the location of the Lord's choosing. That process—rebuilding the temple, in Ezra, and rebuilding Jerusalem, in Nehemiah—is what is detailed, not the journey getting there.

And in our next session, that rebuilding begins.

SESSION 7: EZRA 3: *The Altar Rebuilt*

Last week the Jews got organized: they counted heads, collected funds for their trip, purchased their beasts of burden, sold their property and all belongings not being taken back to Judah. They set out on their long journey, and as we finished last week they were at their destination: Jerusalem.

Please turn to Ezra 2:68.

What did the returnees have to expect once they arrived in Jerusalem? What awaited them?

- First, ruination:
 - rubble, burned timbers, charred stone;
 - probably very few personal items, as the city would have been picked clean over the last 70 years;
 - nature would have reclaimed some of the perimeter, wild growth softening the hard line of what had been the defining walls of the city; grass and weeds would have sprouted between the well-worn bricks of the streets and alleyways, between the few standing stones of the city walls.
- The Assyrians, who removed the people from Israel/Samaria had replaced them with their own people, who worshipped pagan gods. But the Babylonians had not done this, so Jerusalem/Judah was not as contaminated by polytheism as Israel. For the most part the people living in the area would be fellow Jews, and there should not have been pagan idols or temples about.
- They would certainly discover squatters in the ruins of the city; some of the peasants left behind would have taken up residence in some of the dwellings, perhaps affecting repairs.
- In better shape would be the land around the city:
 - crops would be up in the fields;
 - the orchards would have been tended, with fruit ripening on the branches;
 - there would be flocks of sheep and goats grazing on the hillsides.

The journey would have been long and hard and costly. Yet, upon their arrival and seeing the devastation around them, the heads of the tribal families gave generously (Nehemiah expands this to include the governor and “the rest of the people”) for the temple’s restoration.

Read Ezra 2:68-69.

As usual there is disagreement over the coin referred to here. The Greek *drachma* was silver, not gold, and the word so translated here is of Persian origin, leading some to conclude that what is meant here is the gold Persian *dari*. Its value was the price of an ox, or a month’s wages for a soldier. 61,000 of these would be **1,133 pounds of gold**. A “mina” equaled 1.26 pounds of silver; five thousand minas would be **6,300 pounds of silver**.

Now we are ready for Chapter 3—which has a better beginning with v70 of Chapter 2, than v1 of Chapter 3.

Read Ezra 2:70.

The past tense “lived” in the NASB, and “dwelt” in the KJV sounds a bit odd to our ears, but it is a reminder that this did not happen all in one day. If you will suffer one more *Lord of the Rings* illustration, it is like the difference between the book and the movies. In the films, there is almost constant movement forward: the characters arrive somewhere, the next morning they are off again—constantly moving toward their ultimate goal. But in the original book, the characters arrive somewhere, sit around for a few days or weeks, enjoy banquets, long discussions, sing some songs, before they eventually continue on.

It is easy, by the vantage point of the telescoping centuries and millennia, to imagine that the Jews arrived in Jerusalem and the next day set up the altar, then put their collective nose to the grindstone, working hard for a few weeks or months until the temple was completed. After all, that’s what they came for, right? But the truth is these things took time, and there were delays; they had to do battle with external hostility, and internal apathy. So the whole process took years. And first, they had to find places to stay. They had to get settled in their homes and villages.

v1

Read Ezra 3:1.

Now when the seventh month came...

That is, the seventh month of the Jewish year: Tishri (September-October). This would make it about three months after their arrival. The month of Tishri was and is an important month for the Jews.

- The first day of the month is Rosh Hashanah—by the civil calendar, New Year's Day;
- Ten days later is Yom Kippur—the Day of Atonement;
- And from the fifteenth to the twenty-second the Jews celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles, or Booths.

v2

Read Ezra 3:2.

The high priest Jeshua and Zerubbabel the governor lead their brethren in rebuilding the altar.

and his **brothers** = *ah* (awkh) = a primitive word; **a brother (used in the widest sense of literal relationship and metaphorical affinity or resemblance** [like <H1> ('ab)]) :- another, brother (-ly), kindred, like, other. Compare also the proper names beginning with "Ah-" or "Ahi-".

The people of Israel had just spent the last seventy years surrounded by pagan temples and idols. Edwin Yamauchi states that

- 50 temples are mentioned in Babylonian texts, along with
- 180 open-air shrines for Ishtar (goddess of love, war, fertility, and sexuality),
- 300 hundred daises for the Igigi gods (gods of heaven in Sumerian mythology), and
- 1,200 daises for the Anunnaki (Sumerian deities of the old primordial line ; "Those who from the heavens came to earth" or "princely offspring".

This was their first reason for quickly reestablishing sacrifices to Yahweh. There was a burning hunger in them to reconnect with *their* God—in the only "authorized" place for His worship. A second reason was that it would soon be time for the Day of Atonement; they needed the altar for that most-important sacrifice. But there was a third reason for their urgency.

v3

Read Ezra 3:3.

terrified (lit., terror was upon them), **fear** (was upon them) = *ema* (ay-maw') = or (shortened) 'emah, ay-maw'; from the same as <H366> ('ayom); fright; concrete an idol (as a bugbear) :- dread, fear, horror, idol, terrible, terror; **"a terror inspired by men or animals"**.

Alexander MacLaren: The state of the Holy Land at the return must be clearly comprehended. Samaria and the central district were in the hands of bitter enemies. Across Jordan in the east, down on the Philistine plain in the west, and in the south where Edom bore sway, eager enemies sulkily watched the small beginnings of a movement which they were interested in thwarting. There was only the territory of Judah and Benjamin left free for the exiles, and they had reason for their fears; for their neighbours knew that if restitution was to be the order of the day, they would have to disgorge a good deal. What was the defence against such foes which these frightened men thought most impregnable? That altar!

No doubt, much superstition mingled with their religion. Haggai leaves us under no illusions as to their moral and spiritual condition. They were no patterns of devoutness or of morality. But still, what they did carries an eternal truth; and they were reverting to the original terms of Israel's tenure of their land when they acted on the conviction that their worship of Jehovah according to His commandment was their surest way of finding shelter from all their enemies.

And herein lies the lesson for us.

- Where do we seek our help when we are terrified by what lies around us?
- Whose help do we enlist when our foes are preparing to strike?

We will see when we get to Nehemiah that he knew precisely where to go, whom to ask for help. When a situation arose, he stopped everything he was doing—even if he was serving before the king—and prayed to God.

But there is an even more alarming consideration: I believe in many ways the modern believer is like the frog placed into tepid water, who, because the temperature is raised so gradually, doesn't realize he is really being boiled alive. The Jews turned to God—*because they recognized the threat!* We today can be so fat and contented, so insulated, so comfortable, that we fail to recognize the threats on every side:

- we have come to think ourselves strong, self-sufficient;
- we have lost our sensitivity to the world's immorality—we have forgotten how to blush;
- we have permitted some of the fallen ways of the world to seep into our corporate gatherings of worship and study;
- we have stood by as the world claimed the Sabbath for itself, making it just another day in the week.

Before we can turn to the Lord for help, we must first acknowledge that His help is needed. Only then can we, with the psalmist, cry out to Him for protection against those who would do us harm.

Read Psalm 91:1-4.

vs4-5

We can't know what was in their hearts, but the impression from this passage is that there is a sense of joy, of relief, of nostalgia. But again we must remind ourselves: very few of these who returned had ever experienced anything like this before—at best, most had only heard of it from parents or grandparents.

Read Ezra 3:4-5.

Of course all these offerings and commemorations took place over a number of days (the Feast of Booths itself took seven days), but the passage reads like a veritable spiritual “orgy” of devotion to Yahweh—as if they just couldn't get enough of Him.

It has the flavor of someone who has never tasted candy before opening a box of chocolates for the first time. She tries one piece, then another, then another. Or of someone with a talent for handiwork, but never having the tools at his disposal, being suddenly given access to Wendell's woodworking shop. He will move from tool to tool, trying out this one, then that one, then another, ecstatic over now having the opportunity to put into practice what had heretofore been only theory.

In fact, that is a common thread running throughout these two books: the joy, the heartbreak, the overwhelming emotions of a people becoming reacquainted with their God. On the surface, the book of Ezra is about the rebuilding of the altar and the temple; the book of Nehemiah is about the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, and the city itself. But at the root of both is the story of a people once alienated from their God, now becoming reacquainted with Him.

Think of it: Almost everyone present had spent their entire lives surrounded by devotion to other gods. None of us has ever experienced that. Back in Babylonia, everywhere they turned there was an idol, a devoted high place, a shrine or temple dedicated to one of a myriad gods. Festivals would take place, with the whole city breaking out into celebration of one god or another. The conversation of neighbors would be peppered with references to a pagan deity (“If Ishtar is pleased with my offering I will bear a son.”)

Meanwhile, with all of this for the environment in which you live, within the four walls of your home your grandfather speaks of a glorious temple in the middle of a city—the *only* temple in the city, one dedicated to the one God, the *only* God: Yahweh. He tells of daily and annual sacrifices to Yahweh, of festivals and feasts to the God of heaven who sanctified the twelve tribes of Israel as a people special to Him, but how Israel rebelled against Him, sinned against Him, turned away from His written laws to go their own way with foreign gods—in the words of Yahweh, committing adultery with them, prostituting themselves with other gods.

Now they are back in the land they had only heard about through the tales of their fathers and mothers, and their grandparents. And they quickly, almost frantically, restore the altar upon its scorched foundation. The altar is necessary for worship of Yahweh—*and in this place alone*. The worship is necessary to reconnect with God, to reestablish communion with Him. And that communion is necessary, not just for their spiritual rebirth and salvation, but for their protection against the enemies that lie on every side, enemies looking for any vulnerability with which they can prevent the rebirth of Judah, the rebirth of Jerusalem, the rebirth of God's chosen people in the land of His choosing.

SESSION 8: EZRA 3: *Foundation*

CORRECTION

Last week Ila asked which altar this was being rebuilt, and I made two mistakes with my answer—both of which bear out the truth of what Pastor Daniel was saying last week in his message about the importance of reading God’s word more than once. I have lost count of the numbers of times I have read through the entire Bible: I do it every year now. More than that, I have *taught* the details of the tabernacle’s original construction in our study of Hebrews. Nevertheless, I said something incorrect last week, and I am grateful that Ila brought the error to my attention so I can correct the record.

- As to the altar’s location I inexplicably answered that this was the altar within the holy of holies, where only the high priest went once a year. As most sane people are aware, only the ark of the covenant was inside the holy of holies (although there was a small incense altar just outside). The altar was located in the outer courtyard, and the basin of blood carried into the holiest place on the Day of Atonement. This was the altar that was rebuilt by the exiles. [\[there was no ark when the exiles returned\]](#)
- My second mistake—stating that the altar was made of stone—was less egregious; it is perhaps incorrect, but hard to prove one way or another. There *were* stone altars in use [\[show pic\]](#), but it is true that in the descriptions we have from Scripture, the temple altar is essentially made of bronze:
 - the original altar in tabernacle was made of acacia wood overlaid with bronze;
 - the altar in Solomon’s temple (first permanent temple) was 144 square yards (approximately) and made of cast bronze; this was broken up and removed by Nebuchadnezzar’s troops;
 - the altar described in Ezekiel’s (millennial) temple is the same in size and material as Solomon’s.
- Then again, “David first built an altar on the threshing floor of Araunah in Jerusalem (2 Sam 24:21). When it was later desecrated by Antiochus IV (1 Macc 1:54) with ‘a desolating sacrilege’ in 167 BC, the Jews dismantled it and rebuilt a new altar with great blocks of stones. Josephus (*Contra Apion* I, 198 [22]) quotes Hecataeus, who wrote: ‘Within this enclosure is a square altar, built of heaped up stones, unhewn and unwrought; each side is twenty cubits long and the height ten cubits.’” (Yamauchi)

The truth is, we do not know for sure what material the returning exiles used to rebuild the altar. Frankly it would have been much easier and logical for them to erect a crude stone altar than to cast a new one of bronze—especially if in the original dimensions. That was no mean feat.

FOLLOW-UP

Finally, last week Dennis made a good point, likening this return of the Jews after 70 years surrounded by pagan idolatry to the end times, when the Jews will finally realize the Lordship of Christ Jesus. I would like to suggest another parallel—one a little closer to home for Christians.

We spoke last week of how the exiles had been living in a cesspool of pagan idolatry for seventy years, unable to properly, obediently worship their God—the *true* God, Yahweh. For me that is a perfect picture of how the believer is doomed to live on earth, surrounded by everything that stands against his God, in a “foreign” land that is no longer his home. This is his condition until the day he leaves this morass of idolatry, and enters heaven where he can finally properly worship the true God in person.

But there is another parallel. These exiles were “returning home” to a place in which most had never lived. We will see in v3:12 that there were a few in their midst who had seen the original temple, but most had never seen Judah before. We, as believers, are homesick for and will one day “return” to a place in which we have never lived.

vs6-7

Now let’s get back to our story... We are in the third chapter of Ezra. Last week the men, led by the governor Zerubbabel and high priest Jeshua, rebuilt the altar and made the daily sacrifices, as well as those specific to the month of Tishri. Now it is time for them to begin the reconstruction of the temple itself.

Read Ezra 3:6.

Ezra 3:6 But the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid.

One of my recurring complaints about the *Des Moines Register* over the years has been that the reporters, in their news stories, never seem to answer the most obvious questions. Invariably, after reading a long story (back when I bothered to read the *Register's* news stories), my response would be, "But what about..."

Ezra 3:6 produces much the same response in me—specifically, reading the scholars and commentators produces the same response. When I read "But the foundation of the temple of the LORD was not yet laid," the obvious question for me is, "What happened to the old one?" Think about it: the foundation of the previous temple would have consisted of massive stone blocks, covering a very large area. Surely these were not destroyed by the Babylonians.

Every commentator I could consult just accepted this statement in v6, and moved on. Apparently I am the only one remotely interested. So I am left to make a semi-educated guess. To wit, assuming the Babylonians did not attack the temple foundation with crow bars and sledge hammers, my best guess is that the fire from their systematic destruction of Jerusalem and the temple would have cracked the original stones, rendering them broken, unstable, or just out of alignment.

Read Ezra 3:7.

When Solomon built the original temple, he remembered that the Phoenician king of Tyre [lit., *tsore*] had supplied cedar for his father David's palace. So he contracted with them to supply the cedar paneling for the interior of the temple, and he also requested someone skilled in working with the "gold, silver, brass and iron" and the fabrics that would be used. The king of Tyre was agreeable, and had replied,

"Now then, let my lord send to his servants wheat and barley, oil and wine, of which he has spoken. We will cut whatever timber you need from Lebanon and bring it to you on rafts by sea to Joppa, so that you may carry it up to Jerusalem."

(2 Chronicles 2:15-16)

Now the exiles make a similar request to the Phoenician [modern Lebanon] cities of Tyre and Sidon [lit., *tsee-done*]. Tyre was located just about 12 miles N of Israel and Sidon a little further N. As before, they would bring the materials by ship down the coastline to Joppa, which was W and slightly N of Jerusalem. They would then be transported overland to the city.

As you might imagine, at this request the Phoenicians might just wonder, *Wait a minute, this land now belongs to Persia. Who gave these Jews permission to rebuild their temple to Yahweh? We don't want to get on the wrong side of Cyrus.* Which is why the Jews brandished their permission slip from King Cyrus giving them leave to do this.

v8

In the spring of 536 BC, the second month of their second year in Judah, they got down to the business of rebuilding the temple.

Read vs8-9.

...and appointed the Levites from twenty years and older to oversee the work

The Levites were going to be the foremen of the work. An interesting side-note is that because of their fewer numbers in the group of returning exiles, they lowered the age requirement. In Numbers 4 the age for serving was at least thirty; in Numbers 8 this was reduced to twenty-five. Here it is reduced further, to twenty, surely because there were fewer of them available.

v10

And once again in a brief span of two verses, time has passed. It reads as if the building of the foundation took all of a day or so; it begins in v8, and by v10 is already spoken of in the past tense. But of course it took much longer.

At the same time we must remember that the “foundation” probably did not include the pavement for the entire temple complex, which, even so, was far more modest in Solomon’s temple than in the temple of Jesus’ time: Herod’s temple [40 acres? almost one mile long?]. But the temple proper for both was constructed to the same dimensions, so would require the same-sized footing. We have these specified for us in 1 Kings 6:

As for the house which King Solomon built for the Lord, its length was sixty cubits and its width twenty cubits and its height thirty cubits. (1 Kings 6:2)

We can only assume that this size foundation—60 x 20 cubits or 90 feet x 30 feet—is what was completed by v10. [a cubit was the distance from a man’s elbow to fingertip, or approximately 18 inches] Then everyone takes their place for the dedication service—which quickly becomes, instead, a praise gathering—and revival.

- the trumpeters were the priests themselves, in uniform
- the singers were the sons of Asaph, 128 in number. (Ezra 2:41)

And all was done according to the guiding hand of King David.

directions^{NASB}, ordinance^{KJV}, prescribed^{NIV} = *yad* = a primitive word; **a hand (the open one [indicating power, means, direction, etc.], in distinction from <H3709> (kaph), the closed one); the hand as extended; “used to denote any kind of instrumentality or ministry, as by the hand of a prophet” (Wilson).**

Sidebar: It may be just me, but I hear a bit of wistful nostalgia, of regret, in the full title given David: of King David of Israel. The chronicler didn’t have to tack that on, but perhaps he was thinking, *Oh that none of this had ever happened—that our wickedness had never divided the chosen people of Israel into two disparate kingdoms.*

vs11-13

And now we have the first recorded instance of revival in the returned exiles. It may have occurred as well when they began offering sacrifices on the rebuilt altar, but we are not told that.

Sidebar: The word “revival” is one that has been sorely misused throughout church history. In some corners of the Christian world “revival” means adding new souls to the kingdom rolls; it means filling the pews with the lost and saving their souls with sweaty rantings of fire and brimstone.

Revival is for *believers*; it is when God ignites His Spirit in those whose faith is flagging [think a swimmer who has stopped breathing being revived by mouth-to-mouth—i.e., brought back to life]. Through a charismatic speaker, such as Jonathan Edwards in the 1700s, or by the miraculous, unplanned anointing by the Holy Spirit, those whose connection to God has been dulled by living in this fallen world are revived, refreshed, their faith reenergized by the ministry of the Spirit.

Vs11-13 describe a true revival.

Read vs11-13.

Here is the evidence for revival:

- v11: all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord
- v12: the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice when the foundation of this house was laid
- v12: while many shouted aloud for joy
- v13: the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away

...praising and giving thanks to the Lord, saying, “For He is good, for His lovingkindness is upon Israel forever.”

- **praise** for who He is: “He is good”
- **thanksgiving** for what He is doing: “His lovingkindness is upon Israel”

This is a revival sandwich:

- the bread is the enthusiastic, joyful shouting of the younger generation;
- wrapped inside is the meat of the sandwich is the nostalgic weeping of the old men (v12).

all the people shouted with a great shout

Revival loosens inhibitions. The Spirit grabs hold of us and we are compelled to express the wonder and joy of His working in us.

the old men who had seen the first temple, wept with a loud voice

Old age releases men's tears. If they were old enough at the time, they would have been numbered among those who had shouted with joy the first time they set eyes on Solomon's temple. Now, in old age, their joy is expressed in a way different from the young, colored by the decades of memories, both painful and fond. The young may not understand, but joy can be expressed even with tears.

Finally, as the foundation of the Jewish temple is reset in Jerusalem, let us be reminded of *our* foundation.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:10-11.

SESSION 9: EZRA 4: *Opposition!*

PREFACE

Please turn to 2 Kings 17.

The second invasion of the northern kingdom, Israel/Samaria, was carried out by Shalmaneser, king of Assyria in 722 BC. Unlike Nebuchadnezzar, who later invaded Judah in the south, Shalmaneser imported people from his own kingdom to settle in Samaria.

Read 2 Kings 17:24

The king of Assyria brought *men* from Babylon and from Cuthah [kooth'-ah] and from Avva [i-vah'] and from Hamath [kham-awth'] and Sephar-vaim [sef-ar-vaih'-yim], and settled *them* in the cities of Samaria in place of the sons of Israel. So they possessed Samaria and lived in its cities.

Read 2 Kings 17:25-29.

Then vs30-33 list all the pagan gods that were worshipped along with Yahweh. This is the background for where we are at in Ezra—this morning in Ezra 4.

THE SAMARITANS

Read Ezra 4:1.

The “enemies of Judah” (adversaries) are the ones we just read about, those settled in Samaria by Shalmaneser—more precisely, the descendants of those imported almost 200 years earlier—as well as those belonging to subsequent importations. These people worshipped multiple gods, and if they worshiped Yahweh at all, it was with an adulterated, bastardized form of the original.

Read v2.

So this delegation consisted of some who arrived later, during the reign of Esarhaddon [ay-sar' chad-dohn'] king of Assyria, who succeeded Sennacharib, and ruled from 680-669 BC.

Sidebar: When reading your Bible pay attention to the pronouns; they can be a dead giveaway to the mind (and true intentions) of a speaker. These Samaritans did not say “we, like you, seek **our** God, Yahweh,” but “we seek **your** God.” Say no more.

These guys were fooling no one. Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the boys saw right through them.

Read v3.

NASB: You have nothing in common with us

NKJV: You may do nothing with us

ESV: You have nothing to do with us

NIV: You have no part with us

Literally, “it is not for you and for us”

We can draw a couple of lessons from this moment:

- First, it seems almost inevitable that after a mountaintop experience we then find ourselves in the valley. Right after exaltation comes discouragement. Look at where the Jews were just moments before: the ecstatic revival and celebration of Chapter 3, vs10-13, when the foundation was rebuilt, which concluded, “for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the sound was heard far away.” I’ll bet; as far away as Samaria. And now, all of a sudden, they must deal with those who wish them and their building plans harm. And they will be dealing with them for some time to come.

- Second, though we are to witness to and sometimes minister to unbelievers, this does not mean they are to have a part in what we are doing in the Lord's name. This takes me back to our days touring with our drama group, *His Company*, in Southern California. A friend of one of our members and her daughter joined our company. The daughter was talented, both on stage and off—a good actress, artist, and makeup artist. But she and her mother were not believers, and after a while I realized it was not working: they simply could not perform for the same reasons, with the same motivation as the rest of the group. Their hearts were not right. It saved me from an uncomfortable task when they decided to leave on their own.

Just as we ask non-believers to refrain from taking Communion, we must always be mindful that, as Paul tells us in 2 Corinthians 6:

Do not be bound together [unequally yoked] with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?

The governor and high priest told these troublemakers that they would not be permitted any part in the reestablishment of the temple and the true worship of Yahweh. They did not worship Yahweh rightly; they did not worship Him alone; and they were not Jews.

THE CHALLENGE OF CHAPTER 4

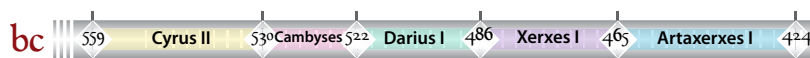
Let's back up for a moment and take the long view of Chapter 4. If one just sits down and reads the chapter, it raises more questions than answers. For on the surface the time line is way out of whack. It seems to leap forward in time, racing through decades, racing through Persian kings as if they each reigned for just a day, then circles back on itself. Or if it is not doing that, then the names of those kings mentioned do not fit at all.

As before in this study, scholars and commentators have tried to make sense of this, at times standing on their heads and twisting their logic into pretzels to explain Chapter 4. Let us, as before, go with the most simple, sensible explanation—one propounded by Yamauchi (*The Expositor's Bible Commentary*) as well as Keil & Delitzsch.

The Confusing Chronology of Chapter 4

Scripture	Persian Kings Referenced	
1:1 to 4:5a	...Then the people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia... (Ezra 4:4-5a)	Cyrus II in power (559 to 530 bc)
4:5b	...even until the reign of Darius king of Persia. (Ezra 4:5b)	about Darius I (522 to 486 bc)
4:6	Now in the reign of Ahasuerus [Xerxes I], in the beginning of his reign, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem. (Ezra 4:6)	about Xerxes I (486 to 465 bc)
4:7 to 4:23	And in the days of Artaxerxes, Bishlam, Mithredath, Tabeel and the rest of his colleagues wrote to Artaxerxes king of Persia... (Ezra 4:7a) Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms. (Ezra 4:23)	about Artaxerxes I (465 to 424 bc)
4:24 to 6:22	Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia. (Ezra 4:24)	Darius I actually in power (522 to 486 bc)
7:1 to end	Now after these things, in the reign of Artaxerxes king of Persia, there went up Ezra... (Ezra 7:1)	Artaxerxes I actually in power (465 to 424 bc)

A parenthetical summary, temporarily stepping outside the logical timeline, extending into the future and encompassing the rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls, as well as the rebuilding of the temple; covering approximately 70 years.



This chart helps us understand how the chapter is organized.

- vs1-5a are in real-time, subsequent to the restoration of the temple foundation;
- then from v5b through v23—a passage that mentions Darius I, Xerxes I (Ahasuerus), and Artaxerxes, and includes an extended episode about a letter sent to Artaxerxes;
- at v24 the narrative returns to real-time.

V4 explains that the “people of the land”—i.e., the Samaritans—then began an effort to “discourage” the people of Judah. The KJV translates it literally: “weakened the hands of”; it means to slacken, to go limp—to “deprive of strength and courage for action.” We might say they tried to *dispirit* them, to suck away their verve and determination, as well as frighten them physically.

V5 goes on to say that, further, the Samaritans “hired counselors” to frustrate the Jews. They sought the advice and assistance of others in the region, those more street-smart and, critically, those who could communicate properly with the powers back in Babylon. The text does not make the connection, but I think these “counselors” are named for us in vs7-9, which we will look at in a moment.

The writer of Ezra then steps outside the immediate time line—the moment in Jerusalem just as they are beginning the restoration of the temple—with a parenthetical passage that shoots into the future, even into the time of the rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls, chronicled in Nehemiah. It is as if when he writes, in v4, that powers from without discouraged the restoration of the temple, that this triggers a desire to lay out *all* the times the Jews were discouraged from their building. So he starts writing feverishly, spilling out the whole long tale of opposition to the restoration of Jerusalem. *This wasn’t the only time, you know, he is thinking. There were lots more—let me list them for you.* This he does from the end of v5 through v23, and this is summarized on the chart.

To get his readers back on track, in v24 the writer reiterates what he said at the end of v5:

v5b: even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.

v24: Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.

v6

Now let’s back up and take just a brief look at this parenthetical middle passage.

V6 skips forward in time about 50 years, to the reign of Ahasuerus [[akh-ash-vay-roosh](#)], which is the Hebrew transliteration of Xerxes—the Persian king in the story of Esther.

V7 skips forward in time about 86 years, to the reign of Artaxerxes I, son of Xerxes (based on the text it is impossible to assign an accurate time span).

At this point you may be saying (as I did this week), “Wait a minute. This long span of time doesn’t compute.” The book of Nehemiah opens during the 20th year of Artaxerxes, which would be about 92 *years* after this moment of the rebuilding of the temple. Yet in Nehemiah, Ezra and Nehemiah are together in Jerusalem!

[Turn to the time line on p12 in your booklet.]

Let me point out a few details that are easy to forget:

- work on the temple stops around 530 BC;
- when it resumes, about 10 years later, Darius is king;
- the temple is completed about 5 years later, in 515 BC.
- Here’s what is easy to miss: Ezra does not show up in Jerusalem until 458 BC—57 *years later!*

Read Ezra 7:1a, 6a, 8.

So the time span from the completion of the temple to Ezra arriving in Jerusalem is almost as long as the Jews' period of exile in Babylon! [\[now back to Chapter 4\]](#)

This passage mentions a number of instances in which non-Jews tried to stop the restoration of the temple and Jerusalem:

- vs4-5 mention regional efforts, with the help of counselors, to frustrate the Jews;
- v6 mentions a letter sent to King Xerxes;
- v7 mentions a first letter sent to King Artaxerxes by Bish-lam, dictated by Tabeel, with the approval of Mithredath. [\[K&D claim this passage \(vs7-10\) speaks of just one letter, while Yamauchi claims it is two. The text seems to read as if there are two, with different authors, but my guess is these mentioned here are just the tip of the iceberg anyway. Over a period spanning 67 years, surely more than just one or two missives against the Jews made their way to the Persian kings.\]](#)
- vs8-16 mention and include the text of a second letter dictated by Commander Rehum (chancellor) to the scribe Shimshai—which we will look at in our next session.

For now, let's close by considering some of the whats and whys of this episode.

What were the Samaritan's motives?

- Reestablishing themselves in Judah, the Jews could become a political force perhaps in opposition to those in Samaria and the surrounding districts.
- The Samaritans rightly saw the temple, and worship of Yahweh, as the power point—the source of Judah's strength and the hub around which the nation would rally—so it must be stopped at all cost.

[Can you think of others?](#)

Why use correspondence instead of direct military action?

- The Jews had brought with them written permission of the king, so military action could result in nasty consequences for the Samaritans.
- They had to make their case directly to the king—hoping that subsequent rulers would be less-friendly to the Jews, and more amenable to the Samaritans' case against them.

SESSION 10: EZRA 5: *Beginning Again*

PREFACE

Last week we discussed the confusing chronology of Ezra Chapter 4, and we stopped at the point where the passage includes the text of a letter to King Artaxerxes and the text of a letter back to Judah *from* Artaxerxes. These letters fit into the chronology of Nehemiah Chapter 1, and we will address them then. For now we return to the end of Chapter 4 in Ezra.

v4:24

It is now 520 BC. Judah is at the end of a decade-long period of inactivity. We are now in the second year of a new Persian king: Darius I.

Before we launch into Ezra 5, however, we must pay a visit to the prophecy of Haggai to pick up our narrative.

HAGGAI 1

Read Haggai 1:1.

Read Haggai 1:2-5.

God says:

You say now is not the time for us to rebuild the house of the Lord. But it is time for you to build your houses? Examine your priorities!

Read Haggai 1:5-6.

Well, let's see now... You've spent the last ten, twelve years building your own houses and neglecting the Lord's. You have also planted crops and carefully tended the grapevines, you've made new clothes for yourselves, and you are starting to collect wages. But the harvest is pitiful, and you never seem to have enough to eat; you haven't enough wine to fill a thimble; your new clothes don't keep you warm; and you never have enough money to pay your bills.

Hmmm... Could there be a connection here? Examine your heart!

Let me tell you what's going on here:

Read Haggai 1:7-11.

Let's give them the benefit of the doubt; let's assume their behavior was fueled by fear—fear of the “people of the land”—rather than self-indulgence. I am reminded of something the young shepherd David said when all the Israelite soldiers were quaking in fear before Goliath:

“Who is this uncircumcised Philistine, that he should taunt the armies of the living God? The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, He will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.”

And then David said to Goliath himself:

Then David said to the Philistine, “You come to me with a sword, a spear, and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord of hosts, the God of the armies of Israel, whom you have taunted. This day the Lord will deliver you up into my hands, and I will strike you down and remove your head from you. And I will give the dead bodies of the army of the Philistines this day to the birds of the sky and the wild beasts of the earth, that all the earth may know that there is a God in Israel, and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not deliver by sword or by spear; for the battle is the Lord's and He will give you into our hands.”

(from 1 Samuel 17:26-47)

I am also reminded of something Jesus said in His Sermon on the Mount:

Read Matthew 6:25-33.

<Selah>

EZRA 5

Once they turned back to the Lord, showing due reverence and deference to Him, He blessed their obedience and stirred up the spirit of the leaders and everyone else—and they got back to work on the temple.

Read Ezra 5:1-2.

vs3-5: MORE OPPOSITION

Tattenai was viceroy, or governor, of the Persian provinces west of the Euphrates; he was subordinate to King Darius, and Zerubbabel in Judah was subordinate to Tattenai. Probably new at his post with the administration of Darius, He was suspicious about this activity in Jerusalem. So he visited Jerusalem with his investigator, Shethar-bozenai, to check things out for himself.

Read vs4-5.

Sidebar: Note the pronouns again.

V4: "Then **we** told them..." Only the NASB and NKJV translate this so, while the other translations make it a second question from the Persian officials (the KJV tries to have it both ways, which is *really* confusing). This raises a question and a fact;

Question: Who is writing this? (esp. in light of v5)

Fact: Whomever it was, he was *there* (so it is not Ezra).

V5: This is even more curious. "But the eye of **their God** was on the elders **of the Jews**..." Would a Jew put it this way? I suppose he could have said it in an editorial third-person voice. But if so, why did he say the previous sentence in the *first*-person voice? Curious.

vs6-17

Vs6-16 give us the text of the letter Tattenai sent to Darius to check out the truth of what the Jews had told him. And while we do not need to study every word in it, I want to point out a few impressive things about these people—*all* of them.

- First, I am impressed by Tattenai:
 - He was just doing his job as governor, checking out what was going on in his assigned territory
 - He listened to what the Jewish leaders had to say
 - While he investigated, he let the work continue (v5)—that is, for the moment he gave them the benefit of the doubt
 - In his letter to the king, he quotes the Jews, for accuracy
- Second, I am impressed by the Jewish leaders; look at what they said to Tattenai, beginning at v11:
 - They did not hesitate to express their allegiance to and servitude to Almighty God: "We are the servants of the God of heaven and earth and are rebuilding the temple that was built many years ago, which a great king of Israel built and finished."
 - And then, in v12, although they could have laid the blame for things solely at the feet of the Chaldeans, they did not hesitate to accept responsibility for all they had lost. *All this came about because we Jews disobeyed and rebelled against our God.*
 - Finally, in vs13-16, they give the clear facts about what Cyrus did for them; implicit in this is that God heard their cry, forgave their iniquity, and directed the Chaldean king to work on their behalf.

<Selah>

EZRA 6

And then I am impressed by what King Darius does in Chapter 6.

- First, he had his people conduct a search through the archives of King Cyrus. [vs1-2] He didn't have to do this; he could have just issued a new decree of his own, without consulting those of his predecessor.
- The original document is found—the official Persian document for the archives, written in Aramaic. In this "in-house" version it is not surprising that Cyrus makes no mention of Yahweh ("LORD"), as he did in the Hebrew version—only "house of God" (*Elah*).
- In his own decree, Darius reinforces the original by Cyrus. We don't know his motives, beyond the historical

fact that these Persian rulers were doing this throughout their kingdom. For example, Yamauchi tells us that Cyrus repaired the Eanna temple at Uruk and the Enunmah at Ur. Cambyses (his son) gave funds for the temple at Sais in Egypt. And Darius rebuilt the temple of Amon and restored the temple of Ptah in Egypt.

- We see in this passage one clue as to motive.

Read Ezra 6:10.

- The most delicious part of this decree is found in v8:

Read v8.

Tell you what, guys: Since you raised this stink, you can be the ones to pay for the restoration of Jerusalem's temple out of your own taxes.

You can almost hear their heels click together and see their snappy salute in v13.

Read v13.

(v11 gives ample motivation)

And on March 12, 515 BC the temple was completed.

Read vs14-15.

I love the transparency of this passage—the admission that they needed the two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah to light a fire under them and get them going again.

Whatever it took, however long it took, the job is done. The temple has been restored!

SESSION 11: EZRA 6-8: *Ezra!*

PREFACE

The temple is finished, and we close out Chapter 6 with the sequence of events commemorating this milestone. Less a celebration than just getting down to business, beginning at v16 we can trace the events by noting the verbs:

- v16: they “**celebrated** the dedication of this house of God with joy”
- v17: “they **offered** for the dedication...” all the livestock used for the sacrifices
- v18: “they **appointed** priests to their divisions and the Levites in their orders for the service of God”
- vs19-21: they “**observed** the Passover”
- v22: “they **observed** the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy”

In v22 we read that their joy was based on

- the working of Yahweh in their midst
- the working of Yahweh in the heart of the king

Sidebar: The title “king of Assyria” is unexpected, but not necessarily erroneous. Technically, it was no longer the Assyrian, but the Persian, or Babylonian, or Chaldean empire, but on occasion the former is still found in certain documents of the time.

CHAPTER 7

EZRA

The first five verses of Chapter 7 and the beginning of v6 introduce Ezra and offer his qualifications. They are substantial indeed. As to **lineage**,

- Ezra traces his line back to Zadok (v2):
 - the honorable and respected priest under King David, and high priest under Solomon;
 - the Zadokite line held the office of high priest until 171 BC;
 - the Sadducees were even named after Zadok—
- More than that—and unique for an individual in the OT—Ezra’s line goes all the way back to Aaron. This would be like a U.S. President tracing his line back to George Washington *and* Abraham Lincoln.

As to his **credentials**,

- According to v6, Ezra is a scribe. (The NIV “teacher” is accurate regarding his job description in Jerusalem at the time, but is not faithful to the Hebrew *sopher* [saw-fair]):
 - Originally, a scribe would be something akin to a secretary, transcribing the edicts and correspondence of a king (who might be illiterate); during the exile and after, however, scribes began taking on the teaching role, keeping the law before the Hebrews, interpreting it, etc. These same scribes, in NT times, would be called “rabbis” (very much like our pastors today).
 - We cannot say for sure, but Ezra, like Nehemiah, could very well have been employed in the Babylonian administration (which would have explained his proximity and access to Artaxerxes); one scholar says, “It would seem probable that he held a position in Persia comparable to ‘Secretary of State for Jewish Affairs.’”

- But I believe Ezra's best and most important credential is found in v10.

Read Ezra 7:10.

One reason I love reading biographies of great men and women is that I am then encouraged to instill in my own life some of their better qualities—those things that made them great. We could spend the rest of our time this morning expanding on this quality of Ezra's, applying it to our own lives; but we will be succinct, and move on. He set his heart to...

- **study** the law of the Lord: *to tread or frequent; usually to follow (for pursuit or search); by implication to seek or ask;*

Read Psalm 1:1-2.

- to **practice** (do) it: *to act upon it, obey it*

Read Psalm 40:6-8.

- to **teach** His statutes and ordinances: *to goad, to instruct, to train*

Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17.

- Ezra's final credential surpassed all others:
(v6b) ...and the king granted him all he requested because **the hand of the Lord his God was upon him.**
(v9b) ...because **the good hand of his God was upon him.**

DÉJÀ VU

In vs6-9 the anonymous chronicler of the book of Ezra summarizes Ezra's trip from Babylon to Jerusalem. (Ezra himself will give more details of the journey in Chapter 8.) After a four-month trip, Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 BC, and the lead up to the journey sounds like a repeat of the first return of the exiles 79 years earlier:

- an agreeable king—this time not Cyrus, but Artaxerxes—gives him permission to leave (v6);
- he puts together a group of Levites and priests, as if to restock the newly rebuilt temple (v7);
- and the king gives him a decree to carry with him, and it contains many of the same elements as the one by Cyrus:
 - permission for anyone to leave who cares to;
 - mention of silver and gold from Babylon;
 - mention of any remaining temple utensils;
 - an accounting sheet, specifying how much silver and goods the Jews may require from the "provinces beyond the River";
 - a restriction against any of these provinces to tax the Jews or charge them tolls;
 - permission for Ezra to appoint judges so that the laws of God—and the laws of Persia—upon pain of death or banishment, are upheld and obeyed.

DOXOLOGY

After the decree/letter by King Artaxerxes, Chapter 7 closes with an outpouring of gratitude and praise from Ezra himself, writing in the first person.

Read Ezra 7:27-28.

Because "the hand of the Lord my God [was] upon [him]," (v28) Ezra knew that all this cooperation was not originating with the king of Persia. Yahweh was in charge, moving the hearts of unbelievers as well as believers, and Ezra knew who to bless for this. No matter who it is that "extends lovingkindness to" us, it is ultimately the Lord God doing it.

CHAPTER 8

In Chapter 8, Ezra backs up and offers some of the details of the preparation for their journey. He first, in vs1-14, itemizes the leaders and family numbers of those who were to go with him to Jerusalem. In this mostly pedantic chapter the impression we get of Ezra is that he was a pretty good organizer and leader, but more importantly a profoundly *spiritual* man, who wanted the trip to begin correctly. In fact, he would inaugurate it with a prayer meeting.

vs15-20

Ezra and those planning on making the journey encamped along a river (or canal) near the Euphrates for three days (v15). There they would organize the caravan, count heads, load the beasts of burden, etc. While he was counting heads, Ezra noted that there were no Levites—that is, “worker bees” for the temple. So, in vs16-20, he called in some of the leaders to round up some willing to go back with them.

vs21-23

Ezra, like Nehemiah (as we will see), is a man of action and prayer—and he understands that success in the former is only realized if it is preceded by the latter. Prayer and *spiritual* preparation must go *before* the journey.

Read Ezra 8:21.

humble, afflict^{qv} = *ana* (aw-naw') = a primitive root [possibly rather identical with <H6030> (‘anah) through the idea of **looking down or browbeating**]; **to depress** literal or figurative, transitive or intransitive (in various applications, as follow) :- **abase self, afflict**.

Sidebar: We may not care to admit this, even to ourselves, but could it be that we are reluctant to humble ourselves, to abase ourselves before the Lord, thinking it not really necessary? Can this be part of the corruption of grace, that the apostle Paul speaks of?

If so, perhaps it would benefit us to periodically read—better yet, memorize—Isaiah 53:6-7, which translates the same word used in Ezra as “afflicted.”

Read Isaiah 53:6-7.

Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled [or humiliated] Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:8)

Ezra proclaimed a “fast.” Among the many benefits of fasting, here are a few that might have applied to their situation (from Grudem):

- Fasting increases our sense of humility and dependence on the Lord; our hunger and physical weakness continually remind us how we are not really strong in ourselves but need the Lord.
- Fasting allows us more time for prayer.
- Fasting is a continual reminder that, just as we sacrifice some personal comfort to the Lord by not eating, so we must continually sacrifice all of ourselves to Him.

The fasting was an integral part of their humbling themselves before their God.

Why this extreme earnestness in this moment? He explains in vs22-23.

Read vs22-23.

Before they set out [literally, pull up their tent stakes], Ezra wanted to establish their level of faith in God. Were they really prepared to let the Lord go before them, literally protecting them from the very real dangers of this journey?

V23 says God “listened to our entreaty.” But what was His answer? Were their fasting and prayers of humility well-received? We have the answer in v31:

Read v31-32.

vs24-30,33-36

The last thing Ezra did before setting out on their journey was to disburse the gold, silver and bronze treasure into the hands of the priests and leading Levites, for safekeeping during the journey. In v28 he emphasized to them what an important responsibility this was.

Read vs28-29.

This was an extraordinary amount of treasure; this was not something they would carry in their back pockets.

- 650 talents of silver would equal 49,000 pounds—almost 25 tons.
- 100 talents x 2 would equal 7,500 pounds—almost 4 tons.

They were responsible to get this safely to Jerusalem, where it would be counted back to the priests at the temple.

Just as Nehemiah would later, they spent the first three days recuperating from their long journey. On the fourth day they presented the treasure to the priests at the temple—"the house of our God"—among them Jozabad, who was the son of the high priest Jeshua, who had come originally with Zerubbabel.

The treasure was duly weighed out and the amounts recorded. Then they sacrificed burnt offerings, and I like what Yamauchi says about them:

The animal sacrifices were made as a thanksgiving to God for His mercies and as a sin offering to acknowledge their unworthiness for such mercies.

That is a good lesson for us all. God called Ezra and entrusted this mission to him. That was a sign of blessing, of approval, as it were. But, being a humble man, Ezra felt it necessary—in his own eyes at least—to acknowledge before God and all Judah that neither he (Ezra) or any of the exiles were by any means *due* the blessings of God.

Perhaps every Sunday, when we give our tithe or offering, and we, in our minds, say, *"Thank you, Father for the innumerable blessings You have poured into my life,"* we should immediately follow that with, *"But I acknowledge to You my God that I know that I am unworthy of those blessings. I acknowledge that they are all by Your grace alone."*

SESSION 12: EZRA 9: Confession

PREFACE

Chapter 9 of Ezra begins the two-chapter conclusion of the book. The subject at hand is the intermarriage of Jews with other, heathen nations. And we must begin by asking the question,

*How grieved are we over our disobedience and sin?
How grieved are we over the existence of sin in the body of Christ?*

We will see that Ezra was so grieved over the sin of Israel that—to put it in modern terms—he went ballistic.

DISCOVERY

Here is an instance where, to fully appreciate the moment, we must burrow down into what lies *beneath* the text—not taking liberties, but digging into the underlying historical and cultural facts.

Read Ezra 9:1.

...these things...

vs8:33-36—the delivery of the silver and gold brought by this second group of exiles from Babylon, and the resulting offerings and sacrifices of thanksgiving and humility.

Yamauchi: The animal sacrifices were made as a thanksgiving to God for His mercies and as a sin offering to acknowledge their unworthiness for such mercies.

In the workbook I create for each study, I leave space for jotting down observations and questions that arise when reading through the text. When I read

Now when these things had been completed,

I jotted down, “What things?” And we have just answered that. Right after that I wrote, “How much time has passed?” And the answer to that is probably a few months.

Then after reading both verses 1 & 2, I was left with another question. See if the cause of it leaps out at you.

Read vs1-2.

The head-scratcher for me was that in vs1 it is the “princes” who make the report about “the people of Israel and the priests and the Levites,” but in v2 the princes are included in the group of worst offenders:

“...indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness.”

As usual, not everyone agrees on this, and Yamauchi’s explanation is unacceptable:

Those who brought Ezra’s attention to this problem were probably the ordinary members of the community rather than the leaders...

I’m sorry, but that’s not what the word means;

princes^{NASB,KJV}, **leaders**^{NIV,NKJV}, **officials**^{ESV} = *sar* = from <H8323> (sara); a head person (of any rank or class) :- captain (that had rule), chief (captain), general, governor, keeper, lord, ([-task-]) master, prince (-ipal), ruler, steward.

In the KJV it is translated prince 208, captain 130, chief 33, ruler 33, governor 6 times. *Nowhere* (in KJV or NASB) is it translated with a term representing just your average Joe down the street.

John Gill writes that these were

some of the nobles of Israel, the most religious of them, who were concerned at the corruptions that were among them, though not a sufficient number to reform them.

So here's the situation:

Approximately 79 years earlier the first group of exiles returned to Judah under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Jeshua. They restored the altar and rebuilt the temple. Then, as so often happens, the spiritual high from this renewal subsided; life in Judah settled into normalcy.

Perhaps the male/female ratio in the returning exiles was skewed, and mates were found from the "people of the land" because there were too few in the Jewish community. Or perhaps not; in six or seven decades it probably would have occurred anyway that the Jews would intermarry with the indigenous peoples.

This was less a matter of *racial* purity than *spiritual* purity.
Read Deuteronomy 7:1-4.

Sidebar:

Jebusites: original, pre-Davidic residents of Jerusalem (Jebus)

Ammonites: descendants from Lot's younger daughter

Moabites: descendants from Lot's older daughter (Gen 19:35-38)

And now, all these decades later, the very people called to shepherd the Jews in faithfulness to God's law were the worst offenders [v2: "foremost in this unfaithfulness"].

EZRA'S RESPONSE

Even taking into account the extravagant emotionalism of Semitic peoples, Ezra's response to this situation is extraordinary.

Read v3.

*I tore my garment **and** my robe...*

sign of heartfelt, grievous affliction

*pulled some of the hair from my head **and** my beard,*

violent wrath and/or moral indignation

*...and sat down **appalled**.*

appalled^{NASB,NIV,ESV}, **astonished/astounded**^{KJV} = *shāmēm* (shaw-mame') = a primitive root; **to stun** (or intransitive grow numb), i.e. devastate or (figurative) **stupefy** (both usually in a passive sense) :- make amazed, be astounded, (be an) astonish (-ment), (be, bring into, unto, lay, lie, make) **desolate** (-ion, places), be destitute, destroy (self), (lay, lie, make) waste, wonder; **to be so desolated that one is speechless**.

[**astounded** is an archaic term that means either to be *deprived briefly of the power to act: dazed, or filled with consternation or dismay*.] Translated "desolate" 49 times in the KJV.

As Ezra reacts so to this news before the temple, the people gathered around him—

Read v4.

—and remain there while he prays to God.

Read v10:1.

EZRA'S PRIESTLY CONFESSION

Correct me if this is wrong, but what comes to mind first when someone says the word “prayer”?

- seeking the Lord's help with an illness or problem
- seeking help for someone else

That is, asking God *for* something. Even in a prayer of contrite confession of sin, we might finish it off by asking the Lord for help in combating the temptation to do it again. That is not necessarily wrong; we are called to do this [Ephesians 6:18; Philippians 4:6]. But what do you think of someone who comes to you *only* when he wants something from you?

What impressed me right off when I read Ezra's prayer was that he never asks God for anything. It is pure, undiluted confession. Professor Adeney agreed when he wrote in 1893...

The striking characteristic of this outburst of Ezra's is that it does not contain a single petition. There is no greater mistake in regard to prayer than the notion that it is nothing more than the begging of specific favours from the bounty of the Almighty. That is but a shallow kind of prayer at best. In the deepest and most real prayer the soul is too near to God to ask for any definite thing; it is just unbosoming itself to the Great Confidant, just telling out its agony to the Father who can understand everything and receive the whole burden of the anguished spirit. *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Prof. W. F. Adeney)

Ezra was a scribe *and* a priest, and his prayer is an eloquent example of the priestly act of standing in the gap between man and God—in this case a confession of corporate sins.

vs5-6

I have no doubt that what Ezra was doing all day, sitting there at the temple, speechless, was forming in his mind what he must say to yeh-ho-vaw' *adonai elohim*—the Lord my God. When it came time, he did not clean up, he didn't eat anything after fasting for the day, but just prostrated himself before his God.

But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation [or fasting], even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands [palms] to the Lord my God;

Ezra's first words are ones of anguish, shame, remorse—but they are beautiful.

and I said, “O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities [perversity; moral evil] have risen [lit., multiplied (kjb: increased), i.e., stacked up] above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens.”

There are times when our sin before God is so great, so deep, has accumulated to such an extent that we dare not even look up.

v7

In v7 Ezra succinctly summarizes the history of Israel's disobedience, of rebellion against the laws of God—all of which resulted in captivity, and shame. And then he acknowledges the grace of God in permitting their return to Judah.

vs8-9

v8: “But now for a brief moment grace has been *shown* from the Lord our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.”

KJV “space” = archaic for a period of time

“peg” = a nail driven into a wall on which to hang something, or a tent peg to which a line is secured; to the Jews, this was their temple in a still-ruined and vulnerable Jerusalem

“light” = vitality and joy (“enlighten”)

“reviving” = preservation of life, quickening, relief

v9: “For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem.”

Sidebar: I could find no explanation for the KJVS placing the first part of v9 in the past tense—i.e., “we **were** slaves/bondmen”—when every other translation puts it in the present tense. The NKJV presses it further, by continuing in the past tense—i.e., “Yet our God did not forsake us in our bondage; but He extended mercy to us in the sight of the kings of Persia...”

The Jews are still servants of the Persian empire; though several of the kings had shown them mercy—even supported their rebuilding efforts—they are not a nation unto themselves. Judah and Israel are still vassal states; as Albert Barnes writes, “The Persian monarch was their absolute lord and master.”

A parallel passage in Nehemiah makes it clear—even in the KJVS:

Read Nehemiah 9:36-37.

The “wall” is not a reference to the walls of Jerusalem, which have not yet been rebuilt, but to the shield of protection the Persian kings had given them; the Lord had “extended lovingkindness” to them *through* these kings.

vs10-12

In vs10-12, by way of proving their sin, Ezra recites back to the Lord a summation of what He had commanded them:

‘The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end and with their impurity. So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good things of the land and leave it as an inheritance to your sons forever.’

And they had not obeyed this command. God had graciously permitted the exiles to return, and in no time they were back at it. The white glove was once again getting muddy.

vs13-14

The nucleus of the remaining portion of Ezra’s prayer is the beginning of v15:

“O Lord God of Israel, You are righteous...”

This fundamental statement is expanded on by the text that both precedes and follows it.

Read vs13-14.

v15

And right at the moment where someone else might insert a concluding entreaty—*O Lord God, have mercy on us!*—Ezra closes out his prayer with worship and confession. First the worship:

“O Lord God of Israel, You are righteous...”

There are, essentially, two forms of pure worship of God: One is declaring our love for Him, our devotion, our adoration: *I love You Lord / And I lift my voice / To worship You / O my soul, rejoice.*

The second way is to call out His attributes, His eternal qualities, and that is what Ezra does here:

“O Lord God of Israel, You are righteous...”

Ezra is saying, *Lord God, You are just in how You treat us. Your judgments are right and lawful.*

And he closes his prayer by expanding on this:

“...for we have been left an escaped remnant, as it is this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this.”

Implied in this is, *We have been found by You to be guilty, because we are guilty. Do with us what You will; whatever punishment You decide, we deserve it.*

SESSION 13: EZRA 10: *Cleaning house*

PREFACE

From the ending doxology of Ezra 7 through to the end of Chapter 9 the book called “Ezra” has been written in the first person—i.e., Ezra speaking. But now, at the beginning of Chapter 10, it reverts back to a third-person narrative.

A STRONG LAYMAN

Here is where we are at: Ezra has been praying before ([toward](#)) the temple, weeping ([loudly](#)), repeatedly prostrating himself. He has been fasting all day, his clothing is torn. I don’t doubt for a moment Ezra’s sincerity; his anguish over the sins of his people was authentic, and not just for show ([cf. Matthew 26:65](#)).

But I also do not doubt that Ezra was very much aware that the people were looking to him to lead them. He must be an example for them.

Illustration: a worship leader up on the platform may be sincerely praising his God, but, mindful that he is a *prompter* for leading the congregation into authentic worship, he may make his own worship more physically obvious to serve as an example.

So it is not surprising that the people of Ezra’s congregation followed suit.

Read Ezra 10:1.

Then a devout layman comes forth to speak. Ezra the priest was innocent in this matter, but he spoke to God—employing the corporate “we”—on behalf of the people. And now Shecaniah, a righteous layman, though himself innocent in the matter, speaks to *Ezra* on behalf of the people—also employing the corporate “we”.

Read vs2-3. [[Jehiel = ef-ee-ale’](#); [Elam = ay-lawm’](#)]

The first question, of course, is, *Who is this guy, and who is he to be speaking out like this?* We get a couple of clues from the list of names that closes this chapter.

- First, Shecaniah’s name does not appear there, so he is not guilty of taking a foreign wife;
- But that doesn’t mean he hasn’t any involvement. Note his name in v2: “Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam”. Now look at v26.

Read v26.

His dad *was* guilty.

Sidebar: While we are in the list, let me address an issue Dennis raised last week about whether these who took foreign wives are from the first (79 years earlier) or the second group—just arrived with Ezra.

Here in the list we have clues to answer that. If you work through this list, you will see some familiar names—familiar from the second chapter of Ezra. We won’t take the time for them all, but let me point out just a couple:

- sons of Parosh — 10:25 / 2:3
- sons of Zattu — 10:27 / 2:8
- we’ve already looked at the sons of Elam — 10:26 / 2:7
- and there are many more.

We can’t say with certainty that no one was in the second group that came over with Ezra, but the preponderance of evidence shows that at least most were descended from the first group that came with Zerubbabel and Jeshua. Oh, and speaking of Jeshua the high priest, look at v18.

Read v18.

Now let’s return to our story...

If I were directing this scene, I would block it like this:

Ezra is prostrate before the doors of the temple; fanned out behind him are the people of Judah, they too on their knees, weeping over their sin. From the front of the crowd, Shecaniah rises; he turns to face the crowd and says,

“We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children...”

Here he turns and gestures toward Ezra—

according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God;

—then turns back to the crowd.

and let it be done according to the law.

Shecaniah turns to face Ezra, perhaps extends his hand to the priest to help him up from the ground, and says in a loud voice so all behind him can hear,

“Arise! For this matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act.”

Lampel paraphrase: On your feet old man! You’ve been called to this task, but we’re all behind you. Be strong, be bold, be quick; we’re with you—but get to it!

Sidebar: Before we leave Shecaniah, I want to point out something he said in v3: “let us **make** a covenant with our God”

make = *karat* (kaw-rath') = a primitive root; **to cut** (off, down or asunder); by implication to destroy or consume; specifically to covenant (i.e. **make an alliance or bargain, originally by cutting flesh and passing between the pieces**)

In Genesis 15 we have the root instance of what this word means. The Lord promises Abram that he will have a son and that his descendants would be as innumerable as the stars. And the Lord goes on to say He will give Abram the land he is on. But Abram, replies, *What proof do I have of this?*

Read Genesis 15:8-10, 17.

So, as Ezra rises to his feet, I wonder if he may have been thinking, *You say you are with me on this? Well then, prove it.*

Read Ezra 10:5.

take oath = *shaba* = to be complete; to swear oneself, i.e. swear (as if by repeating a declaration seven times).

Ezra then continued his mourning and fasting in an auxiliary room—probably one of many storerooms—in part of the temple area. While there, the leaders and elders made a proclamation ordering all exiles to assemble in Jerusalem—on penalty of excommunication [v8: “**excluded from the assembly of the exiles**”].

Sidebar: Aside from his spiritual faithfulness to Jehovah, I think we can consider another reason for Ezra’s dramatic reaction to this situation. I can imagine the mindset of some of those—and their descendants, of course [over the span of 79 years]—who remained behind in Babylon. Imagine the stories that were told in Babylon about the glories of dwelling again in the Promised Land, once again worshipping at the temple—the *real* temple! And I am sure those left behind were seeing all this through rose-colored glasses, imagining the restored Jerusalem almost as a spiritual paradise.

Then Ezra gets there and discovers the deeply imbedded sin and corruption that exists in what is certainly *not* a spiritual paradise. Of course he would be incensed—but also disillusioned. In a few years, Nehemiah will go through the same thing.

Read Ezra 10:9.

This gathering took place in the month corresponding to our December—as your chart on p12 indicates: December 19, 458 BC. As the people themselves point out in v13, this was the cold, rainy time of the year, “when the rain usually falls in torrents” (Robinson).

It does cause one to wonder: perhaps the Lord had a hand in this. The whole point of this assembly was to make the Jews miserable over their sin and confess that sin to God. Well, the weather was a perfect match for this; you would be pretty miserable, crouched there in the open, a cold wind blowing and a cold rain pouring down. The whole assembly would have looked like a collection of drowned rats.

It is now three days later, and Ezra has regained his strength. He now stands before them in the strength of the Lord God.

Read vs10-11.

It’s not so much incorrect that most of the modern translations have this “**foreign** wives;”; it can mean that. But in this context, that is not quite the right shading for the word—and I prefer the KJV here.

foreign^{NASB,NIV,ESV}, **pagan**^{NKJV}, **strange**^{KJV} = *nokri* (nok-ree') = from <H5235> (neker) (second form); **strange**, in a variety of degrees and applications (foreign, non-relative, adulterous, **different**, **wonderful**) :- alien, foreigner, **outlandish**, strange (-r, woman).

These Jewish men had been tempted to join with pagan women—the emphasis should rightly be on their *religion*, not their nationality. But too, in this word there is also a sense of the temptation: these were women “strange” and “wonderful”—wondrous to behold. They were *different* from the women to which they were more accustomed, and this made them more exciting.

But, again, it was less their nationality than who or what they worshipped. I think we need a reminder of just who these people were, and why it was so wrong—so reprehensible—for the Jews to involve themselves with them.

In 722 BC the Assyrian king Shalmaneser conquered the northern kingdom, removed Israel and replaced it with people from Mesopotamia and Syria (2 Kings 17:24). Here, from 2 Kings 17 is a description of the culture in which these “foreign wives” were steeped:

Read 2 Kings 17:29-33.

[Back to Ezra 10.](#)

Our narrative is very real, very practical. The people immediately and heartily agreed to what Ezra said, but because of the size of the problem—and the nasty weather—they (or surely one spokesman) suggested a practical, systematic way to attack the problem.

Read Ezra 10:12-14.

V15 reveals that there were only four out of the whole group of exiles that stood in opposition to this remedy.

Read v15.

Note: The KJV translates *amad* “employed,” which gives an erroneous impression that these four were employed to affect this commission. It is true that in other settings this word could mean that—but not here. The verse begins with a word that is in the Hebrew text: “only.” This makes it clear they “stood against” the proposition, not with it.

Why? We don’t know, but once again the list of offenders that follows may give us a clue. One of the four in opposition is Meshullam.

Read v29.

They got to work on this ten days later, and finished up their detailed survey three months after that. They compiled a list that included about one hundred couples.

CONCLUSION

I would like to close with a consideration of the two aspects of this drama: the **sin** and the **repentance**.

The Sin

The exiles had broken the very first commandment.

"You shall have no other gods before Me." (Exodus 20:3)

That commandment is fundamental; without it, all the rest of the law is meaningless. Jesus, quoting Deuteronomy 6, says essentially the same thing in a different way.

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" (Matthew 22:37)

Yahweh is a jealous God who will not countenance a divided devotion. Eighty percent of our worship is not sufficient; it must be 100%. If you don't quite grasp the immensity of the sin committed by the exiles, put it into modern terms.

You are born and raised a fundamentalist, evangelical Baptist. At a young age you accept Christ as your Savior. You teach Sunday School; you are solid in the faith, a pillar of the church.

Then you fall in love with a young woman, a lovely girl of foreign extraction who is an adherent of the *Gaia* cult—a modern extension of the ancient Greek cult of the Mother Goddess Gaia, creator and giver of birth to the earth.

Such a nonsensical belief seems harmless to you—and you really do love this woman, so you marry. One day you come home from work to discover that your wife has set up a small shrine to Gaia in a corner of your living room: a few candles surrounding a statue of a voluptuous nude woman holding a child. Little by little, through innocuous conversation, pamphlets and books, more and more of your home life is taken up by the practice of this religion that venerates the earth and the personification of the earth, the goddess Gaia.

At first you go along just to please your wife, but over time the philosophy of the earth itself as giver of life begins to make sense to you. Eventually, though the two of you still attend services at the local Baptist church every Sunday morning, the daily practice of kneeling and reciting verse before the statue of Gaia becomes a more comfortable and sensible form of worship for you.

That is precisely what the exiles in Judah did. That was their sin.

The Repentance

That was a powerful, dramatic sin, but equally dramatic—indeed, *traumatic*—was their repentance. Let's not lightly pass over what they were willing to do to confess their sin and make things right again.

Read Ezra 10:19, 44.

Now *that* is repentance; that is true devotion. Those who were guilty of this sin gave their hands in pledge to give up wives—even their children from these marriages, as v3 and v44 indicate. Henceforth they would worship the Lord God—*yeh-ho-vaw' adonai elohim*—only. You have to respect them for that.

And Jesus referred to this as well:

"And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life." (Matthew 19:29)

SESSION 14: *Nehemiah!*

THE STORY THUS FAR

The Lead-up: Rebellion & Judgment

We began this story in 2 Kings, looking at the four principal invasions of Israel/Judah [\[see page 6 in booklet\]](#):

1. In 732 BC Tiglath-pilaser III, king of Assyria, invaded Israel/Samaria; King Pekah was killed, and a new king more friendly to Assyria (Hoshea), installed on the throne; and some of the people were deported to Assyria.
2. In 722 BC Shalmaneser V, king of Assyria, invaded Israel/Samaria; more of Israel removed, and Israel resettled by immigrants from Babylon.
3. In 701 BC Sennacharib, king of Assyria, invaded and captured most of the fortified cities in Judah, but came short of taking Jerusalem itself. This left Jerusalem in a much more precarious situation.
4. During the period 604-586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon (Persian empire, now), invaded Judah; over a period of about eighteen years he first blockaded the city of Jerusalem, starved the citizens, then systematically removed almost all the people, the gold, silver, and temple utensils. Finally the temple, the king's palace and the major buildings, then the city walls were demolished, and the city left in ruins.

Why did all this take place? Chapter after chapter in the OT tell us why, but let's pick the closing remarks of Joshua's farewell address.

Read Joshua 23:14-16.

That's what *they* did, so, after centuries of longsuffering, that's what the *Lord* did.

Zerubbabel & Ezra

A new king rose in the Persian empire in 559 BC, and twenty years later Cyrus II entered Babylon [\[page 12 time line\]](#). Shortly thereafter "the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia" (Ezra 1:1) and he gave permission for the exiles to return to Judah to rebuild the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem—"everyone whose spirit God had stirred to go up and rebuild the house of the Lord."

And so, after roughly 70 years of exile, this they did under the leadership of the governor Zerubbabel and the high priest Jeshua. They returned to Jerusalem, first rebuilt the altar so they could reestablish sacrifices, re-laid the foundation, then the temple itself.

After a period of opposition from without, with help from the new king of Persia, Darius I, they completed the temple in 515 BC.

It is now 458 BC—57 years later. Artaxerxes is now king, and he gives permission to the scribe and priest Ezra to lead a second group of exiles back to Judah. And I think it would be of value to refresh our memories on Ezra's best qualification for this task.

Read Ezra 7:10.

Our hearts, as well, should be set on

- **studying** the word of the Lord,
- **practicing** the word of the Lord, and
- **teaching** the word of the Lord.

Just last week we saw how Ezra—his heart pierced over the sin committed by the exiles in taking pagan wives (and husbands), thus corrupting Judah with the evil of idolatry—conducted a revival of sorts. A mass prayer meeting and time of confession was held before the temple, resulting in the removal of at least 100 foreign wives and their children.

We will see, later, that the reform that took place through Ezra did not last long.

NEHEMIAH

Ever since leading a home Bible Study group through the book of Nehemiah back in the late 1980s, I have been impressed with the man. Every Christian today can learn a lot not just from the chronicle of his activities, but from the man himself—his character, his determination, his morality—and perhaps most of all his prayer life: his intimate relationship with the Lord.

Time Frame

As we have before, let's first establish our time frame.

- Nehemiah was a contemporary of Ezra; they probably knew each other back in Babylon.
- Look at page 13 in your booklet: At the right of the time line at the bottom of the page we see that Artaxerxes was king of the Persian empire from 465 to 424 BC.
- Now go up to page 12; Ezra received his call and left Babylon for Jerusalem in 458 BC. Scripture confirms that it was Artaxerxes that gave Ezra permission to leave.

Read Ezra 7:1, 11-12.

- Now turn to the first chapter of Nehemiah.

Read Nehemiah 1:1.

Susa was where the Persian kings wintered ([Chislew = our December](#)). The text tells us it was the "twentieth year." Twentieth year of what? Well, in the ancient world years and epochs were oriented by the rule of kings, so, for example, instead of calling it 2014 we would say "in the sixth year of King Obama."

- And what king was ruling at the time?

Read Nehemiah 2:1.

The twentieth year of Artaxerxes would be (as the chart on p12 indicates) April 13, 445 to April 2, 444 BC.

- So as the book of Nehemiah opens, it is roughly
 - 163 years from the beginning of Babylonian captivity,
 - 93 years since the first exiles returned to Judah, and
 - 12 years after the close of the book of Ezra.

Who is Nehemiah?

Nehemiah will become the governor/leader in Jerusalem, but what is he right now? Look at the end of Chapter One; v11 closes with, "Now I was the cupbearer to the king." Some translate the word as "butler," but that would be insufficient here. Literally it means "one who gives someone something to drink." Well, butlers do that, but an ancient "cupbearer" typically did far more—and had far more official responsibilities.

First, the one who handed a cup of wine to the king had to be utterly trusted by that king. The favorite method of assassination was poisoning, so the sovereign had to have unqualified trust in the last person holding a drink before it met his lips. My educated guess is that we would not call Nehemiah the king's wine-*taster*; that role would be filled by someone more expendable.

A passage in the Apocryphal book of Tobit describes the duties of one Ahikar:

Now Ahikar was cupbearer, keeper of the signet, and in charge of administration of the accounts, for Esarhaddon had appointed him second to himself.

Further, Yamauchi points out that a cupbearer

- would be well-trained in court etiquette;
- would probably be handsome—a pleasing countenance;
- would certainly be knowledgeable about wine selection;
- would need to be a pleasant companion to the king, willing to lend an ear—and thus a trustworthy confidant of the king; and
- would have a hand in who was given access to the king.

So that is a thumbnail sketch of the king's cupbearer as the book of Nehemiah opens.

NEHEMIAH 1:2-3

For the remainder of our time today I want to set the scene by looking at the first three verses of Chapter One.

Read Nehemiah 1:1-3.

Hanani ([short for Hananiah](#)) may be just a fellow Jew—one of the Jewish “brethren”—but is probably Nehemiah’s blood brother. The way v2 is worded, I’m inclined to believe Hanani, living in proximity to his brother Nehemiah, received a group of men who knew him, and had recently arrived from Judah. Hearing their report, he told them, “My brother Nehemiah needs to hear this.” So he brings them to court and introduces them to his brother. It is also possible, however, that *all* of them—including Hanani—were living in Judah. [\[Each of the common translations used today offer a different interpretation from the others.\]](#)

It makes perfect sense that Nehemiah, upon learning that these men have been in Judah, asks them how things are going over there. And I think at this point, there are two possibilities for Nehemiah’s state of mind:

- One is that he is expecting encouraging news. After all, it has been more than ninety years since the exiles returned; things should be well-established by now.
- On the other hand, there is every reason to suppose that over the last ninety years there has been traffic in both directions between Babylon and Judah, and the Persian administration has been kept apprised of all the events in that land. Nehemiah is a confidant of the king, and surely he is privy to periodic reports on the state of things in Judah.

Nonetheless, this is not AD 2014, but 444 BC. Nehemiah couldn’t call up *Google Earth* for a satellite image of Jerusalem. The most recent report might still be a few years old. Perhaps he had heard nothing more since Ezra had departed Babylon.

Even though it means we need to get down into the weeds for a moment, what Nehemiah knew of the state of things in Judah is important for understanding v3—and for understanding his dramatic response to the news delivered by these men. Here is their report:

“The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.”

Please turn to Ezra 4.

There is a school of thought that the condition of the walls and gates refers to a partial rebuilding that had been thwarted just before Ezra arrived.

Read Ezra 4:7.

A group of officials put their heads together and sent a tattle-tale letter back to their king. Here is the pertinent report:

Read v12-13.

Then Artaxerxes’ reply:

Read v21.

Some scholars conclude that it is the destruction of this beginning restoration to the city walls and gates, made just before Ezra arrived on-scene, to which the men refer in their report to Nehemiah. That is Yamauchi’s position. But K&D and many others subscribe to the position that the men refer to the *original* destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar. The text of v3 is little help; the verbs simply describe it’s present state: “is broken down... are burned.”

The first camp interprets v3 as if it says this—

“...and the wall of Jerusalem **has been** broken down and its gates **have been** burned with fire.” [\[i.e., recently\]](#)

—while the second camp interprets v3 as if it says this:

“...and the wall of Jerusalem **is still** broken down and its gates **are still** burned with fire.”

I lean toward the latter, taking the position that the primary reason for Nehemiah’s anguish at this news is that he is shocked and utterly dismayed to hear that the city walls still lie in ruins. (“You mean to tell me that the city still, after all this time, remains defenseless?!”)

Sidebar: Don’t we see the hand of God in this? In Ezra 4:21 Artaxerxes declares that all work on the Jerusalem city walls is to cease “until a decree is issued by me.” That tells us two things: First, he had his reasons, then, to have it stopped. But, two, he left open the possibility that he might give permission for it to resume in the future. In the economy of God it was not yet time. But Nehemiah, his heart broken over the state of Jerusalem, prays to “the God of heaven” to soften the heart of the king ([Nehemiah 2:1-8](#)). And God answers his prayer—because *now* it is time.

Why was this so important? Why was Nehemiah so upset that the walls of Jerusalem remained in ruins?

In antiquity—even up to just a few hundred years ago—sound, defensible walls were critical to the security of a city. Without walls a city was literally laid bare, open to any and all assaults.

Sidebar: Modern Jerusalem is no longer secured within defensible walls, but it has established a modern equivalent: the Iron Dome system. Stone walls would not keep out modern attacks that can easily shoot or fly over them. But with the Iron Dome interceptor system they have today’s answer to what Nehemiah rebuilt in 445 BC.

Remember how we discussed all the opposition the returned exiles had to deal with when they were trying to rebuild the temple? How much easier that would have been if they could have just shut the city gates to such people.

Why did Nehemiah think this so important? First the walls would give Jerusalem better security against military incursion. But they would also let the Chosen People, dedicated to the worship of Yahweh, do something else.

Read Nehemiah 13:15-19.

Jerusalem’s city walls were not just for keeping its citizens safe from military assault, but for keeping the Jews and their religion safe from *secular* assault.

And that defense is no less important for us today.

Read Ephesians 6:10-17.

SESSION 15: Nehemiah's Prayer

PREFACE

Nehemiah, the son of Hacaliah, was a man of prayer. He was a righteous man who understood—even 440 years before the birth of Christ—that one could enjoy a personal relationship with Yahweh. His story is a refreshing change from the staid formality of temple worship; there is an intimate immediacy to his communion with the “Lord God of heaven” (Nehemiah 1:5).

Reading his story, one can easily imagine Nehemiah existing in a sort of constant prayer-state. When a situation arose, he would immediately go to his God in prayer.

Sidebar: Today we have individuals existing in a constantly on state of communication with others of their ilk, via iPhone, etc. Day by day, minute by minute they are passing along the trivialities of their life to others, even as they read the trivialities of the lives of others. Constantly connected.

This illustrates the life of Nehemiah. One imagines him constantly on—only in his case it was with the God of heaven, and he was not dealing in trivialities, but baring his soul, crying out to God for help in every crisis, as well as worshiping, praising, honoring his Lord.

FIRST RESPONSE

Read Nehemiah 1:4.

When I heard these words...

What words?

Read Nehemiah 1:3.

I sat down and wept and mourned for days;

That Nehemiah “sat down” is not inconsequential. Even among Jews today the prescribed attitude of mourning is seated on a low stool.

At various times in our walk, seemingly out of the blue a burden will come upon us. We might go for years, hearing of one need or another with no effect. The trials and suffering of others will bounce off us leaving not even a dent. Or we might acknowledge the need by offering a perfunctory prayer on their behalf.

But then God, as He does from time to time, says, “Now,” and suddenly we are burdened by the plight of others. As perhaps never before we now feel it deeply, powerfully. We are now preoccupied with it; it fills our thoughts day in and day out.

Nehemiah is now overwhelmed by the plight of Jerusalem. He receives the bad news as if it is about a member of his own family. I’m sure he had always had a heart for his nation and its city, but he had not migrated there with Ezra twelve years earlier. He had remained behind. But now the situation in Judah had become his own personal burden. The Lord God had picked it up and placed it squarely on Nehemiah’s shoulders.

NEHEMIAH’S PRAYER

Nehemiah’s prayer upon hearing of the plight of Jerusalem is a pretty good template for our own prayers (roughly following that old chestnut, A.C.T.S.):

1. Worship (v5)
2. Confession (vs6-7)
3. Covenant Reminder (vs8-10)
4. Entreaty (v11)

v5: Worship

Too often our prayers are impolite and, at times, rendered impotent by our efficiency. Do we have a specific need

that is heavy on our heart? With our first words we go right to it, state our case, then polish it off with a snappy “amen.” We present our laundry list of requests like we are ordering a Happy Meal at the drive-up window; thirty seconds and we’re done.

Even though Nehemiah has a specific request he needs to bring before the Lord—a fruitful audience before the king—he doesn’t get to it until the very last sentence of his prayer. He begins his prayer with worship.

Remember that along with adoration, specific worship can include a declaring, a calling out of the qualities, the nature, the *attributes* of God (the biblical word is “ascribe”—*yahab*: to give, i.e., to “give” these qualities to the Lord).

Read 1 Chronicles 16:28-29.

Nehemiah begins his prayer with this, ending v5 with a little implied thanksgiving.

Read v5.

Sidebar: See how, in our self-important culture, we have diminished the true meaning of words? I watched a piece the other day about a woman who was a chef at a couple of Iowa landmarks. She, of course, was telling the camera how wonderful it was for her to be doing what she was, and every other adjective coming from her mouth was “awesome.”

So when we call the Lord God “awesome,” does that mean his presence is equal to the enjoyment of preparing fresh vegetables? Here’s what the word really means:

awesome = *yare* (yaw-ray') = **to fear**; moral **to revere**; causative **to frighten** :- affright, **be (make) afraid, dread (-ful)**, (put in) fear (-ful, -fully, -ing), (be had in) reverence (-end), × see, terrible (act, -ness, thing).

The idea is captured by Isaiah in his vision of the throne of God

Read Isaiah 6:1-5.

Or more succinctly in Hebrews 10:31...

It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Alexander MacLaren points out something important about this business of beginning prayer with worship:

That commencement is no mere proper invocation, conventionally regarded as the right way of beginning, but it expresses the petitioner’s effort to lay hold on God’s character as the ground of his hope of answer. Prayers which are cast in the mould of God’s own revelation of Himself will not fail of answer. True prayer catches up the promises that flutter down to us, and flings them up again like arrows.

vs6-7: Confession

Then, immediately after establishing God’s character, he confesses *Israel’s* character—and it is found wanting. And just as we saw before in Ezra, a righteous representative makes a corporate confession using the “we” pronoun. Perhaps Nehemiah as an individual was not guilty, but he was a son of Israel, and in this prayer he acknowledges that God addresses and treats the nation of Israel as if it *were* an individual. In this, Nehemiah includes himself in the guilty.

Read v6.

How had they sinned?

Read v7.

commandments, commands = as in Ten Commandments

statutes, decrees = something prescribed, as in keeping the Passover

ordinances, laws = legal decisions or judgments

Israel had failed miserably in keeping its side of the covenant.

vs8-10: Covenant Reminder

Remember...

First a note about something Nehemiah says a number of times in this book. About eight times, in addressing Yahweh, Nehemiah says, “Remember...” On one level this can seem arrogant, or at least presumptuous, as if Nehemiah is wagging his finger at God, saying, “Remember what You said!”

But I believe this is just another anthropomorphism, similar to what he says in v6:

let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant

Well, that is just the human way of trying to picture God in our mind so we can better communicate with Him. God is spirit, and thus probably does not have sensory organs like ears and eyes—and if He does, He doesn’t need us telling Him to open them up to the prayers of His people.

Similarly, Nehemiah knows full well that God is not about to forget one of His covenants. We may not fully comprehend the nature of spirit-memory in the Godhead, but we can trust that it is always on and active.

Nehemiah’s choice of words are a reminder that ultimately prayer—any prayer—is more for our benefit than God’s. When one has a firm grasp of the nature and character of God—which Nehemiah established as he began his prayer in v5—one understands that prayer reminds *us* of what is necessary, not God. Thus I think Nehemiah says “Remember...” as if to say, “I remember...”

Before I read vs8-10 in the NASB, I would like to first read parts of it in a closer approximation of the original text. As I do, note especially the difference in those places in your translations where it says, “if”. The following is from *Young’s Literal Translation*:

Remember, I pray Thee, the word that Thou didst command Moses Thy servant, saying, Ye—ye trespass—I scatter you among peoples; and ye have turned back unto Me, and kept My commands, and done them—if your outcast is in the end of the heavens, thence I gather them, and have brought them in unto the place that I have chosen to cause My name to tabernacle there. And they are Thy servants, and Thy people, whom Thou hast ransomed by Thy great power, and by Thy strong hand.

The point is not that our modern translations are incorrect; they reflect the correct idea behind the text. But the original text is more emphatic: from *God’s* perspective there is no “if,” no question about Israel’s rebellion—and Israel’s subsequent repentance and return.

There is no “if” about sin, and there is no “if” about God’s grace.

Now let’s read vs8-10 from a modern translation.

Read vs8-10.

“Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses,	<i>O God, You have brought to my mind the covenant promises You made to Moses so long ago.</i>
saying, ‘If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples;	<i>And we have been unfaithful; we have sinned against You. Guilty as charged. And just as You promised, You did indeed scatter us to the four winds.</i>
but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.’	<i>But You made another promise, Lord. You said that if we returned to You, and were once again obedient to Your law, You would let us go home to Jerusalem, to Your holy temple. By Your grace and great compassion You have accomplished this! Many of Your people have now returned to Your holy hill.</i>
They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.”	<i>But Your servants remain in peril. They have returned, but are surrounded by those who hate them, and wish them harm. They are defenseless, O God! They need Your strong hand to protect them in this dire hour.</i>

...where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell. (v9)

21. Where Yahweh’s name dwells, *He* dwells.
22. Where His name dwells, His name is *called upon*.

That is, since His “name” is synonymous with the fullness of God, wherever His name dwells, *He* is there. And when we “call upon” His name, we are calling upon *Him*.

To You I shall offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving,
And call upon the name of the Lord.
Psalms 116:17

v11

All this so far, while sincere and earnest, has been preamble to the nut of his prayer. Now in v11 Nehemiah closes his prayer with his specific request. But even now that entreaty is reserved for the *last half* of this last sentence; the first half reiterates what he said in v6. This is the mark of reverence, of humility before holy God. Nehemiah is treading cautiously, submissively into the throne room of Yahweh.

Read v11.

All this has been to one end: that when Nehemiah presents his case before the king, asking permission to go to Jerusalem, God will work in the heart of Artaxerxes to grant his petition. And how did God answer this eloquent prayer?

Read Nehemiah 2:6.

I want to close by focusing on two words in v11—two words that would not typically seem to be comfortable companions.

revere^{NASB,NIV}, **fear**^{KJV,ESV} = *yare* = same word translated “awesome” in v5.

delight^{NASB,NIV,ESV}, **desire**^{KJV} = *hapes* (khaw-fates') = from <H2654> (chaphets); pleased with :- **delight in**, desire, favour, please, **have pleasure**, whosoever would, willing, wish.

We do not normally partner these two words: *taking pleasure in trembling in fear before a holy God*.

I believe it was last winter when we visited some old friends in Marshalltown—they are “old” friends in *both* senses of the word: these have been dear friends, both to me and my parents, since I was a young boy growing up in the church. In our conversation last winter I remember pointing out that the Lampels are of a melancholic nature; speaking for myself, I said something like, “I love to be sad.”

Buck, the husband of the older couple, and an irrepressibly upbeat, gregarious soul, found this utterly unbelievable. *How in the world could one wish to be sad—even enjoy it?*

Well, it’s hard to explain—just as it is hard to explain “*delighting in fear*.”

Perhaps we might understand it this way: When we fear God, revering Him as Almighty God and Lord, submitting ourselves as slaves before Him, that means we are *in His presence*. And David the psalmist tells us in Psalm 16 that in His presence there is “fullness of joy.”

I will bless the Lord who has counseled me;
Indeed, my mind instructs me in the night.
I have set the Lord continually before me;
Because He is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.
Therefore my heart is glad and my glory rejoices;
My flesh also will dwell securely.
For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol;
Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay.
You will make known to me the path of life;
In Your presence is fullness of joy;
In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.
(Psalms 16:7-11)

Who in his right mind would *not* desire that?

But we only truly experience that joy, that pleasure, when we rightly come to Him in reverent fear. So we take *delight* in that holy fear.

SESSION 16: NEHEMIAH 2:1-10: *Audience*

PREFACE

It is human nature—especially when young—to assume that things have always been as they are now.

- Some alive today may think that dialing a telephone has always entailed pushing buttons; who knows, there may even be some who think it has always involved fingers pressing a flat screen.
- Some alive today may think that images on television screens have always been in color.
- Some alive today may think that the United States has always consisted of fifty states—and they might especially be unaware that there was a time when the “United States” was even spoken of in the plural, rather than the singular.
- And some alive today (especially those on the left side of the aisle) may think that the government of these United States is comprised of not three, but just one institution: an imperial president.

So it is not surprising that when we think back not just decades, not just centuries, but *millennia* in time, we may not have a firm grasp of what life was like. Compound this by placing the scene within the culture of a king’s palace, and we are, not surprisingly, truly ignorant.

v1

Read Nehemiah 2:1.

We can be forgiven if we imagine that Chapter One of Nehemiah flows smoothly and immediately into Chapter Two. But actually about four months separate the two.

Read Nehemiah 1:1.

At the opening of Chapter Two, about four months have passed since Nehemiah closed his prayer. And this might seem odd to us; one would think that after that prayer, Nehemiah was primed to march right in and put his entreaty to the king. But there are a number of reasons why he would not do this.

- The first and perhaps easiest explanation could be that the king was no longer in Susa, but was back in Babylon for some reason.
- Perhaps other cupbearers—of which Nehemiah was just one—were on duty.
- Nehemiah may have been waiting for the king to be in a more receptive mood. The king had many irons in the fire, and Nehemiah was waiting for a more auspicious occasion, when the odds were better for the king to be generous. (We might think, *Hey, he should just trust in God and go in and get the job done.* But perhaps the counsel Nehemiah was receiving from the Lord was, *Wait. The time is not right.*)

We are utterly ignorant of what it was like then to be in the presence of a sovereign ruler. We cannot even compare it to the kings and queens of today; chances are good that even if you displease the Queen of England during an audience, she won’t chop off your head. But remember the story of Esther: She showed true courage by entering the throne room of her husband without being sent for—even though she was the queen, Artaxerxes was within his right to have her put to death for this offense. The deference showed to a sovereign reached what we might consider absurd levels. Yamauchi tells us that...

Persian works of art such as the great treasury reliefs from Persepolis indicate that those who came into the king’s presence [placed] the right hand with palm facing the mouth so as not to defile the king with one’s breath... Regardless one’s personal problems, the king’s servants were expected to keep their feelings hidden and to display a cheerful countenance before him.

Nehemiah tells us in v1 that so far he had done that—

Now I had not been sad in his presence.

—until now.

v2

One more point regarding why Nehemiah may have waited so long to bring this issue before the king.

Read Nehemiah 2:2.

Aside from letting his feelings show, what reason did he have for being so afraid? The Douay-Rheims Bible (the traditional Catholic Bible) translates this, quite accurately,

And I was seized with an exceeding great fear.

Nehemiah was *vehemently*—the word is translated elsewhere, *violently*—terrified. He was quaking in his boots. Why? Well, he had good reason to expect trouble if he made his request. As we've pointed out before, King Artaxerxes had already ordered that any restoration of the city walls was to stop. Cyrus and Darius before him had given permission for the *temple* to be rebuilt—but not the city walls. They wanted the *religion* of the Jews restored, but not a strong, fortified Jewish capital able to rebel against their Persian overlords. When he received a report that the Jews were beginning work on the city walls, Artaxerxes' sent his answer in Ezra 4:21.

"So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me."

Nehemiah was not just preparing to make a personal request of a powerful king, but he was going to ask him to reverse an earlier decree.

v3

Prefacing his remark with a standard way of addressing a sovereign, Nehemiah seems to blurt out the burden on his heart. Even so, he is being a bit crafty in the words he chooses.

Read Nehemiah 2:3.

...the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate

Question: Why do you think Nehemiah mentions his fathers' tombs?

Few things were as important to a king than his legacy. Note the picture of the Persian kings' tombs on p13 of your booklet. The common nightmare for any king was that his tomb would be desecrated and robbed. So Nehemiah mentioning this was surely a way to gain the king's empathy.

v4

And now we come to one of the most eloquent verses on prayer in Scripture.

Read Nehemiah 2:4.

Nehemiah knew *exactly* what he wanted to request of the king; he didn't need to consult "the God of heaven" for advice on that. And the actual content of his prayer is not even the issue. **The important thing is *that he prayed*.**

Let's let this percolate for a moment.

- How many times have we thought, "I need to pray about this when I get home"?
- Or, "If I pray right now, somebody will think I'm weird."
- Or, "I haven't time for this right now."

Professor Adeney, draws a connection between the longer prayer of Chapter One and the brief, silent entreaty of Chapter Two. He writes this in the *Expositor's Bible Commentary*:

Such a sudden uplifting of the soul to God is the most real of all prayers. This at least is genuine and heartfelt, whatever may be the case with the semiliturgical composition the thought and beauty of which engaged our attention in the previous chapter. But then the man who can thus find God in a moment must be in the habit of frequently resorting to the Divine Presence; like the patriarchs, he must be walking with God. The brief and sudden prayer reaches heaven as an arrow suddenly shot from the bow, but it goes right home, because he who lets it off in his surprise is a good marksman, well practised. This ready prayer only springs to the lips of a man who lives in a daily habit of praying. We must associate the two kinds of prayer in order to account for that which is now before us. The deliberate exercises of adoration, confession, and petition prepare for the one sudden [exclamation]. There we see the deep river which supplies the sea of devotion from which the momentary prayer is cast up as the spray of a wave. Therefore it was in a great measure on account of his deliberate and unwearying daily prayers that Nehemiah was prepared with his quick cry to God in the crisis of need. We may compare his two kinds of prayer with our Lord's full and calm intercession in John 17:1-26 and the short agonised cry from the cross. In each case we feel that the sudden

appeal to God in the moment of dire necessity is the most intense and penetrating prayer. Still we must recognise that this comes from a man who is much in prayer. The truth is that beneath both of these prayers—the calm, meditative utterance, and the simple cry for help—there lies the deep, true essence of prayer, which is no thing of words at all, but which lives on, even when it is voiceless.

This indicates that Nehemiah understands the true order of things. Before him sits Artaxerxes Longimanus, King of Persia, King of Babylon, the Great King, Pharaoh of Egypt, his master, employer, and lord, in whose hands is his very life. He is under obligation to answer his king forthwith.

But Nehemiah recognizes a *higher* king. He calls upon not a king of a place, but *the* king of the universe—the king of *everything*.

Perhaps that is at the root of our embarrassment about when or where we pray. Perhaps there is still some small part of us that has skewed priorities—that the things of this world are somehow more important, or more powerful, or more intimidating, than the Lord of eternity.

Nehemiah knew that Artaxerxes held his life in his hands. But he also knew that the “God of heaven” held his *eternal* life in *His* hands.

v5

So after Nehemiah prayed, this is how he answered the king:

Read Nehemiah 2:5.

The scene is probably some sort of banquet, rather than the formal throne room. “Wine was before” the king; the queen is seated next to him; his belly is full and instead of being preoccupied with affairs of state, he notices his cupbearer’s sad expression.

Sidebar: By the way, here is a lesson for everyone who serves under a boss. Notice how he addresses the king here and in v7: “If it please the king...” Even though Nehemiah answers to a King far greater than Artaxerxes, he is gracious and respectful toward his earthly boss.

And the king has a gracious way of answering Nehemiah in the affirmative.

Read Nehemiah 2:6.

Many decades ago, when I was but a young lad and a musician in the navy, I was attending the Navy School of Music before being shipped out with a band. I was part of a group that had been in the boot camp Drum and Bugle Corps together. Once we were at the School of Music in Virginia we tried to form a rock band. We met with a lot of resistance from the powers that be; nothing like that had been done before (sort of like suggesting something new in a church!). But, remarkably, once we finally convinced them and they gave in, the floodgates of the bureaucracy opened up, and we had anything we wanted: our own rehearsal room, sound gear, a Hammond organ, time away from classes. And so was formed the very first, official, Navy Rock Band, with yours truly as the lead singer.

That is how God answers prayer some times. When the time is right—*His* time—He opens the floodgates and provides everything we need. That is what He did for the original returning exiles, that is what He did for Ezra, and that is what He did for Nehemiah.

Artaxerxes could have answered Nehemiah’s request with, “OK, I’ll let you go, but you’re on your own—and be back right away. I need you here.”

In vs7-8 Nehemiah boldly requests

- letters of passage bearing the mark of the king, so the governors of the provinces will know he has the authority of the throne;
- a letter ordering the keeper of the king's forest to supply reinforcing timbers for the city walls, the fortress, and even Nehemiah's own dwelling.

And because God's hand was orchestrating all of this, the king just nodded his head in agreement to everything, like someone being manipulated by Jedi mind tricks.

v9-10

Without ceremony in v9 we suddenly find Nehemiah on the road and presenting his letters of authority to the governors of the provinces. And just like the U.S. Navy, we learn that Artaxerxes granted Nehemiah even more than he originally asked.

Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen.

Some might wonder if this speaks to a lack of faith in Nehemiah. Remember, Ezra had purposely not requested a military escort, thinking this might diminish his witness of dependence on "the hand of our God" (Ezra 8:22). But as Professor Adeney points out,

Nehemiah came straight from the court, where he had been a favourite servant of the king, and he was now made the official governor of Jerusalem. It was only in accordance with custom that he should have an escort assigned him when he went to take possession of his district. Then, probably to save time, Nehemiah would travel by the perilous desert route through Tadmor, and thus cover the whole journey in about two months—a route which Ezra's heavy caravan may have avoided.

V10 should have an accompanying soundtrack, expressing impending doom. Here are introduced the two principal villains of the piece: Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official.

Read v10.

We will get to know both of these guys better as the story unfolds, but for right now, though he is not officially named such, Sanballat was the governor of Samaria—Nehemiah's chief nemesis and the leader of the region causing the resettled Jews the most problems.

These two will be thorns in Nehemiah's side all the time he is in Jerusalem.

SESSION 17: NEHEMIAH 2:9-19 : Leader

PREFACE

Very often leaders contribute not absent skills, but motivation; they supply not missing abilities, but inspiration. It would be wrong to think that the Jews were physically incapable of restoring the walls of their city until Nehemiah showed up. They already had everything needed to get the job done—everything, that is, except a leader.

THE ANTAGONISTS

In every chapter of the resettling and rebuilding of Judah, the returning exiles have met with opposition—and mostly from the same precincts. Now that he is in Jerusalem, Nehemiah is going to meet a few of them.

Sanballat the Horonite

In v2:9 we learn that Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite received advance notice of Nehemiah's arrival. They probably were tipped off by their contacts with the provincial governors beyond the river as Nehemiah passed through their areas.

Sanballat's name derives from the name of the Akkadian moon god, Sin; his name means "Sin has given life."

There is general agreement that "Horonite" refers to either upper or lower Beth-horon ([bayth kho-rone'](#)), as either his place of residence or his ancestral town—my guess is the latter. Scripture does not tell us so, but we know from other sources that Sanballat was the governor of Samaria at the time, and while [earlier maps place Beth-horon just inside the border of Samaria, the map on p11 of your booklet shows the border further north. Along the western border of Judah, locate Gezer; just to the right, about midway between Gezer and Mizpah, would be the site of upper and lower \(altitude\) Beth-horon.](#) But at this time he surely dwells well within the border of Samaria—probably at Shechem or the city of Samaria.

Both Sanballat's name—"Sin has given life"—and Beth-horon—"house of hollowness" (or "the hollows")—have straightforward meanings. But in light of his character and actions in this account, they are symbolic descriptions of the man. He was a sinful man of hollow character.

Tobiah the Ammonite

On the surface, at least, Tobiah sounds a little better. His name means "Yahweh is good." The description of him translated "official," is—as the KJV and ESV have it—literally servant or even slave. This could be just an innocuous way of speaking of someone serving the Persian king, or, as others surmise, he could be a freed slave, now serving as an official of the court. In any case, he is probably the governor of Ammon. [You'll find it on the map in your booklet on p14—across the Jordan, just NE of Judah \(under the "D" in "Desert:\).](#)

There's nothing new under the sun ([Ecclesiastes 1:10](#)). The sentiment of these two governors could have been lifted from today's headlines.

...it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.

And just as in Nehemiah's time, when someone whose name includes "Yahweh" could hate the Jews, there are Jews today in the United States that hate Israel.

NEHEMIAH ARRIVES

So now we pick up the narrative in v11.

Read Nehemiah 2:11-12.

Just as his predecessor, Ezra ([Ezra 8:32](#)), Nehemiah rests for three days after his long journey from Susa to Jerusalem. And right off the bat we are witness to his intelligence and wisdom—examples of which we will see throughout this book. He didn't barge in, slap down his credentials and announce, "I'm the new governor,

come to rebuild the walls of this city. Let's get to work!" No, without telling anyone why he is there, he quietly, surreptitiously (at night!) scopes out the situation.

A good executive does his homework. What if Nehemiah had first of all announced his plans; the obvious first response would have been, "OK, what are your plans?" "Well, I don't really know yet. I need check things out first, then I'll get back to you." How much better to quietly get all his ducks in order *first*, then announce his intentions. After his prayer life, the second enviable quality of Nehemiah is his organizational, managerial skills. So first of all he conducts an inspection tour, which is itemized in vs13-15.

REPORT

Nehemiah kept all this close to his vest until he was ready to speak to the officials. Which is now.

Read Nehemiah 2:17.

There is a fascinating word-play going on in this verse. Here Nehemiah says,

"...let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a **reproach**."

Look at v1:3.

"The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and **reproach**..."

Do you remember the story found in 1 Chronicles 19, where King David sent a group of messengers on a goodwill mission to Hanun, the new king of Ammon, upon the death of his father. The father had shown kindness to David, so he wanted to return the favor to the man's son. But the messengers were treated as spies and badly treated.

So Hanun took David's servants and shaved them and cut off their garments in the middle as far as their hips, and sent them away. (1 Chronicles 19:4)

David was incensed when he heard about this, and ultimately went to war over it (that's how big a deal this was). But in the meantime...

...he sent to meet them, for the men were greatly humiliated. And the king said, "Stay at Jericho until your beards grow, and then return." (1 Chronicles 19:5b)

reproach, disgrace^{niv} = *herpa* (kher-paw') = from <H2778> (charaph); contumely, **disgrace**, **the pudenda** :- rebuke, reproach (-fully), **shame**. (Pudenda are the external genitalia for either sex.)

Nehemiah's use of this word in 2:17 and 1:3 expresses the depth of embarrassment and shame felt by the exiles. On a practical level it was not good that the city remained unprotected, but to the Jews it was more than that: they felt shamefully *exposed*. In the Jewish culture to be naked was a shameful thing. That was part of the shame of the cross: Jesus was stripped naked for the execution.

(Some scholars are of the opinion that nudity was so shameful to the ancient Jews that their idea of being "naked" meant to have their equivalent of underwear on—that is, naked to them was not literally naked.)

FIRST OPPOSITION

When Nehemiah sweetened his pitch by pointing out that not only had King Artaxerxes sanctioned this work of rebuilding the walls, but that "the hand of my God has been favorable to me," the response of the leaders was enthusiastic: "Let us arise and build!" *Let's get going! Right now!*

The best literal translation of the last sentence is in the KJV:

So they **strengthened** their hands for *this* good work.

put^{nasb}, **set**^{nkjv}, **strengthened**^{kjv,esv} their hands = *hazaq* (khaw-zak') = a primitive root; **to fasten upon**; hence **to seize, be strong** (figurative *courageous, causative strengthen, cure, help, repair, fortify*), *obstinate; to bind, restrain, conquer*

:- aid, amend, × calker, catch, cleave, confirm, be constant, constrain, continue, be of good (take) courage (-ous, -ly), encourage (self), be established, fasten, force, fortify, make hard, harden, help, (lay) hold (fast), lean, maintain, play the man, mend, become (wax) mighty, prevail, be recovered, repair, retain, seize, be (wax) sore, strengthen (self), be stout, be (make, shew, wax) strong (-er), be sure, take (hold), be urgent, behave self valiantly, withstand.

That is, they vigorously, energetically set to the work at hand—the “good” work. (As is often the case, the NIV is mushy with “**began** this good work.”

But now, entering stage left, are the villains of the piece—and they’ve brought along with them a new character.

Read Nehemiah 2:19.

These three “mocked us and despised us.” Again, the NIV is too soft with “ridiculed.” We can see and hear this even today, during the conflict between Israel and Hamas. The idiot left does not just disagree with or condemn the *actions* of the Jews—they hate their guts; they find the *people* of Israel contemptible. Like Hamas, they wish the Jewish people were just wiped off the face of the earth. As God warned millenia ago, they are *despised*.

Sidebar: Christians today should be taking note of Israel’s response to today’s manifestation of this hate; we can learn from their example. In John 15 Jesus tells His disciples:

“If the world hates you, you know that it has hated Me before it *hated* you. If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.” (John 15:18-19)

Israel today—at least under the leadership of Bibbi Netanyahu—does not care what the world thinks of them; they are going to do whatever is necessary to defend themselves. Christians need to learn that lesson; we need to stop trying to get along with the world and just stand for what we know to be right. They will never love us; get over it.

Geshem the Arab

Now, who is this “Geshem the Arab”? He will show up again in Chapter Six. And you might rightly ask, “Where did *this* guy come from?”

The date is now August 445 BC. [Turn to the time line on p6 in your booklet.](#) Almost 300 years earlier, back around 710 BC, Sargon II (Assyrian King after Shalmaneser V) recorded in an inscription after one of his military campaigns,

The tribes of Tamud, Ibadid, Marsimanu and Haiapa, distant Arabs, who inhabit the desert, who know neither high nor low officials, and who had not brought their tribute to any king—with the weapon of the god Assur, my lord, I struck them down, the remnant of them I deported and settled them in Samaria.

Geshem is certainly a descendant of those earlier immigrants, and now in cahoots with Sanballat and Tobiah.

“Are you rebelling against the king?”

Note their disingenuous attack: Hearing of his coming by their contacts with the other governors, they certainly knew that Nehemiah came with letters from Artaxerxes. So this was a bogus accusation.

But once again I am impressed with the way Nehemiah is handling this. If I were writing this script, at this moment I’d have Nehemiah produce the letters from the king, unscroll them in his accuser’s faces, and answer, “These prove I am on the side of the king. Whose side are *you* on?” But I am not writing this story; the Lord is. Look at how Nehemiah answers.

Read Nehemiah 2:20.

Even though he carries in his pocket the permission of the king, and even though I'm sure he realizes that the authority of King Artaxerxes will carry more weight with his opponents—he does not fall back on human authority. The weapon he brandishes is the authority of *elohim shamayim*—"the God of heaven"—the God of all the universe.

The Jews in Jerusalem had success rebuilding the walls of the city because Nehemiah was their leader. Nehemiah had success in all he did because the Lord God was *his* leader.

I would like to close by reading Psalm 20.

Read Psalm 20.

SESSION 18: NEHEMIAH 2:20-3:32 : Work Begins!

PREFACE

Whenever God's word presents us with a passage or chapter that, at least on the surface, seems trivial or boring, our first instinct should be not to pass lightly over it—or worse, skip it all together—but to understand that God has included it for a *purpose*—*His* purpose—and resolve to glean from it as much as we can.

Chapter 3 of Nehemiah is just such a passage. On its surface it seems to be a monotonous, pedantic jobs list of who did what in the rebuilding of Jerusalem's city wall. But the Spirit of God has penned it for a reason: for our good. Thus we are to dig in and glean that good, and profit from it.

2:20

We left Nehemiah, at the end of Chapter 2, saying something similar to what Zerubbabel, the governor of Judah, had said earlier.

Read Ezra 4:1-3.

Now those in opposition to the restoration of Jerusalem are no longer offering to help; they want it stopped.

Read Nehemiah 2:19.

The governor's reply was direct and pointed.

Read Nehemiah 2:20.

That is, *You have nothing to do with this. Take a hike.*

Both Ezra and Nehemiah understood that when God calls us to a task we must remain single-minded in its execution, and we must not let dissenters, or even the well-intentioned outsider, pull us off track. Back when we studied Ezra 4 I offered the illustration of permitting for a while a non-believer in our company of actors. She had many good qualities for the stage, but ultimately I realized that none of them were worth more than the spiritual integrity of the company.

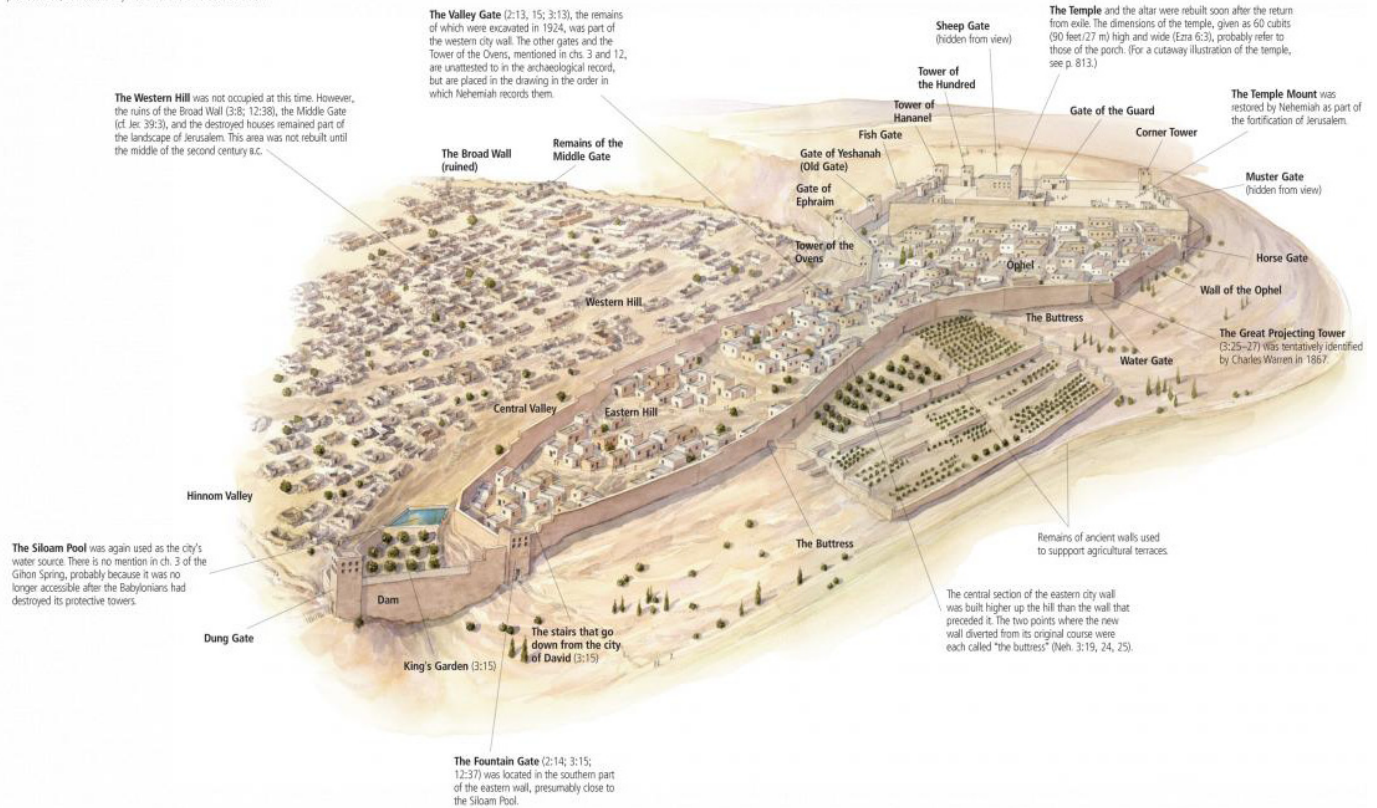
Both Ezra and Nehemiah know that the returning Jews were in a precarious position, vulnerable, unsteady on their feet, unsure of tomorrow. The two leaders are determined to protect the integrity of the resurgent Jewish community. Outsiders—and especially those in clear opposition to the task at hand—must be removed. This will be a recurring theme in the book of Nehemiah.

The illustrations on the following page should help as we proceed through Chapter 3. The first is a painting of Jerusalem in the time of Nehemiah with the walls restored; the second is a diagram of the walls showing the gates and structures mentioned in the passage and an aerial photograph of Jerusalem; my best guess is that the photo dates from the early to mid 20th century. I have outlined the approximate location of the Nehemiah-era walls.

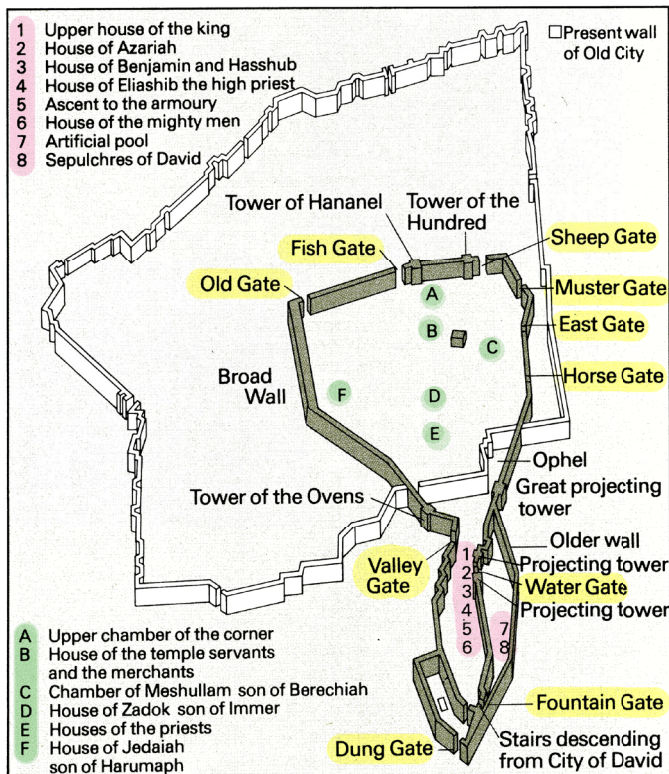
JERUSALEM IN THE TIME OF NEHEMIAH (C. 444–420? B.C.)

Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 B.C. Upon their return from exile in 536 B.C., the Jews, under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua, first restored the altar and then laid the foundation of the temple. Twenty years later, in 516 B.C., the temple was rebuilt. This time period is referred to as the Second Temple period. Later on, and under very difficult circumstances, Nehemiah restored the city wall. This is described in great detail in ch. 3. There is ample archaeological evidence, both positive and negative, to show that only the Eastern Hill of Jerusalem was fortified at that time and that the eastern wall of the city was built higher up the slope than the previous wall, so that the city was smaller than that of Solomon.

The Tower of Hananel, the Tower of the Hundred, the Sheep Gate, the Gate of the Guard, and the Corner Tower added strength to the northern wall of the Temple Mount, which also served as the northern city wall in this area.



Jerusalem Walls



CHAPTER 3

We begin, in v1, at the upper right-hand corner, at the Sheep Gate, and the text takes us around the circuit of the wall counter-clockwise.

It says a lot about the people that the first to roll up their sleeves and get to work are the priests; the high priest Eliashib leads the way.

Read v1.

How appropriate it is that the priests are assigned the gate where the sheep for the temple sacrifices would be brought into the city. This would have been just north of and to the rear of the temple complex. And in fact, different from every other gate mentioned, *this* gate was “consecrated, sanctified”—they set it apart as something holy, clean.

Sidebar: The wall and gates were rebuilt by the common folk from all walks of life—people from Jerusalem and other cities such as Jericho, Tekoa, Gibeon, and Mizpah. Viggo Olsen points out the absence of professionals—that there were priests, goldsmiths, perfumers, and women who did the work, but, surprisingly no experts are listed: stonemasons, carpenters, bricklayers. One would imagine they were there, but none are specifically listed.

Between the Sheep and Fish gates the men of Jericho worked, while the sons of Hassenaah rebuilt the Fish Gate. The men of Tekoa were hard workers, pulling double duty: In v5 they are working along the north wall...

Read v5a.

Moreover, next to him the Tekoites made repairs...

and later, in v27, they worked on the lower eastern wall.

Read v27.

After them the Tekoites repaired another section in front of the great projecting tower and as far as the wall of Ophel.

But the same could not be said for their betters:

Read v5b.

NKJV ...but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord.

ESV ...but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord. [or lord (a-don’)]

Read v11.

“Ovens,” as in bakery ovens, is preferred over “Furnaces.”

Everyone turned to; it was an egalitarian crew.

- In v8 there are goldsmiths and perfumers.
- In v9 “the official of half the district of Jerusalem”—if this were Chicago he would be called the local alderman—made repairs.
- In v12 another alderman was in charge of a crew that included his daughters. By the way, it says he was “Shallum, the son of Hallohesh”; Yamauchi points out that Hallohesh is not a proper name, but a word meaning “whisperer”—i.e., snake charmer or an enchanter.

Now in v13 we are down to the Valley Gate in the lower western wall, and those who installed it continued on to the Dung Gate—a remarkable distance of one thousand cubits = 500 hundred yards, or 1,720 feet = more than five football fields! We might safely assume that this portion of the walls was less damaged than others.

Another official, Malchijah son of Rechab, took responsibility for repairs to the Dung Gate in v14. Rounding the corner and heading back up the hill, in v15 another official took charge of the Fountain Gate and the repair of walls around the original king’s garden and Pool of Shelah, or Siloam.

Sidebar: The pattern seems to be that *communities*, rather than *individuals* or family groups, were given responsibility for the repair of the gates, whereas individuals and families would work on the walls—especially around their houses.

The Nehemiah of v16 is a different Nehemiah. The work itemized in vs16-27 all takes place in the lower section of the eastern wall, south of the Horse Gate.

I just want to point out one discrepancy between the NASB and NKJV in v20. Bear with me; this may, at first, seem like I am picking nits, but an examination of the difference in translation may give us some insight into these workers and the job they are doing.

Read v20.

zealously^{nasb,niv} **earnestly**^{nkjv}, **carefully**^{nkjv} = *hara* (khaw-raw') = **to glow or grow warm**; figurative (usually) to *blaze up*, of **anger, zeal, jealousy** :- be angry, burn, be displeased, × **earnestly, fret self**, grieve, be (wax) hot, be incensed, kindle, × very, be wroth. See <H8474> (*tacharah*).

“Carefully”?! This seems to be more an *antonym* than a synonym. I still don’t have an explanation for this translation. But digging into the word reveals something interesting.

We can easily picture someone having zeal for their work rebuilding the walls and gates of Jerusalem. Perhaps it is a spiritual passion that drives them; perhaps a sense of civic or tribal duty. But the way this same Hebrew word is translated in Jeremiah gives us an additional perspective.

Read Jeremiah 12:5.

NASB, NIV, ESV: compete
KJVS: contend

Now this is a different color. Have you ever noticed—either as a spectator or a participant—the phenomenon of two or more men working together on a project? (I don’t know if it is the same for women; my guess is that it is not, since the phenomenon seems to be a testosterone effect.)

One man working alone will pace himself and take a break once in a while. But add another into the mix and now things have changed. Most men do not want to appear a shirker around other men: He will take fewer breaks and will push himself to make sure he is holding up his end. He will pick up or carry items heavier than he would if he were working by himself.

I believe it is less machismo than just not wanting to let the team down.

I can imagine this was the working environment at the Jerusalem wall. As the word is translated in Jeremiah, there was probably a healthy *competition* between the men and women, between the different groups and types of people. They unconsciously pushed each other to do more, to do better, to excel. This competition sparked an extra *zeal* in some to do more than they might have imagined possible in themselves.

[Back to Nehemiah 3.](#)

Read v26.

A word about “Ophel.” Although at this time it is a place name, the word means swelling, or bulge. In ancient times, when establishing a city certain strategic qualities were important: a water supply, for one, but also the city should be *defensible*. The ophel—the outcropping or ridge along the eastern side of the City of David—is what made the city defensible. Opinions differ on the precise extent of the ophel, but it is roughly along and to the immediate north of the City of David—that is, the lower (and oldest) part of old Jerusalem.

In v28 we are now at the Horse Gate, which was the principal gate for leaving the city to descend into the Kidron Valley, and the priests are restoring the wall to the north of this gate, “each in front of his house.”

By v32 we are back where we started, around the Sheep Gate.

Read v32.

CONCLUSION

The work on the wall and the gates is not completed, but only just begun. Work will not only continue, but we will see in the next chapter that because of the opposition, and very real threat of attack, progress will slow as the builders will be reduced to working one-handed, as they carry their weapon with them, and some of the crews will be cut in half, as some laborers carry weapons instead of tools.

But the work *will* continue.

You might say, “Well, that’s very nice, but what does it have to do with us today? Where’s the theology? Where’s the doctrine? Where’s the teaching?”

At least once a year this church holds a Saturday Work Day. I recall one in particular when this building and grounds was a veritable hive of activity. It seemed as if the entire church body had turned out to work. Men, women, youth—quick work was made of needed repairs, painting, cleaning, polishing, improvements. And it was an egalitarian crew; the workers were from all walks of life: different vocations, different skills, different gifts. All were contributed for the good of the whole. It was glorious—and *that* is the contemporary picture of Nehemiah 3.

But not every church Work Day has been like that. More often than not the attendance has been sparse, and many jobs of the list have gone uncompleted. There are, of course, many valid reasons that some have not participated—and I am not here to cast stones. But perhaps the next time a Work Day is called, it would do each of us good to reread Nehemiah 3:3-5.

Also the sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate; they laid its beams and hung its doors with its bolts and bars.

And next to them Meremoth the son of Urijah, the son of Koz, made repairs. Next to them Meshullam the son of Berechiah, the son of Meshezabel, made repairs. Next to them Zadok the son of Baana made repairs.

Next to them the Tekoites made repairs—but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord.

SESSION 19: NEHEMIAH 4 : *Diligence & Trust*

PREFACE

Believers—be they believers in Christ Jesus, or the ancient believers in Yahweh—have a different perspective on life. There is an added dimension to their daily life that is missing in that of the nonbeliever.

Last week Beth offered praise to God because she had been able to mow her lawn and weed her garden. Now, the unbeliever would hear that and conclude that she had lost her mind. “*You* did all the work! What does God have to do with it—and why should *He* get any credit for something *you* did?”

But the believer understands.

After building our barn—after driving every nail and screw, erecting every wall, lifting every rafter, nailing down every shingle ourselves during a hot and humid summer—we offered praise and thanksgiving to *God* for it. The unbeliever would just shake his head and declare us insane.

But the believer understands.

Nehemiah is a believer. Calling upon the Lord is as natural to him as breathing. And even after he has organized his men with weapons, having them stand watch in defense of the half-built Jerusalem wall, he declares, “Our **God** will fight for us.”

In Chapter 3, last week, everyone turned to rebuilding the city wall and gates. Chapter Four of Nehemiah is a beautiful picture of a determined, resilient community, willing to do anything to defend their city against mounting opposition—yet all the while understanding that ultimately the battle is the Lord’s.

vs1-3

In Nehemiah 4, our story opens not in Jerusalem but in Samaria. Sanballat, the Samaritan governor, is presiding over a gathering of his kinsmen, or fellow leaders, and the leaders of the military [this last favored over the NASB “wealthy men”(K&D); the word means a force].

On receiving word that the Jews had started work on the wall (v1), Sanballat is incensed, furious. [furious = “zealous” in v3:20 (*hara*)—i.e., Sanballat burned with anger.]

Listening in on the conversation one is immediately taken back to the days of junior high. The snotty diatribes by Sanballat and Tobiah sound like nothing more than that of pimply faced teenage bullies standing around their lockers, jeering at the kids with better grade-points.

Read Nehemiah 4:2-3 (NIV).

...and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?”

Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!”

What a sad group of losers.

vs4-8

And what was Nehemiah’s response when he heard of this? The same response he almost always had: he turned to the Lord.

Read Nehemiah 4:4-5 (ESV or NKJV).

That is, “Do to *them*, O God, what they want to do to us. And while You’re at it, send *them* off into captivity, and let a nation plunder their wealth as ours was. Don’t even consider forgiving their offense, which is diametrically opposed to Your will in Judah.”

In a sense, Nehemiah is still the good manager, the good organizer. He has his hands full at the walls of Jerusalem, organizing work crews, keeping everyone fed, keeping everyone safe. So he delegates: Sanballat and Tobiah must be dealt with; “God, *You* do it. *You* see to those evil men.”

You see the distribution of responsibilities in the next verse: Nehemiah has left responsibility for the enemy in God’s hands; “There. Done. So *we* built the wall...”

Read v6.

With the one exception of the nobles of Tekoa, I’m impressed by the spirit of these people. The text says they had a heart, or mind, for it—intellectually, emotionally, from the very *center* of their being they *wanted* to do the work. Bribery, coercion, arm-twisting was not necessary.

And now that the wall is completed to half its height, the opposition gets serious. While gaps remained in the wall, the surrounding enemy held out hope, but now they begin making their plans to physically intervene.

Read v8.

vs9-10

In the response of Nehemiah we again see balance: dependence on God coupled with human responsibility.

Read v9.

Think of v10 as a song the workers would sing as they are working, day after day in the sun, growing weary and, at times, frustrated.

I confess that my interpretation of the poem in v10 does not agree with any of the commentators at my disposal, but it appears, at least, to agree with the ESV translation. The NASB *hints* at my interpretation:

Read v10.

And we ourselves are unable to rebuild the wall.

It is that “ourselves” that hints at my interpretation. The KJVs and the NIV just say flat out, we are not able—or cannot—build the wall. That sounds like the voice of futility. “Governor, you want us to rebuild the wall, but we can’t do it!”

But I think the song is less one of futility than dependence on God. “We *ourselves*...” That is, we can’t do it *by ourselves*. We need help—and the ESV translation makes the point even more clearly.

“The strength of those who bear the burdens is failing. There is too much rubble. **By ourselves** we will not be able to rebuild the wall.”

All the commentators interpret this as a song of woe, but I contend the workers are taking a cue from their governor Nehemiah and are declaring, “We can’t rebuild the wall by ourselves—but we don’t have to! The Lord is on our side.”

Here is another song those workers could have sung:

Read Psalm 118:10-14.

vs11-14

I wouldn't be at all surprised to hear that Nehemiah had his spies in Samaria to keep him informed. But he also had the outlying people of Judah with their ears to the ground. From one or more of these sources he learned that the opposition was dead serious about stopping the work.

Read Nehemiah 4:11-13.

"Ten times" is an idiom meaning "time and again"—that is, repeatedly.

And speaking of "repeatedly," Nehemiah keeps mixing earthly common sense with heavenly common sense: He places weapons in the hands of the people and stations them at the most vulnerable points along the wall; this is not panic or fear, just a practical response to the situation. This is combined with a practical, common sense reliance on God. In v14 he tells them,

"Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives and your houses."

vs15-18

Read Nehemiah 4:15.

The Samaritans had their own spies, and were told by them that the Jews had learned of their plans. They had counted on the element of surprise; now that had fallen apart.

Did Nehemiah credit his spies? Did he credit their weaponry and manpower? No, he credited God.

Even so, the governor knew that the threat was still there, and they had to be ready. So he organized things so rebuilding and defense were fused together.

Read Nehemiah 4:16-18.

vs19-20

...while the trumpeter stood near me.

What's this all about? Why does the governor keep a trumpeter nearby? This is my favorite passage in this chapter: It is an eloquent example of how Nehemiah combines the earthly and the heavenly.

I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another. At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there."

What a great idea! The workers are spread out over the circumference of the wall—something like 2 to 2.5 miles—and the sound of a trumpet would carry far better than the human voice.

In the movie *Witness*, in which a Philadelphia detective takes refuge among the Pennsylvania Amish, there is great distance between farmhouses—and they don't have telephones. A human voice would not carry to the next farm if help were needed, so each farmhouse has a bell. When neighbors hear that bell, they drop everything and come running.

For the Jews in Jerusalem, it would be the sound of a trumpet.

But there is an unexpected punchline—and I love the fact that the KJV sets it off with a *colon*.

In what place therefore ye hear the sound of the trumpet, resort ye thither unto us: our God shall fight for us.

When you hear the trumpet, come running toward the sound. To what end? What's going to happen when you do this? Our God will fight for us. The narrative is clearly a call to arms, but in reality it is a call to be a witness—a spectator, as it were—to see what the Lord would do for them. Amazing. What a guy this Nehemiah is. What faith!

vs21-23

So that we don't end our study on the minutia of the strange last three words of the Hebrew text of this chapter, I want to mention it now. The last three (Hebrew) words of this chapter translated literally mean "each man his weapon the water." Translators have interpreted this "notoriously difficult" text in different ways, and for our purpose we don't need to get lost in the details.

I was amused that the ESV just glosses over it, not mentioning water at all:

each kept his weapon at his right hand.

But that's the nub of it, really. The point of it is not what the water is, or what it is being used for; the point is that at Nehemiah's order the workers and defenders kept their weapons always at hand—no matter *what* they were doing.

Read Nehemiah 4:21-23.

Governor Nehemiah organized the men of Judah into an efficient force that both defended and built the city of Jerusalem—and his genius was that with all the emphasis on manpower, weaponry, and human organization, Nehemiah repeatedly pointed everyone toward a dependency on, and trust in, *God's* working.

CLOSING DISCUSSION

In our time remaining I would like to open a discussion on this challenge of human effort vs. God's work.

- What is the proper balance between the two? Nehemiah is masterful at balancing human effort with a dependence on God.
- Where is the dividing line? At what point does human effort go too far, minimizing or even squelching our trust in God?
- In contrast, can we leave too much to God? When does faith become laziness?

SESSION 20: NEHEMIAH 5 : *Usury*

PREFACE

Before we do anything else we need to nail down this concept of “usury” that comes up in Chapter 5 of Nehemiah. And, as is often the case, it is a bit slippery and not everyone is in agreement about it. Par for the course.

Read Psalm 15. (NIV or NKJV; *not* NASB)

What is “usury”? Well, fair warning: tracing this practice through God’s word has you chasing your tail in no time at all. The one thing that is consistent throughout is that the prohibition on usury was specifically Jew-to-Jew. A Jew could charge interest to a foreigner, and a Jew could *pay* interest to a foreigner.

Read Deuteronomy 23:19-20. (*not* KJV)

This passage makes it sound like no interest whatsoever was permitted. Yet we will see in vs10-11 of Chapter 5, Nehemiah and his men did.

A passage in Leviticus brings us closer to the difference between simple interest and usury.

Read Leviticus 25:35-38. (*not* NIV)

As is so often the case in God’s economy, it is less the actions than the *intent* that matters—the condition of the heart. God never told Israel that it was wrong to make a profit, to be a shopkeeper and show a profit at the end of the month. God never told Israel that they could not show an honest profit, and thus put food on the family table.

Here is an illustration that would have been typical in Israel:

1. Because of a drought a man loses his crop, so he cannot support his family;
2. he goes to someone for a loan;
3. the drought continues into the next year, and he is unable to pay back the loan;
4. to pay back the loan, he becomes an indentured servant to the person who loaned him the money;

So far, everything is fair. Usury, or “unjust gain” would be if the person to whom the poor man is indentured would then ***charge interest on top of the labor***. In which case the man would be stuck: as a servant, he would be unable to pay the interest, so he would be unable to ever leave the servitude—his debt would just keep accumulating.

Isaiah emphasizes this aspect of usury: the element of greed and lack of compassion in the one charging the interest.

Read Isaiah 56:9-11. (preferably NASB)

Read Isaiah 57:16-17.

That is the background for our study in Chapter 5 this morning.

VS1-5: THE COMPLAINT

[This passage is packed with application for us today. I suggest that instead of waiting to the end to make application, that you bring it home as we work through this episode. Every time we examine what was happening in Judah, apply it to *your* body of believers, *your* family of brothers and sisters—as well as your Christian brothers and sisters outside your immediate family (i.e., church).]

The people of Judah—even during the rebuilding of the city wall—brought a complaint to the governor about being mistreated by fellow Jews:

- v2: those who had no land of their own were running out of food (grain)—implied, they could not afford the usurious demands of those selling the grain;
- v3: a famine had reduced the viability of the land, so that landowners were forced to mortgage their property to buy grain;
- v4: the Persian king was demanding taxes from the provinces that the people could ill afford, so they were having to mortgage their lands and borrow money to pay those taxes—implied, at exorbitant rates;
- v5: the situation was so bad that people were selling their sons and daughters into slavery—slavery to fellow Jews—just to survive.

All of this was wrong on a number of levels:

- The financial demands were not just and fair—it was price gouging, taking advantage of people who had few options open to them.
- These demands were being made on fellow Jews, fellow countrymen, brothers and sisters in the faith.
- Land was changing hands in an unlawful manner—the Mosaic Law, that is.

Read Leviticus 25:23-28.

This was based on the fact that none of the land belonged to the individual in the first place; it belonged to the Lord. He had given it to the Jews as a dwelling place, but He still held the Deed. [\[just so with us\]](#) In a sense, when they cheated the poor out of their land, they were cheating God, the ultimate Landowner.

- Finally, think about it from their point of view: With joy and expectation the Jews had returned to the homeland from Babylon and other parts of the Persian empire. In exile they had not been enslaved; the Persians did not split up the families, taking the children from their parents. But now, back in the bosom of their homeland, their land was being taken from them, moneylenders were taking advantage of them, and families were being split apart. Real nice.

vs6-7: NEHEMIAH'S RESPONSE

I think this may be the first instance recorded in which Nehemiah's first response is *not* to reach out to the Lord.

Read vs6-7.

And I consulted with myself...

"my heart took counsel upon it" (K&D)

What Nehemiah did with the offenders seems to come from the sport of wrestling.

contended^{nasb}, rebuked^{kjvs}, brought charges^{esv} = or **ruwb**, roob; a primitive root; properly **to toss, i.e. grapple; mostly figurative to wrangle**, i.e. *hold a controversy*; (by implication) *to defend* :- adversary, chide, complain, contend, debate, x ever, x lay wait, plead, rebuke, strive, x thoroughly.

You are exacting usury...

I don't normally accept at face value what a commentator has to say about something. Typically they will cite chapter and verse; I read it for myself and, more often than not say, "Yes, I see that."

Regarding what the term "usury" means, Yamauchi states something for which he cites the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, a modern scholar, and a passage from the apocryphal Book of Ecclesiasticus. His position makes sense, but I was unable to back it up with Scripture. Even so I wanted to include it here.

The OT passages prohibiting the giving of loans at interest were not intended to prohibit commercial loans but rather the charging of interest to the impoverished so as to make a profit from the helplessness of one's neighbors.

[\[We might correlate that to the NT injunction against taking a fellow believer to court.\]](#)

The granting of loans is not condemned nor is the making of profit. But the OT condemns the greed and avarice that seeks a profit at the expense of people.

Professor Adeney concurs:

He was not contemplating those harmless commercial transactions by which, in our day, capital passes from one hand to another in a way of business that may be equally advantageous to borrower and lender.

vs8-13

So, after his initial rebuke, Nehemiah rounded up all the offenders and had a chat with them.

Read vs8-9.

We bought them *back* from the nations, and now you are illegally selling them again—to Jews!

Sidebar: I think the admonition is for the same purpose—both for the ancient Jews and modern Christians: We will be surrounded by those that hate us. We are to bind ourselves to each other in brotherly love both for mutual encouragement and strength, and as a witness to the nations.

Nehemiah encourages them to not just obey the letter of the law, but the *spirit* of the law—to do more than just what was required: give back the profit, *and* give back the property.

Read vs10-11.

the hundredth part of the money...

The wording of this makes it hard to understand, but this refers to the interest that had been charged: 1% per month, or 12% per annum—a very high interest rate at that time.

The lenders agreed, but the governor wanted to make it official. He called in the priests to witness the taking of an oath that everything would be returned. And then Nehemiah went a step further, employing a symbolic action to drive home the point even further.

Read v13.

GENEROSITY

Instead of pushing on to finish this chapter, let's spend the remainder of our time tracing this from then to now.

Read Deuteronomy 15:7-11.

It is clear from the tone of that passage that one is not to make a profit from loaning money or goods to those who are in desperate need—especially a brother or sister in the faith.

Jesus carried this into His Sermon on the Mount—extending it even to those *outside* the faith.

Read Luke 6:33-36.

The apostle Paul was uncharacteristically succinct when he summarized this in Galatians 6:2.

Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

And what is the "law of Christ"? Jesus gave it to His disciples shortly before He left them.

Read John 13:34-35.

Not only is that a commandment for us today, but it circles back to what the Lord was telling Israel. *You are to be distinctive. You are not to behave as the other nations. You are to witness to those nations in My name by holding to my Law and by loving each other.*

SESSION 21: NEHEMIAH 5 : A Life Lesson

PREFACE

In the remainder of Chapter 5 Nehemiah offers himself as an object lesson that stands in contrast to the tale of usury that precedes it. But let's first spend a moment in the NT.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:5-8.

Paul and his companions came to Thessalonica with a humility that belied their positions of authority as apostles. They did not browbeat anyone into submission, but rather lived submissively, gently to others. But they went further:

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:9-10.

They would not even partake of the apostolic privilege of being supported by those to whom they ministered. They worked at trades—for Paul, probably tent-making, or the manufacture of the tent material from animal hair and skins—to support themselves so as not to be a burden on the Thessalonians.

In his second letter to Thessalonica, Paul reminds them of this again, adding more details:

Read 2 Thessalonians 3:7-10.

Paul determined to practice what he preached. He determined to set an example for these people, demonstrating that the Christian life was not to be aimless, undisciplined, lazy. He placed the burden upon himself, rather than those in his charge, choosing not to take or accept what was rightfully his so as to be a living lesson for them.

Now please turn to Nehemiah 5.

Last week we looked at how some were taking advantage of the poverty of their fellow Jews by exacting usury—unjust profit. Governor Nehemiah put an end to this.

To back up a little, I confess that the meaning of his statement in v10 remains elusive:

Read Nehemiah 5:10.

- Was he saying that he *had* been making loans at interest, but now, to set an example, would stop? [\[NKJV, NASB, ESV\]](#)
- Or was he saying that although he had the right to, he had been making loans, but without interest? [\[NIV\]](#)
- Or (and this would lead into what he states in vs14-19) was he saying that he had been avoiding taking from the impoverished what was rightfully his? [\[KJV\]](#)

Just because it fits so nicely into the rest of the chapter, let's assume the last. This would make vs14-19 an *expansion* of what he stated in v10.

v14

Just like the apostle Paul about 500 years later, Nehemiah resolved to do without certain rights and privileges of a governor so as to be a life-lesson for the people of Judah.

Sidebar: Reading the narrative of Nehemiah it is easy to imagine it is being written on the spot—as if we are reading about things as they happen. But in v14 Nehemiah spills the beans, revealing that he wrote this considerably later, since v14 refers to the *completed* span of time for his first term as governor.

Read Nehemiah 5:14.

He refers to this in the last chapter.

Read Nehemiah 13:6.

So after twelve years in Judah he returned to the Persian king. But his heart remained in Judah, and he subsequently requested leave of the king to return—which was granted. [We do not know how long he stayed the second time.](#)

It would be hard to believe that the same person who recorded what we have in v14—someone not even taking advantage of the nominal rights granted him as governor, of having the people support him—could state in v10 that he had been, at the same time, charging them interest on loans. Doesn't compute.

This is why I favor the KJV for v10:

I likewise, and my brethren, and my servants, might exact of them money and corn: I pray you, let us leave off this usury.

v15

A healthy fear of God can cause us to do the *right* thing, or *not* do the wrong thing. It would seem in this instance that for Nehemiah it was both.

Read Nehemiah 5:15.

So far in this story of Ezra-Nehemiah, the first post-exile governor, Zerubbabel, has come off sounding pretty good. In fact in the prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah he is lauded. We cannot say, one way or another, whether Nehemiah includes him in this statement. But it is not hard to imagine that between Zerubbabel and Nehemiah—a span of 92 years—there were less-righteous governors who were only too happy to collect what was due them.

After v14, this paragraph is book-ended by Nehemiah's relationship with and devotion to God. Every aspect of his life was ruled by that relationship. When he chose *not* to do something, it was because of his fear of God:

But I did not do so because of the fear of God. (v15b)

And when he decided *to* do something, it was because he knew his God was watching:

Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people. (v19)

Nehemiah's was a life that did not just know God on Sunday mornings; that life walked in close fellowship with God every day of the week.

Every person on earth bears allegiance to a god. For most, I believe, that god is "self," for that is how we are hard-wired at birth. In the believer the Holy Spirit moves in and the first thing He does is cut those wires; He severs the "god-circuit," interrupting our worship of self. He then begins building a *new* "God-circuit" that leads not from self to self, but from self to the true God. But the current of devotion is strong; it is a powerful impulse in the human—so strong that it sometimes bridges the gap of that severed connection, and once again we devote ourselves to ourselves. Whenever this occurs in the believer, the Spirit moves to block that spurious connection, and He re-aims the current toward the new and better circuit. In the spiritually mature, that old circuit has withered into obsolescence; the wire is corroded, eroded, and will no longer carry any charge at all. Meanwhile, the *new* circuit crafted by the Spirit is solid and pulsing with energy. All devotion, all allegiance, all worship is now routed toward the true God of heaven.

That is the condition in which Nehemiah operates. His hard-wired devotion to Jehovah God controls his every decision, his every move. And that is a pretty reliable impetus—with substantial benefits:

**The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
A good understanding have all those who do His commandments;
His praise endures forever. Psalms 111:10**

v16

So v16 naturally follows.

Read Nehemiah 5:16.

For this context of Nehemiah operating under a “fear” of God, I think most of the translations are too tame for the Hebrew verb translated “applied” in the NASB.

applied^{nasb}, continued^{kjvs}, persevered^{esv}, devoted^{niv} = *hazaq* = to *fasten* upon; hence **to seize, be strong** (figurative *courageous, causative strengthen, cure, help, repair, fortify*), **obstinate; to bind, restrain, conquer** :- aid, amend, × calker, catch, cleave, confirm, be constant, constrain, continue, be of good (take) courage (-ous, -ly), encourage (self), be established, fasten, force, fortify, make hard, harden, help, (lay) hold (fast), lean, maintain, play the man, mend, become (wax) mighty, prevail, be recovered, repair, retain, seize, be (wax) sore, strengthen (self), be stout, be (make, shew, wax) strong (-er), be sure, take (hold), be urgent, behave self valiantly, withstand.

With a single-minded purpose, Nehemiah and his guys devoted themselves to finishing the wall of Jerusalem.

vs17-18

If Nehemiah was just housing and feeding himself, it wouldn’t mean that much that he was sacrificially supporting himself. Big deal. But, as governor, we was responsible for feeding far more than just himself.

Read Nehemiah 5:17-18.

A governor, like a king, fed (and sometimes housed) many people.

This amount of food seems extravagant—until you compare it to the daily requirements for King Solomon. Compared to him, Nehemiah was a piker.

Nehemiah	Solomon (from 1 Kings 4:22-23)
1 ox	10 fat oxen, 20 pasture-fed oxen
6 sheep	100 sheep
birds	deer, gazelles, roebucks, fattened fowl
occasional wine	30 kors of flour (300 bushels)
	60 kors of meal (600 bushels)

But of course what he served at table is not the point, but that he paid for it himself rather than tax the people for it.

v19

V19 is the closing bookend, bringing us back to Nehemiah’s devotion to God. At first it admittedly seems rather self-serving.

Read v19.

The ESV makes it sound even more so:

Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people.

Adam Clarke points out that this aligns with what Jesus taught:

Read Luke 6:38.

It still seems a little unsettling, doesn’t it? But I appreciate the interpretation of Matthew Henry.

Matthew Henry: He mentions it to God in prayer, not as if he thought he had hereby merited any favour from God, as a debt, but to show that he looked not for any recompence of his generosity from men, but depended upon God only

to make up to him what he had lost and laid out for his honour; and he reckoned the favour of God reward enough. “If God do but think upon me for good, I have enough.” He refers it to God to recompense him in such a manner as he pleased. “If men forget me, let my God think on me, and I desire no more.”

Nehemiah didn’t ask God for a refund of all he had laid out. He didn’t ask for any special measure of glory or renown. He just asked God to remember him. Whatever God was willing to do for him, that would suffice. With that he would be well rewarded.

Pastor Daniel offered another passage in which Jesus taught that we are to claim the promise of reward from our heavenly Father.

Pastor Daniel: If you remember my thesis on giving from a few weeks back, you may find some help in understanding what’s going on in v. 19: Giving without seeking our Father’s reward is idolatry. Cf. Mt 6:1-5. I think Matthew Henry is right, Nehemiah was seeking the favor of God. He’s saying, “Father, behold what I do in secret and reward me according to your promise.” He is seeking a heavenly reward that only God can give.

Read Matthew 6:1-6.

SESSION 22: NEHEMIAH 6 : Cheap Tricks

PREFACE

There are times in our life when the enemy will try just about anything to get us to deny the sovereignty of God, or at least knock us off-track in our obedience to Him. It happened even to the Son of God.

Read Luke 4:1-13. (in NASBU)

Satan himself tempted Jesus for more than a month, and he climaxed his effort with three distinct tests. The fascinating and intriguing details of each of these tests is beyond the scope of our study today, but we can summarize them all as the Enemy's attempt to knock Jesus off-mission—to cause Him to agree to do something that would result in mission failure.

In Chapter Six of Nehemiah, the governor, too, is confronted by three attempts by the enemy to cause Him to agree to do something that would result in mission failure. First the enemy tries **intrigue**; next he tries **innuendo**; finally he resorts to a form of bald-faced **temptation** that would have fit right into Luke 4 or Matthew 4.

vs1-4: INTRIGUE

The first attempt reads as if it were lifted from the pages of a spy novel.

Read Nehemiah 6:1-4.

Turn to the map on p11 of your booklet.

The NASB and ESV translate the location as “Chephirim (or Hakkephirim) in the plain of Ono,” but it can also be translated, “the villages” [“___im” = plural]. But look where Ono is; some neutral spot just outside Jerusalem? No, it's all the way up in the NW corner of Judah, hard against the Samaritan border! Yeah, right.

So our three favorite bad guys—Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem the Arab—put their heads together and hatch a plot to get Nehemiah out of the city, out where he will be more vulnerable, and capture him—or worse.

Now, Nehemiah did not just fall off the turnip truck; he can read this plot with his eyes closed. Have you noticed even today: The bad guys invariably assume that everyone else is as stupid as they are.

At this time the city of Jerusalem was still vulnerable: the gaps in the wall had been repaired, and the stone framework for the gates had been restored, but the actual wooden doors were not yet in place. But apparently no one in the enemy camp was entertaining thought of actual military action. So this first attempt was to coax Nehemiah out of the city, out away from his protection and support, and very near the enemy territory of Samaria.

vs5-9: INNUENDO

Normally correspondence—especially at this level—would be written on parchment or papyrus, rolled up and tied with a string that would be sealed with a clay [not wax] *bullā* [a seal impression]. But now Sanballat sends an *open* letter to Nehemiah.

Read Nehemiah 6:5-9.

Sidebar: Just why some translations make this name “Gashmu” rather than (as in v1) “Geshem” is a mystery. It is the same guy: Geshem the Arab. K&D says this the “the fuller pronunciation of his name.”

But I just love that: “...and Geshem says...” *It's not just me, it's not just me. Geshem says it too!*

When one reads history it may be surprising to learn how much effort is expended by kings, and rulers of all sorts, in exerting and retaining power. The picture painted is that the rule of a king was continually eroding—and this even more so as the empire grew and spread. A king could not be in all corners of his kingdom at once, so, as in this case, governors would be appointed to be in charge of districts or satraps, to rule in the name of the king. The natural risk in doing this is that that far-flung governor would begin to take control in *his own* name, gathering power and control of his own, and setting himself up as a new king of that region.

I am currently reading *A History of the Arab Peoples*, by Albert Hourani (1991), and it is fascinating to read how after the death of Muhammad in AD 632, as individuals jockeyed to establish their own caliphates, how tenuous was their hold on power. You could be a *caliph* or *imam* one day, and dead the next—or pushed out of power by a new and stronger individual.

This was the constant fear of a king. Remember that this was the accusation used against Jesus...

Read Luke 23:1-4.

The first accusation was a flat-out lie; Jesus said that they *should* pay whatever was due Caesar. The second was true to a point: Jesus admitted to being a king, but that his kingdom was of another world. When Pilate decided Jesus was no threat, the Jewish leaders persisted.

Read John 19:12.

This put the fear of...Caesar in Pilate. If word got back to Rome that there was a pretender in Judea, and he had done nothing about it, *his* neck would be the one on the block. Even Caesar had to worry about the erosion of his power.

So the accusation made by Sanballat in this public letter was serious. And even when Sanballat mentions prophets, the accusation remains the same: Nehemiah is setting himself up as not just governor under Artaxerxes, but a king in his own right. Serious stuff, this.

So what is a governor to do? Vs9:

But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

Last week I took the position that most of the translations of v5:16 were too weak in their translation of the Hebrew *hazaq*. V9 in Chapter Six substantiates this position. The word translated “strengthen” in all the versions is the same Hebrew word.

applied^{nasb}, continued^{kjvs}, persevered^{esv}, devoted^{niv} = *hazaq* = to *fasten* upon; hence **to seize, be strong** (figurative *courageous, causative strengthen, cure, help, repair, fortify*), **obstinate; to bind, restrain, conquer** :- aid, amend, x calker, catch, cleave, confirm, be constant, constrain, continue, be of good (take) courage (-ous, -ly)...

Nehemiah is not pleading with God to “continue” things as they are; he is pleading for *new and better* strength—a God-supplied strength—with which to do battle with the enemy.

vs10-14: TEMPTATION

Finally, after the first two attempts have failed miserably, the enemies try a new tack.

Read v10.

Most translations agree on the description of Shemaiah’s situation—except the NKJV.

NASB/ESV: who was confined at/to his home

KJV: who was shut up

NIV: who was shut in at his home

NKJV: **who was a secret informer**

I could not find one person to explain the NKJV interpretation, or even discuss the possibility of anything like that. Where they came up with that I have no idea. Shemaiah certainly was a false prophet, a scoundrel and “secret informer”—but that’s *not* what the Hebrew text says.

K&D: The phrase says only, that when Nehemiah entered Shemaiah’s house, he found him *āsar*, which simply means shut up, shut in his house, not imprisoned...

We are not really told why Shemaiah was confined, but we have clues that indicate it was self-imposed.

Professor Adeney: Shemaiah proposed to proceed at once to the temple with Nehemiah, and thus confessed his seclusion to be voluntary.

I think the best explanation is that it was part of his subterfuge to entrap Nehemiah; he hoped his being shut up would demonstrate to the governor that he, too, feared for his life. Most commentators seem to conclude that Shemaiah was a priest—or at least in a priestly family—and so could legally come and go from the temple. He also presented himself as a prophet—but he was, in truth, a *false* prophet, since his recommendation went against God’s Law.

Yamauchi points out that there was indeed an area within the temple complex where Nehemiah could have sought refuge.

Read Exodus 21:12-14.

Before the Lord designated *cities* of refuge He set apart an *altar* of refuge within the temple to which someone could flee. And in 1 Kings we see this put into practice.

Read 1 Kings 1:50-53.

Nehemiah could have taken refuge at that altar, but that was not what Shemaiah was suggesting. He wanted Nehemiah to go “in the house of God, within the temple,” where, by the Law, only a priest could go. In this Nehemiah would have been not just a coward, but would have committed a sin against God.

Beyond that, this would have been politically suicidal, as Matthew Henry explains:

If Nehemiah had been prevailed upon to do this, immediately the people would both have left off their work and thrown down their arms, and every one would have shifted for his own safety; and then the enemies might easily, and without opposition, have demolished the works, broken down the wall again, and so gained their point.

If Nehemiah had done this he would have effectively abdicated his role as governor, leaving the people leaderless. But, of course, without even reading on we know already that Nehemiah was made of sterner stuff.

Read v11.

And his usual insight kicked in.

Read vs12-13.

And once again the good governor and administrator delegates:

Read v14.

God, go get 'em. I'll keep building the wall; You take care of my enemies.

CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION

Walking in close communion with God, having a life that vibrates to a heavenly pitch, is not just ceremony or (as our president might term it) “theater.” It is not just the recitation of pious words. There is a true cause and effect in play.

In each of these attempts by the enemy Nehemiah immediately saw through the subterfuge. Did he learn such perceptiveness from sitting next to Artaxerxes? Perhaps some. Was he born with such wisdom? I doubt it. Nehemiah was born with *a heart for God*—and it was out of time spent with Him that such insight and wisdom came.

Time and again, when confronted with challenges, opposition, physical threat and outright hatred, Nehemiah answered wisely, with confidence and resolve. This was no accident, or just an inherent character trait. Nehemiah was trained in the school of God. His was a life built and energized by a regular, intimate communion with the Lord.

As should ours.

SESSION 23: NEHEMIAH 7 : *Completion, Conflict & Census*

PREFACE

For a moment this week I entertained thought of divvying up Chapter Seven of Nehemiah and having us all share the load of reading through all the names. But then I thought, “No, I like this church, and I’d like to stay.” So I nixed the idea. Not only is it a long, tedious list of names and numbers, but it is virtually identical to the list we have already looked at in Ezra!

v6:15

But before we get to that exciting, fascinating Chapter Seven, we have Chapter Six to finish.

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus was born the year Caligula took the throne of Rome in AD 37—that is, less than a decade after the death and resurrection of Christ. He died some time after AD 100. He was the son of a priestly family. He wrote his histories during the last twenty years of his life, between AD 79 and just after AD 100.

One cannot take Josephus at face value; one must always compare what he writes against other sources. But at times his histories can add some interesting details to what we have in Scripture. In this first instance, what is interesting is the *conflict* between what he writes, and Scripture.

Read first passage in Josephus.

So Josephus claims it took two years and four months for the Jerusalem wall to be restored. How does that compare to what God says?

Read Nehemiah 6:15.

Nehemiah says it took fifty-two days. Which is it? We have a clue in v16.

Read Nehemiah 6:16.

Why is it there are so many biblical “scholars” that insist on ignoring the possibility that God at work in the world can accomplish that which otherwise would be impossible. Yamauchi cites at least two who favor the Josephus version over the biblical—simply because it makes more sense from a human perspective.

When will we ever stop denying the power of God! There need not be a physical, natural explanation for the plagues in Egypt, or the parting of the Red Sea; God did it! He doesn’t need to work through the natural forces. Some times He chooses to, but He doesn’t *have* to.

Let’s review:

Nehemiah 2:20 - So I answered them and said to them, “The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build...”

Nehemiah 4:6 - So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind [or heart] to work.

Nehemiah 4:8-9 - All of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it. But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.

Nehemiah 4:20 - “At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us.”

Nehemiah 6:9 - For all of them were trying to frighten us, thinking , “They will become discouraged with the work and it will not be done.” But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

Nehemiah 6:14 - Remember, O my God, Tobiah and Sanballat according to these works of theirs, and also Noadiah the prophetess and the rest of the prophets who were *trying* to frighten me.

So why should we be surprised when in the very next verse we read that the wall was completed—miraculously!—in only fifty-two days? There is a true cause and effect benefit to living a life dependent on God; there is a true cause and effect benefit to regular, consistent communion with God. Either He is real or He is not; either we live by faith or we do not.

Read Romans 1:16-17.

v16

Even their enemies recognized God's hand in the work.

Read Nehemiah 6:16. (again)

...they lost their confidence

Here the KJV is the more literal translation:

...they were very much cast down in their own eyes

The unregenerate world is not encouraged, but discouraged when they witness God at work.

vs17-19

Read Nehemiah 6:17-19.

Tobiah—referred to as “Tobiah the Ammonite” (2:10)—was well-connected to several Jewish families—even to the high priest Eliashib. [\[Since “Tobiah” is a Jewish name, the “Ammonite” in his title may be a reference to his present situation or alliances.\]](#)

Two possible motives for the actions of these “nobles”:

- They were actively seeking to undermine what Nehemiah was doing, acting as “spies in the camp” for Tobiah
- They were honestly (but naively) seeking “bipartisanship” by informing Tobiah of the good Nehemiah was doing, and telling Nehemiah of the good Tobiah was doing (“...they were speaking about his good deeds in my presence and reported my words to him.” (v19a)

Whatever their motives, the result was...

Tobiah sent letters to frighten me.

v7:1-3

As Chapter Seven opens and Nehemiah declares that all the work on the wall and gates is completed we expect some sort of ceremony or celebration. But *security* is still on Nehemiah's mind. (The formal dedication of the wall will have to wait until Chapter Twelve.)

Read Nehemiah 7:1.

Under normal circumstances all of those Nehemiah appoints to guard the city wall and gates would be in the service of the *temple*. But in this moment the security of the city is more critical; what good would it do to guard the temple if the hordes gained entrance to the city?

Next Nehemiah establishes clear authority and responsibility in the city of Jerusalem; now that it is no longer a pile of rubble, but a fortified city, it needs a local government.

Read v2.

“Hanani” is a shortened, familiar form of the name Hananiah—which Nehemiah probably used because it was the same name as the other guy, who was the commander of the fortress. [Here the KJV “palace” gives the wrong impression: this was the location of the military authority, nominally under the direct command of the Persian king. In the first century it would be called the Praetorium, where Jesus was questioned by Pilate and beaten by the Roman cohort.]

One wonders if not Artaxerxes but Nehemiah himself had appointed the commander, for Hananiah was “a faithful man and feared God more than many.”

Normally the gates of a city would be opened at dawn, but Nehemiah delayed this until the sun was higher in the sky.

Read v3.

The point of this is that there was to be maximum security for the city. In the morning the gates were not to be opened until well after the change of the guard, once the city was awake and everyone was about. At the end of the day, the gates were to be shut and bolted while the day-guard was still on duty. Meanwhile, inside the city, guards were to be posted virtually everywhere.

vs4-5

Read v5.

Why did Governor Nehemiah revisit the account of everyone who came back to Judah in that first wave under Zerubbabel? Or more to the point, why did God “put it into [his] heart” to hold a census and begin it with the accounting in vs6-72? The clue is in v4.

Read v4.

Now that the perimeter of the city was structurally secure, it was time to fill Jerusalem up with people. Yes, there had been people living there for the last ninety years, but the population remained sparse, and the city still had much empty space within the walls.

Earlier Josephus gave information contrary to Scripture; now he gives information that fleshes out the scriptural narrative for us, and helps us better understand the situation (in text segment to the right).

Approximately 92 years earlier a fairly large group had arrived in Judah from Babylon, led by Zerubbabel. The number was a little over 42,000. (A much smaller group had accompanied Ezra: less than 2,000.)

During those nine decades most of the people had either returned to their family cities or villages, or settled somewhere in the outlying countryside [note v6: “...each to his city,” and v73: “Now the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants and all Israel, lived in their cities. And when the seventh month came, the sons of Israel were in their cities.”]. Because of the condition of the city at that time, few had elected to settle within the city of Jerusalem—which, remember, was without a secure wall.

ninth month. Now when the walls were finished, Nehemiah and the multitude offered sacrifices to God for the building of them; and they continued in feasting eight days. However, when the nations which dwelt in Syria heard that the building of the wall was finished, they had indignation at it; but when Nehemiah saw that the city was thin of people, he exhorted the priests and the Levites, that they would leave the country, and remove themselves to the city, and there continue; and he built them houses at his own expense; and he commanded that part of the people who were employed in cultivating the land, to bring the tithes of their fruits to Jerusalem, that the priests and Levites having whereof they might live perpetually, might not leave the divine worship; who willingly hearkened to the constitutions of Nehemiah, by which means the city Jerusalem came to be fuller of people than it was before. So when Nehemiah

Now that Jerusalem was (structurally) once again a real city, it needed people. God wanted Jerusalem to be more than just a central hub for market day. He wanted community, He wanted families, He wanted the city itself to become as strong as its new walls.

So God put it into Nehemiah’s heart to determine who lived where, who belonged to which tribes, and who was related to whom. Being a good manager, he didn’t just send out census workers to knock on doors; he first

checked the archives to give himself a head start. There he discovered the original accounting for everyone who came back with Zerubbabel. This supplied him with original numbers, tribal and family associations, and job descriptions.

I believe there was a second reason that God set Nehemiah to work on this. Remember that what the Lord initiated nine decades earlier through King Cyrus was to reestablish Judah from the inside out. He would have them restore...

1. first the temple altar,
2. the temple foundation
3. next the temple itself,
4. then the wall and gates of the city Jerusalem, which would become the focal point and capital for a renewed Judah.

The Lord first reestablished *Himself*, in their midst, His worship, devotion to Him. Without that all else would be for naught.

Now the Lord was to remain true to that pattern. He had an immediate and critically important reason to have Nehemiah find everyone and bring them back to the city: *to draw them back to Himself through the reading of His word, the Torah.*

And in the next chapter, Chapter Eight, we have perhaps the most glorious worship service ever recounted for us—a worship service, by the way, against which most modern worship services—and Sunday School classes—pale by comparison.

In our next session we will look at what I consider the climax, the pinnacle of this entire narrative of *Rebellion, Restoration and Revival*.

In our next session we will witness that revival, a breathtaking moment in Scripture.

SESSION 24: NEHEMIAH 8:1-6 : *Before the Word*

PREFACE

Read Hebrews 4:12.

In a manner similar to His *name* being synonymous with God, or the Lord Jesus, God's word—God's spoken word which emerges from His thoughts: in our day, the holy Scriptures—His *word* is synonymous with Himself.

William Lane: When we are confronted by God's word we are confronted by God Himself.

God's word is

- **living:**
 - it is not something dead or mechanical, but something alive and breathing;
 - like a human mother or father, it is both alive in itself, and it *gives* life to others;
- **active** *energies* (ener-gace):
 - it is not inert, disinterested, neutral, but operative, effective, powerful;
 - it cannot be stopped: it is self-continuing, it is eternal;
- **sharp:**
 - what it cleaves it cuts cleanly, effortlessly, in one smooth stroke (it does not require repeated hacking);
- **piercing:**
 - no obstacle can slow it; it penetrates anything and everything, and always reaches its destination.

God's written word is so alive, it can actually think and reason, judging "the thoughts and intentions of the heart"—i.e., the thoughts and feelings, the faithfulness of the human heart.

God's word is a *living* thing! It is the mind of God in our hands.

Chapter Eight of Nehemiah is an exquisite picture of corporate worship and instruction, and is the first of two such gatherings (the second is in Chapter Nine). Because it is given to us, written for us in God's holy word, we are to permit it free access to our thoughts and intentions—our heart. We are to *invite* its penetrating power, *welcome* its sometimes painful cuts. As we examine it, we are to let it examine us. So I have inserted into our study of Chapter Eight periodic "incisions": sharp—and perhaps uncomfortable—points for personal emphasis.

As we read and illuminate this episode, make its teaching personal: As we learn how it was done in the time of Nehemiah and Ezra, do not just ask yourself, "Do we...?" but ask yourself, "Do I...?" We will witness the word of God cutting the people of Judah to the quick; let it do the same to you.

v1

The first four verses set the scene for us; then in vs5-12 the details of the service are recorded.

Read v1.

The first thing I notice is the hunger and intensity of the people to hear from God's word. They were not reluctant, dragged to church against their will or wishing they could be somewhere else. *They* asked Ezra to read from the book. Their desire to hear God's law was real and vocal, and just as real and emotional was its impact on them.

This is the first mention of Ezra in the book of Nehemiah. As we saw in our study of Ezra the book, he was a priest, tracing his line back to the high priest Zadok, who served faithfully during the time of David. He was also a scribe; during the exile and after scribes began taking on more of a teaching role, keeping the law before the Hebrews, interpreting it, etc. These same scribes, in NT times, would be called "rabbis." So Ezra was eminently qualified to lead this worship service.

And it makes perfect sense that he would have brought with him from Babylon the five books of Moses: the Pentateuch, the Torah. You may have forgotten—I did—that Artaxerxes had specifically commanded Ezra to teach the Law when he returned to Judah.

Read Ezra 7:25.

It is very possible that most of those standing before the Water Gate that bright morning had never heard the Law before—certainly not in its entirety. There is no mention of the reading of the Law in Ezra or Nehemiah until this point. And this may explain their hunger.

Incision 1: Hunger for the Word

Here the word of God makes its first cut into us: **Do you have a hunger for the word?** Since we have it in inexpensive, portable form, we need not wait for the corporate gathering to hear from its pages. Do you open the Bible each day, on your own, with eager anticipation, with a yearning to hear what the Lord God has for you this day?

Alexander MacLaren: Whether the people had heard it before, or, as seems implied, it was strange to them, their desire to hear it may stand as a pattern for us of that earnest wish to know God's will which is never cherished in vain. He who does not intend to obey does not wish to know the law. If we have no longing to know what the will of the Lord is, we may be very sure that we prefer our own to His. If we desire to know it, we shall desire to understand the Book which contains so much of it.

v2

Read v2.

At any normal meeting only men would be permitted, but at formal, special occasions such as this, women and older children would be included.

...all who could listen with understanding

listen, hear = *shama* = **to hear intelligently (often with implication of attention, obedience, etc.; causative to tell, etc.)**
:- × **attentively**, call (gather) together, × carefully, × certainly, consent, consider, be content, declare, × diligently, **discern**, give ear, (cause to, let, make to) hear (-ken, tell), × indeed, listen, make (a) noise, (be) obedient, obey, perceive, (make a) proclaim (-ation), publish, regard, report, shew (forth), (make a) sound, × surely, tell, understand, whosoever [heareth], witness.

understanding = *bin* (bean) = **to separate mentally (or distinguish), i.e. (general) understand** :- attend, consider, be cunning, diligently, direct, **discern**, eloquent, feel, inform, instruct, have intelligence, know, look well to, mark, perceive, be prudent, regard, (can) skill (-ful), teach, think, (cause, make to, get, give, have) understand (-ing), view, (deal) wise (-ly, man).

It may be that some women in the crowd carried babies in their arms out of necessity, but the point is that it was not a gathering for small children unable to grasp what was being said, but one for adults and older children. This is repeated in v3.

v3

Read v3a.

Another sign of their hunger to hear the word was the fact that they stood in the square "from early morning until midday"—about 5-6 hours! Then something more is added:

...and all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

attentive = *ozen* (ode'-zen) = from <H238> ('azan); broadness, **i.e. (concrete) the ear** (from its form in man) :- + advertise, audience, + displease, ear, hearing, + show; **to ponder, to give ear, to listen**. *Wilson: "...is expressive not only of attention on the part of the hearer, but of his laying up in his mind what he hears."*

Incision 2: Attentiveness to the Word

Do you show respect to God's word? What does it say to our heavenly Father that we continue chatting with our neighbor, or don't bother listening at all when His word is being read? The answer is that it tells God that we consider what we have to say more important than what *He* has to say.

Frankly, my heart breaks when I hear people continue to chat away during the reading of God's word, or during a prayer. What arrogance. How that insults our heavenly Father. We are not just to be quite and listen; we are to listen *attentively*: We are to let His truth sink into our mind to become a permanent resident.

The people standing before Nehemiah showed proper respect for Yahweh, and the reading of His written word.

Read Isaiah 55:8-11.

v4

Up till now the text has mostly described the audience; now, in v4, it describes the setting on the stage—the dais, as it were. A large platform had been constructed, long enough (and strong enough) for 14 men. In the center, probably behind what we would call a pulpit, was Ezra. On his right were six men, and on his left were seven—all, like Ezra, probably priests.

vs5-6

And now we come to this wonderful moment. If this is my favorite chapter, the next two verses are my favorite passage in that chapter.

Read v5.

Just imagine the scene. Ezra mounts the platform. In his arms is the scroll, the sacred Torah. He rests it on the pulpit, unfastens the clasp and unrolls it horizontally. At this moment all the people below him, without a word, without a command to do so, stand out of reverent awe for God's word.

This verse is not an injunction for us to always stand at the reading of God's word; K&D point out that there is no evidence that this was a command, or even custom in the OT. What is important is that *their standing reveals the condition of their hearts for the Lord!*

One can feel the expectation, the anticipation of the people. A reverent hush falls over the crowd, you can almost sense an intake of breath as they await the first words. One wonders where Ezra started reading:

- Did he begin at the Beginning—"In the beginning God..."—
- or did he begin with something more pertinent, more foundational to their situation—perhaps the great *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6:4—

shema Yisrael, Yehovah Eloheinu, Yehovah achad:

"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!"

What a perfect, and appropriate, way to open this momentous reading. Alas, we do not know where in the Torah Ezra began reading.

The *Shema* also would have been a perfect follow-up to what happens in the next verse—the emotional climax of this event.

v6

Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God.

ble^ss^ed = *barak* (baw-rak') = **to kneel; by implication to bless God (as an act of adoration)**, and (vice-versa) man (as a benefit); also (by euphemism) to *curse* (God or the king, as treason) :- × abundantly, × altogether, × at all, blaspheme, bless, congratulate, curse, × greatly, × indeed, kneel (down), praise, salute, × still, thank.

We don't have his words, but Ezra could have quoted King David, from the forty-first Psalm:

Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel,
From everlasting to everlasting,
Amen and Amen.

To which the people answered back:

... "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands;

Again, this is not a command that we must always, as Paul writes in 1 Timothy, "lift up holy hands" in our worship.

then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.

worshiped = *shaha* (shaw-khaw') = **to depress, i.e. prostrate (especially reflexive in homage to royalty or God)** :- bow (self) down, crouch, fall down (flat), humbly beseech, do (make) **obeisance**, do reverence, make to stoop, worship.

This a beautiful, eloquent picture of pure worship: giving reverence and adoring the God of heaven. There are, indeed, other forms of worship: I am sure there were some here yesterday who were worshiping the Lord through their service—if that was what was in their heart, if that was their motivation for doing the work.

But these and other forms of worship, or praise, are *lower* forms of worship. The highest form is to come before the Lord God with nothing before our eyes than Him on His throne; with no other motive in our heart than *His* exaltation, *His* glorification in the midst of our humble obeisance.

This is what occurred at the Water Gate that day. The people were overwhelmed by the majesty, the holiness, the supremacy of their God, and they could do nothing less than to lift holy hands in praise, then fall prostrate on their faces before Him in exquisite, trembling adoration.

A. W. Tozer calls moments such as this, the "Oh!"

A. W. Tozer: When the heart, on its knees, moves into the awesome Presence and hears with fear and wonder things not lawful to utter, then the mind falls flat, and words, previously its faithful servants, become weak and totally incapable of telling what the heart hears and sees. In that awful moment the worshiper can only cry "Oh!" And that simple exclamation becomes more eloquent than learned speech and, I have no doubt, is dearer to God than any oratory. When God Himself appears before the mind, awesome, vast and incomprehensible, then the mind sinks into silence and the heart cries out "O Lord God!" We Christians should watch lest we lose the "Oh!" from our hearts. There is real danger these days that we shall fall victim to the prophets of poise and the purveyors of tranquility, and our Christianity be reduced to a mere evangelical humanism that is never disturbed about anything nor overcome by any "trances of thought and mountings of the mind." When we become too glib in prayer we are most surely talking to ourselves.

The people gathered near the Water Gate, first standing silently before Ezra then falling prostrate in worship of the Lord God—they had not lost the "Oh!"

So we close with our third and final incision.

Incision 3: Lost in the Wonder of God

Have you lost the "Oh!"? Has your worship become dry and stale, mechanical, performed out of habit rather than from the heart? Is your mind elsewhere, rather than focused on the throne of God and the Lamb?

Is your worship separate and distinct from thanksgiving, study, learning, fellowship—are is it all just mushed together into an unrecognizable lump?

Israel's relationship with Yahweh is likened by Him to a marriage, just as the Christian's relationship with Christ Jesus is likened to a marriage.

When was the last time you told Him you loved Him?

SESSION 25: NEHEMIAH 8:7-12 : *Tears and Joy*

PREFACE

In our last session we were privileged to attend a moving, Spirit-filled worship service at the Jerusalem Water Gate. In that service God's word was honored, revered, and He was exalted and praised. In this session we get the sermon—or, in some respects, Sunday School.

Last week I said that in this study—of which this is Part Two—we would witness the word of God cutting the people of Judah to the quick. Today we will see that, as Ezra and the Levites beginning reading and teaching the Law.

vs7-8

Vs7-8 describe the method of the reading/instruction; vs9-12 describe the result.

Read vs7-8.

Ezra did not do all the reading. v8 says “*They* read from the book...” Who were “they”? We needn’t read all the names, but there were 13 priests on the dais with Ezra; v7 adds 10 or 11 more Levites (Maaseiah is repeated, and may or may not be a different person). This gives us a total of 24 or 25 reader/teachers that day.

On the Dais	additional teachers
Mattithiah	Jeshua
Shema	Bani
Anaiah	Sherebiah
Uriah	Jamin
Hilkiah	Akkub
Maaseiah	Shabbethai
Pedaiah	Hodiah
Mishael	Maaseiah
Malchijah	Kelita
Hashum	Azariah
Hashbaddanah	Jozabad
Zechariah	
Meshullam	

Our text does not give us details on just how this reading/teaching was conducted.

- Did all the teachers remain on the platform, taking the reading in turn, and teaching to everyone en mass—a la Sunday sermon?
- Did one or two readers remain on the platform while the teachers fanned out into the crowd, addressing smaller groups—a la Sunday School or Small Groups?

We don’t know—which in itself is instructive. When Scripture repeats something for emphasis, we can be assured it’s because it is important, and we are to treat it so. Likewise, when Scripture leaves something out, we can be assured it is far less important than what *is* there.

Question: What stands out in vs7-8, and is thus more important?

...*explained the law to the people (v7)*

*They read from the book, from the Law of God, **clearly**, and they gave the sense, so that the people **understood** the reading.*

Not just reading, but *understanding* God’s word is important.

Read Acts 8:26-31. [the Ethiopian eunich]

All commentators mention an alternate interpretation that is seen in the NASB: “translating”—i.e., from Hebrew to Aramaic, an unfamiliar language into one more familiar—but, oddly, *none* of the commentators subscribe to it! [NASB margin note: “or explaining”]

I’m also amused by those who dance around the idea of “making it clear” and “giving the sense,” as if trying to rationalize why this should be necessary—the exegetical equivalent of the plagues in Egypt being caused by a climatic low-pressure system.

It is not necessary for the text to be in a different language, or dialect; nor is it necessary for the congregation to be comprised of certifiable imbeciles. Preachers the world over would be out of a job if this were the case. The Ethiopian eunuch was an intelligent man; he was perfectly capable of reading the Isaiah text. But he needed help in *understanding* the text.

Every Sunday morning is proof that laymen (and laywomen) benefit from having perfectly legible text, printed in their native tongue, “explained” by someone in possession of deeper knowledge.

explained the law (v7) = those who could **understand** (v3; Hebrew, *bin*)

translating^{nasb}, **distinctly**^{kjvs}, **making it clear**^{niv}, **clearly**^{esv} = *parash* = a primitive root; **to separate**, literal (to *disperse*) or figurative (to *specify*); also (by implication) to *wound* :- scatter, declare, distinctly, shew, sting.

give... = to put

the sense/meaning = *sekel* (seh'-kel) = from <H7919> (sakal); **intelligence**; by implication success :- discretion, knowledge, policy, prudence, sense, understanding, wisdom, wise.

v9

In v9 we have the immediate result of the reading/instruction.

Read v9.

My first reaction to this verse was, “Why are they weeping?” Was it the weeping that may come from being overwhelmed with joy? Or was it the weeping of confession, grief, shame? The consensus is that it was the latter.

Professor Adeney: It is clear that their grief arose simply from their perception of their own miserable imperfections in contrast to the lofty requirements of The Law, and in view of its sombre threats of punishment for disobedience. The discovery of a new ideal of conduct above that with which we have hitherto been satisfied naturally provokes painful stings of conscience, which the old salve, compounded of the comfortable little notions we once cherished, will not neutralise. In the new light of the higher truth we suddenly discover that the “robe of righteousness” in which we have been parading is but as “filthy rags.” Then our once vaunted attainments become despicable in our own eyes.

Matthew Henry: How the people were wounded with the words of the law that were read to them. The law works death, and speaks terror, shows men their sins, and their misery and danger because of sin, and thunders a curse against every one that continues not in every part of his duty. Therefore when they heard it they all wept: it was a good sign that their hearts were tender, like Josiah’s when he heard the words of the law. They wept to think how they had offended God, and exposed themselves, by their many violations of the law; when some wept all wept, for they all saw themselves guilty before God.

But Yamauchi speaks to why the leaders tried to get them to stop.

Yamauchi: The powerful exposition of the word of God can bring deep conviction of sin. But repentance must not degenerate into a self-centered remorse but must issue into joy in God’s forgiving goodness.

I’ve said before, grace was not invented for the NT. The OT is filled with moments of God’s mercy and grace to His erring people. The returning exiles were convicted of their poor track record in keeping the Law, but Nehemiah and Ezra wanted them to see that they had paid their dues for that—for seventy years! God in His grace had brought them back home—not to spend their lives flagellating themselves over sin, but to “rejoice in the Lord”.

Yes, we should be mindful of our sin, perhaps weep over our failings. But there comes a time to confess the sin, dry our eyes, and embrace the grace that sets us free.

Incision 4: The Power of the Word

Are you troubled when God's word fails to move you?

Here is Hebrews 4:12 again:

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Do you find yourself reading, or listening to, Scripture without effect? Is it as sterile and lifeless as reading a shopping list? His word has not changed: it remains as sharp and cutting as the writer of Hebrews describes it. What changes is *us*. When the power of God's word no longer moves us, no longer bears fruit, we must look to *ourselves* for the cause of the problem.

- Have I become lazy or disinterested?
- Has familiarity bred a sense of (false) confidence that I already know all there is to know from its pages?
- Or, worse, is sin in my life causing me to actually *reject* what He has for me? If so, it would do me good to keep in mind the next verse in Hebrews 4:

And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

vs10-12

Read vs10-11.

Their leaders told the people to feast upon the good stuff [NIV: "choice food"], the best-tasting wine, and share bountifully with those who are without. They should be celebrating—not in mourning. And so they did.

Read vs12.

All the explaining and exposition of Scripture worked: the people understood.

For the remainder of our time in this session let's return and take a closer look at the important clause that ends v10:

...for the joy of the Lord is your strength.

Now and again a small portion of Scripture will capture the senses. You're reading along, minding your own business, when suddenly the turn of a phrase will cause you to pause, lean back in your chair and gaze out the window.

For me this clause does just that. First let us define "strength":

strength = *maoz* (maw-oze') = from <H5810> ('azaz); **a fortified place; figurative a defence** :- force, fort (-ress), **rock**, strength (-en), (× most) strong (hold); i.e., less muscles than a strong *place*.

There are a number of truths we can draw from this statement—especially when we make the connections. Here is what occurred to me; perhaps something else will occur to you:

Not just any joy, but the joy of the Lord

The world offers happiness, pleasure, but only the Lord gives us true joy.

Read John 15:11.

By the world's standards, it is a peculiar sort of joy

Read James 1:2-4.

How do we obtain this joy?

Through our obedience.

Read John 15:10-11.

What is the connection between the joy of obedience and strength, strong fortress, rock?

Read Matthew 7:24-25.

Not the world's strength, but the Lord's

Read Isaiah 12:1-6.

SESSION 26: NEHEMIAH 8:13-18 : *Thanksgiving!*

PREFACE

In our last session we looked at the reading and exposition of God's word (or sermon, or Sunday School) that took place immediately after the worship portion of the gathering at the Water Gate. All of that—the worship and the teaching—took place during the first day of the seventh month, New Year's Day of the Jewish civic calendar.

Read Nehemiah 7:73-8:2.

Just imagine: all of that—the emotional, cathartic worship service that took place at the presentation of the Law, followed by the exhaustive explanation of the written word to “those who could understand”—transpired in just one day. Hawkeye Pierce (*M*A*S*H*) would call that “a full, rich day.”

Now we come to the *second* day.

v13

Read Nehemiah 8:13.

God's word is habit-forming. Like a *Lays* potato chip, you can't eat just one. With Scripture, however, there is no downside: no calories, no cholesterol, no fat. And the more one consumes, the more one desires. Matthew Henry says it best:

The more we converse with the word of God, if we rightly understand it and be affected with it, the more we shall covet to converse with it, and to increase in our acquaintance with it, saying, How sweet are thy words unto my mouth! Those that understand the scriptures well, will still be desirous to understand them better.

So after that very full first day, the leaders of the people—“...the heads of fathers' households of all the people, the priests and the Levites”—came back for more. Perhaps, as John Gill writes, they needed clarification on some of what was taught the day before. Perhaps they just craved more; the day before had been such a rewarding, spiritually reviving experience, that they just wanted more of the same. Perhaps there were some passages from the Law, ones pertinent to and directed specifically to the leaders, that had been omitted from the previous day's teaching to the masses, held in reserve for smaller gathering. In their hearts, their reason for this second session was “that they might **gain insight** into the words of the law.”

gain insight^{nasb}, **understand**^{kjvs}, **give attention to**^{niv}, **study**^{esv} = *sah-kal'* = **to be** (causative *make* or *act*) **circumspect and hence intelligent** :- consider, expert, instruct, prosper, (deal) prudent (-ly), (give) skill (-ful), have good success, teach, (have, make to) understand (-ing), wisdom, (be, behave self, consider, make) wise (-ly), guide wittingly;
K&D: expresses taking an attentive interest in anything. They desired to be further and more deeply instructed in the law by Ezra.

And these were the leaders: the insight they craved and gained they would pass on to others.

v14

Read Nehemiah 8:14.

v17

The choice of words—“they *found* written in the law”—suggests that this feast had been forgotten during the Babylonian captivity—and if not forgotten, it certainly had not been celebrated. It had been celebrated in the time of Solomon. and the book of Ezra says that it was celebrated upon the return of the exiles. But v17 tells us that this festival had not been so properly, so *joyously* celebrated since the days of Joshua.

Read v17.

If one reads the passages that describe this at the dedication of Solomon's temple, and in Ezra after the return, there is no mention of building booths—only the appropriate sacrifices for the Feast.

The seventh month in the Jewish calendar—Tishri—was an important time in the spiritual life of Israel:

- The first day was New Year's day, and the **Feast of the Trumpets**;
- The tenth day was the **Day of Atonement**—the annual day of national confession, the one day the high priest entered the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the sins of the nation. It was also a time of personal examination and confession for each individual;
- From the fifteenth to the twenty-first was the **Feast of Booths** (or, erroneously, “tabernacles”), followed by
- A **Solemn Assembly** on the twenty-second.

LEVITICUS

So while poring over the law they were reminded that it was time for this Feast of Booths to be celebrated. We need to turn to the book of Leviticus to learn its details and purpose. **Turn please to Leviticus 23.**

Sidebar: Regarding the name of this festival, the KJVs and the NIV render it “tabernacles,” but a different word is used for the tabernacle of the exodus:

mishkan = from <H7931> (shakan); a **residence** (including a shepherd's hut, the lair of animals, figurative the grave; also the Temple); specifically the **Tabernacle (properly its wooden walls) :- dwelleth, dwelling (place), habitation, tabernacle, tent.**

Note the emphasis on it being a place of dwelling, of living. The tabernacle of the desert sojourn was the dwelling place (tabernacle) of Yahweh. The word used in Leviticus 23 and in Nehemiah 8, referring to the temporary structures made for the festival is

sukka = feminine of <H5520> (cok); a **hut or lair :- booth, cottage, covert, pavilion, tabernacle, tent.**

The implication is that the former—*mishkan*—refers to a more substantial, almost permanent dwelling place—a home (in this case, for God)—while the latter—*sukka*—refers to something constructed for the moment, something a shepherd or hunter might throw together for a night's shelter.

Your land is desolate,
Your cities are burned with fire,
Your fields—strangers are devouring them in your presence;
It is desolation, as overthrown by strangers.
The daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard,
Like a watchman's hut in a cucumber field, like a besieged city. (Isaiah 1:7-8)

In the first Leviticus passage we have the general command for Israel to hold the feast.

Read Leviticus 23:33-36.

So, sandwiched between the two solemn “convocations” or assemblies was a time of feasting and rejoicing. This all was to take place around the time of harvest. The second passage gives us more detail.

Read Leviticus 23:39-43.

Christians today have Communion. This ordinance (or sacrament), is a picture of the last Passover supper Christ Jesus shared with His disciples. More than an historical reminder, however, in the bread and wine it is a solemn symbol of Christ's body and blood, offered up for sacrifice as a once and final sacrifice for the sins of believers. We do not celebrate Communion to remind ourselves that Jesus sat around a table eating with His disciples; we celebrate it to remember what He did for us in His death and resurrection. That is why He said, “Do this in remembrance of Me.”

Similarly, the Feast of Booths is a physical picture of how Israel dwelt in temporary structures during the wilderness exodus, but the days of thanksgiving and rejoicing under the booths was meant to remind them of the Lord's blessings, extricating them from Egyptian bondage and sustaining them those forty years. Verse 43 makes it clear where their focus should be.

“...so that your generations may know that I had the sons of Israel live in booths when I brought them out from the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God.” (emphasis added)

This is also very much like our American Thanksgiving. In fact, some scholars are convinced that our Puritan forefathers had the Feast of Booths in mind when they proclaimed their autumnal Thanksgiving.

Communion	Physical Act	Commemorates	Symbolizes
	partaking of the bread and wine around the Communion table	Jesus' last supper with His disciples	His sacrifice for us on the cross
Feast of Booths	feast of celebration under a temporary shelter made from natural material	the temporary structures Israel stayed in during the wilderness exodus from Egypt	the Lord's protection and care for Israel during their wilderness sojourn
American Thanksgiving	feast of celebration	the first Thanksgiving of the nation's forefathers	our thanksgiving to God for His goodness and generosity

So the Feast of Booths was a joyous time, a celebration of God's goodness, His generosity, His care. It was a time of thanksgiving to *Jehovah-jireh*—the God who supplies, who meets our needs.

Vs15-16

Now let's read the passage in Nehemiah 8.

Read Nehemiah 8:15-16.

Verse 15 tells us that the festival was to be celebrated not just in Jerusalem, but throughout Judah. Verse 16 illustrates how, in Jerusalem itself, this festival was celebrated in every corner of the city, by every person in the city. And I note a crescendo and decrescendo of civic stature in the list.

each on his roof,	those who lived in simple homes, in which the only open space was the flat roof
and in their courts	those who lived in larger, more expensive homes with inner courts
and in the courts of the house of God,	the priests and Levites erected their booths in and around the temple grounds
and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim.	those who were too poor to have homes in the city, or were visitors to the city erected booths in the larger public areas of the city

The description of the Feast of Booths sounds a bit folksy, but Yamauchi points out just how institutionalized it was later. He cites a passage in the "Temple Scroll," part of the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in Qumran in 1952, in which God describes "an ideal temple in great detail".

Columns 40-46 [of the scroll] describe the outer court as follows: "On the roof of the third story are columns for the constructing of booths for the Festival of Booths to be occupied by the elders, tribal chieftains, and the commanders of thousands and hundreds."

v18

Chapter Eight of Nehemiah has been all about the importance of and reverence for God's word—for the Jews, that would have been the Law, the Torah. As we close this chapter with v18, I want to bring out something that might slip past the casual reader.

Read Nehemiah 8:18.

Earlier in Chapter Eight the reading of God's word was associated with formality, with solemnity. Just the opening of the scroll by Ezra incited the people to involuntarily stand in reverence; this was followed immediately by worship of "the Lord the great God." When Ezra began actually reading from the scroll, the people wept with shame, with grief because the word pierced their hearts, convicting them, illuminating their sin and rebellion.

Now, after all that, at the close of Chapter Eight and before a return to confession of sins at further reading from the Law in Chapter Nine, Israel is celebrating the Feast of Booths—the central seven days of which are days of thanksgiving, joy, happiness, celebration and feasting. The end of v18 speaks of the eighth day of the Feast—a return to a "solemn assembly":

...and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly according to the ordinance.

But note how the verse begins:

He [Ezra] read from the book of the law of God daily, from the first day to the last day. And they celebrated the feast seven days...

The book of the law was also read out every one of those seven days of joyous celebration. Here is the principle:

God's word is a sharp sword that cuts into us to reveal our sin, causing sorrow and confession that leads us into worship of a holy God. But God's word is also a "lamp to our feet," containing "wonderful things," that are "sweeter than honey" (Psalm 119:105, 18,103). No matter the occasion, whether one of solemnity or exuberant joy, every day is the right time to be reading from God's word.

SESSION 27: NEHEMIAH 9:1-31 : *Nothing New*

PREFACE

In his journal entitled *Ecclesiastes*, Solomon wrote,

That which has been is that which will be,
And that which has been done is that which will be done.
So there is nothing new under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 1:9)

Our passage for this session—Nehemiah 9:1-31—includes a brief history of the Jews, from Abram being called out of Ur of the Chaldees to the destruction of Jerusalem under Nebuchadnezzar and Judah taken into exile. Reading this summary account, what is fascinating is that the attentive reader realizes that, just as Solomon pronounced, “there is nothing new under the sun.” And one is struck by the cold truth that just as “boys will be boys,” flesh will be flesh. Indeed, flesh is *determined* to be flesh. There is a certain inevitability to being human.

- In 445 BC the Levites remind the Jews of their sordid history, the vacillation of their predecessors over the many centuries, the nauseating cycle of rebellion followed by confession followed by the Lord’s compassion and forgiveness followed by rebellion, followed by confession, followed by... Over and over again Israel obeyed and rebelled, obeyed and rebelled. And we can hear the audience shout out the “Amen! All true,” they murmur. “We will change our ways. We won’t be like that. We will obey.” And in our Chapter Ten they draw up a new covenant, a new agreement to follow God’s law faithfully.
- Ironically, shortly thereafter, before the book of Nehemiah is finished, these same people will have returned to rebellion against the Lord, with
 - non-Levites living in the temple
 - failing to keep the Sabbath holy
 - once again marrying foreign women(It is officially time to reconsider the title for this class: Perhaps instead of the subtitle *Rebellion, Restoration, Revival*, it should have been *Rebellion, Restoration, Revival, **Rebellion***.)
- The *double* irony is that we here in the Twenty-first Century—almost 2,500 years later—recognize in Chapter Nine of Nehemiah a fairly accurate account of our *own* lives: a nauseating cycle of rebellion, confession, forgiveness, rebellion, confession...

So let us with humble trepidation consider Chapter Nine of Nehemiah—and let us dare not pick up any stones along the way.

VS1-5A: SETTING THE SCENE

The first five and a half verses of Chapter Nine set the scene for us. We are told it is now two days after the Solemn Assembly that closed the Feast of Booths, and that in marked contrast to the convivial rejoicing and celebration just ended, it is now time for mourning.

Read Nehemiah 9:1.

v2

Then we are told that what is to follow is just for those of Jewish heritage.

Read Nehemiah 9:2.

Quite a few commentators tie this immediate separatism to the earlier account of Ezra insisting that the Jews give up their foreign wives (Ezra 9), claiming that they had done it again. But I just don’t see it; there is no mention of wives in this account. However, not being a scholar of the ancient Hebrew language, I also have no—nor could I find—good explanation for the fact that the word translated “foreigners” or “strangers” is the same word used for “son” [*ben*]¹—as in “Judah ben Hur,” Judah, son of Hur.

I believe there are two aspects to this corporate separatism:

- In a manner similar to when Christians celebrate Communion, it is Israel acknowledging their special, chosen status; Gentiles could have no part in the worship and confession to follow.
- But it also acknowledges that Gentiles would have nothing to confess. What follows are accounts of *Israel's* repeated rebellion against God; Gentiles, though having the sin nature, not knowing Yahweh could not have been party to those rebellions against Him!

v3-5a

Again, this first paragraph—especially v3—is a summary of the more detailed account that follows.

Read Nehemiah 9:3.

This gathering spanned about six hours: three hours of reading from the law, followed by three hours of confession and worship. ["day" would be the daylight hours (i.e., 12 hours), so a fourth of that would be three hours]

Verses 4-5a list the names of the Levites leading the congregation.

v5B: CALL TO WORSHIP

Arise, bless the Lord your God forever and ever!

vs5C-6: WORSHIP

Read vs5c-6.

Professor Adeney: This glowing expression of adoration constitutes a suitable exordium [the introductory portion of an oration]. It is right and fitting that we should approach God in the attitude of pure worship, for the moment entirely losing ourselves in the contemplation of Him. [pure worship vs. praise/thanksgiving] This is the loftiest act of prayer, far above the selfish shriek for help in dire distress to which unspiritual men confine their utterance before God. It is also the most enlightening preparation for those lower forms of devotion that cannot be neglected so long as we are engaged on earth with our personal needs and sins, because it is necessary for us first of all to know what God is, and to be able to contemplate the thought of His being and nature, if we would understand the course of His action among men, or see our sins in the only true light—the light of His countenance.

As the professor says, it is exquisitely appropriate to worship God before confession. It is, admittedly, not the typical order; the flesh tells us we must confess our sins—come clean—before we are suitably attired to worship God. But there is no better way to reorient our mind for authentic confession of sin than by falling down in reverent worship of a holy God.

We do not know the true depth of the shadows in which we live until we compare them to the light. It is the brilliance of heaven's throne, the holiness of Almighty God, that *reveals* our sin, thus exposing it for appropriate confession.

vs7-31: CONFESSION

Just like the historical events themselves, the account in vs7-31, presented in poetic form, is a litany of duplicity [Roget's Thesaurus: "mouth-honor"]—saying one thing, but doing another. Jesus, railing against the Pharisees and scribes, said in Matthew 15,

"...rightly did Isaiah prophesy of you: 'This people honors Me with their lips, But their heart is far away from Me.'"
(Matthew 15:7b-8)

When I was a boy my mom taught me the same lesson with, "Don't [just] tell me you love me; show me you love me." That is, your verbal expressions of love mean little when you won't obey me to take out the trash.

The first portion, vs7-15, begins on a good note: praise to God for how He selected out Abram and (without naming him) Moses, and how the Lord got Israel out of Egypt, delivering them to the land He had promised. The Levites recount in v8 how Abram lived by faith:

You found his heart faithful before You,
And made a covenant with him

The first “but” comes in v16—

Read Nehemiah 9:16.

—and the second “but” comes in the middle of v17.

Read Nehemiah 9:17.

There is the pattern:

- In grace, the Lord takes care of His people
- His people rebel
- In grace, the Lord forgives.

Sound familiar? We don’t need to keep returning to the Exodus account, or Joshua and Kings and Chronicles, or Ezra and Nehemiah to recall this insidious pattern. For many of us, we need only return to last week—or yesterday. There is nothing new under the sun.

Rebellion can take many forms; among them, from vs16-17,

- arrogance
- stubbornness
- refusal to listen
- forgetfulness

Perhaps the most egregious form of rebellion is related in v18.

Read Nehemiah 9:18.

This is not just idolatry. The Lord takes it more personal than that. He calls it adultery, even prostitution.

“Then those of you who escape will remember Me among the nations to which they will be carried captive, how I have been hurt by their adulterous hearts which turned away from Me, and by their eyes which played the harlot after their idols; and they will loathe themselves in their own sight for the evils which they have committed, for all their abominations.” (Ezekiel 6:9)

Verses 17b to 25 describe more instances of God’s faithfulness to Israel, bringing the account to the acquisition of the promised land. Predictably, v26 is about Israel’s rebellion. With dizzying rapidity the narrative chronicles the vicious cycle:

Read vs26-28.

v25: grace
v26: rebellion
v27a: punishment
v27b: confession
v27c: grace
v28a: rebellion
v28b: punishment

v28c: confession
v28d: grace

And even when God reaches His limit, destroys Jerusalem and sends His people into exile—*still* He is gracious.

Read vs30-31.

In the ancient history of Israel we see played out the ravages and consequences of rebellion, of sin.
In the later history of Israel we see played out the ravages and consequences of rebellion, of sin.
In our own lives we see played out the ravages and consequences of rebellion, of sin.
And through it all we see, as well, the inexhaustible grace of a holy God.

One would think that experiencing all that grace would once and for all cure us of the sin-habit. Alas, like some at the church in Rome to whom Paul wrote, we imagine that God's grace might give us *permission* to sin.

What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin so that grace may increase? May it never be! How shall we who died to sin still live in it? (Romans 6:1-2)

God is not surprised by the behavior of flesh; He, after all, created it. And that behavior has remained constant since God planted a certain fruit tree in a certain garden, oh so long ago. From then until now, there is nothing new under the sun.

When one builds something that has an inherent flaw, usually one fixes the flaw. Flesh was born with a flaw: a proclivity toward rebellion against its Maker. But God chose not to fix the flaw; He chose not to change the nature of flesh. Instead He opted for a better solution. Let's close by reading what the apostle Paul has to say about both the flaw and the solution.

Read Romans 7:14-8:1.

SESSION 28: NEHEMIAH 9:32-38 : *Slavery*

CORRECTION/CLARIFICATION

The lesson last week ended with this:

When one builds something that has an inherent flaw, usually one fixes the flaw. Flesh was born with a flaw: a proclivity toward rebellion against its Maker. But God chose not to fix the flaw; He chose not to change the nature of flesh. Instead He opted for a better solution.

The following Monday morning my thoughts returned to this and I realized that that statement should not be left as it is echoing without some correction—or at least clarification. It is an arresting thought, but one that suggests God did something imperfectly—and that, perhaps, the imperfection caught Him by surprise.

The truth is, the aforementioned “flaw” was not a bug—an unintended mistake—but a *feature*. Rebellion was designed into flesh to show the need for an external Savior. Man could not save himself because sin and rebellion was and is part of his nature. The Creator God meant for that to be the case. That was part of His plan, so that the “solution” required—the only solution available—would be the sacrifice and resurrection of His Son.

PREFACE

Last week, in vs1-31 of Nehemiah 9, the Levites and priests recited for the people the history of God’s grace and Israel’s rebellion; it was spoken in the form of a prayer.

Sidebar: Note the familiar name in vs4 & 5 that ties this in with Pastor Jeremy’s messages from Zechariah: the high priest “Jeshua” (in Ezra-Nehemiah), “Joshua” in Zechariah.

The long narrative was, in a manner of speaking, a confession, since it detailed the many times Israel answered God’s lovingkindness, forbearance and grace with a rebellious spirit and disobedient actions.

In our passage this week, vs32-38, they get more specific and abject with their confession as they transition from the past to the present.

v32

Last week we discussed the relationship between worship and confession—that the logic of flesh is that we must “clean ourselves up” by confessing our sins first before we worship, but that by beginning (at times) with worship we correctly orient our position before a holy God, with the added benefit that His light will *reveal* those things in our lives that dwell in darkness.

Thus the people of Judah began their long poem of corporate confession with worship in vs5-6. That worship established the correct perspective: it established the character, the nature of the One to whom they confessed, and it established His exalted position far above their own.

Much the same thing is going on in v32.

Read Nehemiah 9:32.

This portion of their prayer opens, in its formal address, with a declaration of three aspects of God’s nature:

the great, the mighty, and the awesome (terrible) God

This speaks to His **majesty**, His sovereignty, His absolute dominion and power.

who keeps covenant

This speaks to the Lord’s **fidelity**, His trustworthiness.

and lovingkindness (mercy)

Finally His **compassion**, His tender love for His people.

Our response might be, “Yeah, I know that. I don’t need to recite something like that before I pray.” But think about it:

- we begin with our fleshly nature—that part of us programmed-in to go our own way, to reject God’s awesome dominion over our lives;
- then add to that the constant bombardment from the dark morass in which we must dwell.

With both of these working against our relationship with a holy God, it is imperative that we remind ourselves, as often as possible, of who He truly is—and how much higher He is than us. With this formal declaration Israel reminds itself that the One to whom they pray, to whom they confess

- rules over everything there is (there is no king or God higher);
- even with all that, still loves us in a personal, intimate way; [\[Ezekiel 16\]](#)
- and can be completely trusted to keep His word (in contrast to anyone on earth).

Because of our nature and our environment, it is necessary for us to be repeatedly reminded of these truths.

Now, if the thought in the rest of v32 stood by itself (“Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant before You...”), without being completed by vs33-35, one might conclude that all the foregoing (vs1-31) had been for naught—that the people of Judah had learned nothing from the recitation of their rebellion.

But taken in context this—the only entreaty in their prayer—reveals a certain tender humanity, and thus is not dissimilar to our own prayers. They make a plea to the One they just described in v31: “...a gracious and compassionate God.”

The Levites employ what is called a *litotes*.

Sidebar:

litotes (lie-toe'-tease) = ironical understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of its contrary (e.g., you won't be sorry, meaning you'll be glad)

K&D: “Do not let all the hardship seem insignificant [small] before You” = *Let our affliction be regarded by Thee as great and heavy.*

At first this may seem out of place, or at least premature. After all the historical evidence for Israel’s disobedience and rejection of God’s law, should their first word be *God, look what we have suffered. Please go easy on us*. But if you think about it, this is not dissimilar [\[litotes!\]](#) to what Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Read Matthew 26:37-39.

Just as Jesus closes His entreaty with

“...yet not as I will, but as You will.”

the leaders and people of Judah quickly add what we have in v33.

v33

Read Nehemiah 9:33.

Time and again during His time of ministry on earth, Christ heard people cry out to Him for mercy.

- the ten lepers
- two blind men
- the Canaanite woman with the demon-possessed daughter

It is admittedly a fine line, but none of these people requested a freebie; none of them requested *grace*. Grace is God freely giving us something we do not deserve; mercy is God *not* giving us what we *do* deserve. All these people requesting mercy from Jesus represent the corruption of a fallen world, the corruption of disease, death... sin.

As sinners they deserved that corruption. As sinners, we deserve that corruption. We cry out to God, “Yes, we have rebelled, we have sinned. We have earned your wrath. But please have mercy on us.” And then, if we are truly submitted to His lordship, we add, with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and the people standing in Jerusalem that day,

“...yet not as I will, but as You will.”

Even so, it's admittedly hard in this moment not to be reminded of the sad episode in 1989 when the two Menendez brothers killed their parents in California. At their trials in the early '90s, one woman on the jury wanted to show mercy to these two adult men on the grounds that they were now orphans. The obvious response is that yes, they are now orphans **because they killed their parents!**

The Jews are pleading for mercy, for God to consider the full weight of the suffering they have experienced. But the obvious response to that is yes, you have suffered, **because of your insistent, repeated rebellion!**

But right away they cover this seeming faux pax by admitting to God, in v33, that

You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.

Indeed. They had broken the covenant made with God, but God was faithful to His end of the agreement. He did precisely what He promised He would do if they rejected His law.

vs34-37

Almost 1,000 years earlier Yahweh told Israel how it would play out if they were unfaithful to Him. Oddly enough, what He foretold then sounds remarkably like what actually happened!

Read Deuteronomy 28:45-48.

Moses goes on to itemize the horrors that would befall such a rebellious nation:

- vs49-50: invasion by a brutal foreign land;
- v51: this invading nation would take their livestock and their crops;
- v52: it would besiege their cities, and destroy the walls surrounding them (Jerusalem!);
- v53: under siege, those in the cities would know famine so severe that they would become cannibals, eating their own children.

Back to Nehemiah 9.

One can read the account of what actually happened to Jerusalem during Nebuchadnezzar's siege and tie off every prophesy made by the Lord through Moses. It happened exactly as He said 1,000 years earlier.

Read Nehemiah 9:34-37.

Israel accepted the blessings of God—but rejected Him. They accepted the bounty, but forgot the source of that bounty. So the Lord took it away and gave it to others. And now Israel is a “slave” in their own Promised Land.

The passage that ends Chapter Nine could be summarized:

*You, O God, **poured out** your blessings on this people, but we squandered it. We answered Your goodness with evil. So you then **poured out** Your judgment against us, taking away from us the bounty of the land and giving it to our masters, leaving us as slaves in our own land.*

In Chapter Nine Judah recites their history of rebellion, but then the passage ends with them bringing the rebellion forward to their present day. Let us do the same.

We have read of Israel's rebellious sin even in the midst of the Lord's gracious generosity. He gave them a good land, "flowing with milk and honey," a fruitful land producing bountiful crops—a good life. Did that draw them closer to Him? No they became full of themselves and were unfaithful to Him. Using the Lord's own imagery, they became adulterers, and "played the harlot."

Ironically, buried within the lament that closes this chapter is the solution to this universal problem (for this proclivity for disobedience did not begin or end with the people of Israel). Let me show you what I mean by rewording vs34-37 to reveal the answer.

**For we have all obeyed You
We have paid attention to Your commandments and Your admonitions
With Your great goodness which You have given us,
With the broad and rich land which You have set before us,
We have served You, and turned from our evil deeds.
Behold, we are slaves today,
And as to the land which You gave to our fathers to eat of its fruit and its bounty, Behold, we are slaves in it.
Its abundant produce is for You, our King.
You graciously rule over us because of our obedience;
You rule over our bodies
And over our cattle at Your good pleasure,
So we live under Your rule and under Your care with great joy.**

How do we live in joy rather than distress? By acknowledging the Lord God as our King, and living in obedience to Him.

SESSION 29: NEHEMIAH 10:1-39 : Promises

PREFACE

Please turn to Chapter Ten of Nehemiah. I am delighted to inform you that this morning I am going to spend the next thirty minutes developing a brief biography for each of the 84 individuals listed in vs1-27... *Just kidding!*

Truth is, we are going to skip over those names—some of which are not individuals, but family names—except for just a couple of quick notes.

v9:38

In the Hebrew Bible, the last verse of Chapter Nine is the first verse of Chapter Ten, which, of course, makes perfect sense. Remember, the verse and chapter divisions in our Bible are *not* inspired; they just make using the Bible more practical and convenient.

Just as when we encounter a chapter that begins, “Therefore...”, v38 prompts us to look backward with its opening of “Now because of all this...” The obvious response is, “Because of all *what?*”

The preceding chapter recited the ancient history of Yahweh’s blessings and Israel’s rebellion against Him. It closed with an admission that little had changed since the national punishment for that rebellion: Babylonian exile. Now, about ninety-two years after the initial return of the exiles to the homeland—a substantial blessing from Yahweh in itself, as well as a promise kept—Israel in Judah was still rebelling against the law of God.

Chapter Nine was the confession, the admission of wrong-doing, summarized neatly in v33 with “You have dealt faithfully, but we have acted wickedly.” Chapter Ten represents the repentance part of the confession—the turning away and moving in a more obedient direction.

Read Nehemiah 9:38.

vs10:1-27

The names signed to this new covenant represent the leaders of the community—Nehemiah the governor, priests, scribes (Levites)—and the leaders of families. The most interesting aspect of this list—perhaps the *only* interesting aspect—is the omission of two important names: Ezra and Eliashib the high priest. One would certainly expect those names to be on the document, but they are not there, and there is no concrete reason put forth for the omission. One is left only to surmise:

- With Ezra at least one can make an educated guess based on his personality and previous actions. Throughout his portion of this story he has not forced himself or God’s law on the community. Remember, for example, that *he* did not call the assembly for the reading of God’s word; the people did. So some posit that it would be in keeping with his nature and method to let the other men take the lead in this. That is, he has presented the Law to them, which exposed their guilt. Now it is up to the people to decide what they will do about it.
- With Eliashib the high priest—Jeshua’s grandson—we have even less to go on, so there is little to be gained in guessing.

vs28-39

Far more important than the names affixed to the covenant are, in ascending order of importance,

- its content,
- its effect,
- its application today.

First, just what is this. A number of different words are used to describe this document:

The usual Hebrew word for “covenant,” used, for example, when God made His covenant with Abraham (Genesis 17) is

berit (ber-eeth') = from <H1262> (barah) (in the sense of **cutting** [like <H1254> (bara')]); **a compact (because made by passing between pieces of flesh)** :- confederacy, [con-]feder[-ate], covenant, league.

The account in Nehemiah gets close to this in 9:38 with the verb translated “make” or “making”.

karat (kaw-rath') = a primitive root; **to cut** (off, down or asunder); by implication to *destroy* or *consume*; **specifically to covenant (i.e. make an alliance or bargain, origin by cutting flesh and passing between the pieces)** :- be chewed, be con- [feder-] ate, covenant, cut (down, off), destroy, fail, feller, be freed, hew (down), make a league ([covenant]), × lose, perish, × utterly, × want.

In Genesis 15 God instructs Abram—in the account that includes the historic and foundational declaration that Abram “believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness”—to cut in two a three year old heifer, a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram and to arrange the halves opposite each other. Then the Lord passed between the pieces as “a smoking oven and a flaming torch” to establish the covenant with Abram.

What are they “making”? Depending on your translation, an “agreement,” or “covenant,” which is an interesting word:

amana (am-aw-nah') = **feminine of <H543> ('amen); something fixed, i.e. a covenant**, an allowance :- certain portion, sure.

Finally, it is referred to as a “document” in vs9:38 and 10:1; that word is not in the Hebrew, but is implied by the word translated “sealed,” which means just that: to close something up with a seal. The KJVs and the NIV come closest to the literal text:

Read Nehemiah 9:38-10:1.

So this is an official, signed and sealed [\[each man's seal would have constituted his “signature”\]](#) agreement, or covenant, drawn up by the people of Judah. How seriously did they take this?

Read Nehemiah 10:28-29.

That pretty much covers everyone. And their serious intention is underlined by v29 where they state that they are taking on themselves [\[or entering into\]](#) “a curse and an oath...”, which is the boilerplate that means, “We declare on oath that we will do this. If we fail to do it, let us be accursed.”

So now we come to the content of this agreement. We could devote the rest of our time this morning detailing the specific vows included, but if we did nothing more than that we would miss the true lesson from the last few chapters of Nehemiah. To understand what is really going on here—to gain something substantial from God’s word—we must move from the content to its effect, and then to its application for us today.

To accomplish the first two, let us have some antiphonal readings: some of us will read from Chapter Ten, while some of us read from Chapter Thirteen. By this alone the point will be made; no extra commentary will be necessary.

The details of the historical narrative we will address in subsequent lessons, when we get there, but for our purpose today we are going to step out of the narrative flow. For now I will just point out that somewhere between Chapters Ten and Thirteen Nehemiah is called back to Babylon by Artaxerxes. As we read from Chapter Thirteen, Nehemiah has just returned to Judah to discover what has transpired in his absence.

So here is what the people of Judah promised the Lord God they would do, followed by how it turned out:

Read...

Nehemiah 10:30 →
Nehemiah 10:31 →
Nehemiah 10:32-37 →
Nehemiah 10:38-39 →

Nehemiah 13:23-24
Nehemiah 13:15-16
Nehemiah 13:10
Nehemiah 13:10-11

Professor Adeney: Nothing so hinders and distresses the missionary as the repeated outbreak of their old heathen vices among his converts. The drunkard cannot be reckoned safe directly he has signed the pledge. Old habits may be damped down without being extinguished, and when this is the case they will flame up again as soon as the repressive influence is removed.

In just a few short years the people of Judah had reneged on *every promise made* in the covenant they so solemnly—and one has to assume, earnestly—drew up. Reading from Genesis to Malachi, one loses count of the times Israel stands there and vows, “We will do this! We will obey!” then turns right around and reneges on the vow.

But we cannot leave it there, for in countless ways we are as guilty as these sad and disappointing people of Judah.

Discussion

Why is it so hard to keep our promises to God?

Is the answer, then, that we shouldn't promise anything to Him?

Are some of His promises conditional?

SESSION 30: NEHEMIAH 11-12 : A Day of Rejoicing!

PREFACE

Our lesson this morning is a landmark occasion that you may wish to record in your personal diary. For someone who once devoted an entire session to the one word “in,” it is of historical note that today we are going to cover two chapters.

THE INITIAL CALLING

Let’s back up a little to get our bearings. The activity carried out in Chapters Eleven and Twelve had its genesis in Chapter Seven.

Read Nehemiah 7:4-5.

The governor states his intentions and, as a starting point, in vs6-73 reads into the record the census of the Babylonian exiles who returned to Judah with Zerubbabel. But then immediate events call a halt to his goal of repopulating Jerusalem.

- In Chapter Eight the people call on Ezra to read from “the book of the law,” and a worship service and Sunday School ensue. Then, because of the month it is, a series of feasts, sacrifices, and days of confession follow.
- Chapter Nine is a recounting of Israel’s miserable track record in obeying God’s law, and
- Chapter Ten records the text of a covenant they draw up promising to obey Him and faithfully support His temple from then on.

THE LISTS

As Chapter Eleven opens Nehemiah is back to the business of populating Jerusalem. The city has a brand new wall and a brand new temple, but an insufficient number of people to preserve and protect it. He needs to move people off the land and into the city, and the method chosen for accomplishing this was by lot.

Read Nehemiah 11:1-2.

While the modern perception of casting lots might be of a game of chance in which one throws dice to see what happens to turn up, in Israel—and especially in the OT—casting lots was a method to discover the Lord’s will. This was how they

- selected the goat to be sacrificed on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16)
- detected guilty persons (Joshua 7:14)
- allocated Temple duties (1 Chronicles 24:5)

The last recorded instance of casting lots to discern the Lord’s will was to select Matthias as a disciple to replace Judas (Acts 1:24-26). Interestingly, this last account is just before the Day of Pentecost, during which the Holy Spirit was for the first time given permanently to all believers. With the indwelling Spirit, Christians need not cast lots to know the Lord’s will.

I didn’t find anyone else mentioning this, but I find it mildly interesting, and perhaps significant, that the number moved into Jerusalem was a tenth of the general population—as if the people and the land itself were making a *tithe* to the “holy city.” [\[Just a thought.\]](#)

The Moves

From v11:3 through the end of the chapter Nehemiah details the shifts in population from country to city, and from one tribal area to another. In Chapter Twelve, vs1-26, Nehemiah reprises the list of the priests and Levites that originally returned from Babylon under Zerubbabel, 92 years earlier.

A BRIEF REVIEW

We cannot assign a specific year to the dedication of the newly completed walls. We can only be reasonably assured of the sequence of events over a span of about 12 years:

1. Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem (445 B.C.),
2. completion of the wall and fortifications (445 B.C.),
3. reading of The Law,
4. great confession and fast,
5. sealing of the covenant,
6. census and the redistribution of the people of Judah,
7. dedication of the wall,
8. Nehemiah leaves Jerusalem for Babylon (during the year 433-432 B.C.).

Let's back up a little more to briefly review what has brought us to this point.

(You might wish to refer to pages 12 and 13 in your booklet.)

- Because of centuries of rebellion against the Lord God and His laws, Judah was removed from the land by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, in stages, beginning around 604 B.C.
- Approximately seventy years later, Cyrus the Persian is now ruling Babylon, and the Lord God moves him to have the temple in Jerusalem rebuilt. To accomplish this he must give his blessings to the re-population of Jerusalem by (some but not all of) the Jews dwelling in the precincts of Babylon.
- The first group migrates to Judah under the leadership of Sheshbazzar/Zerubbabel and the high priest Jeshua/Joshua, arriving in the spring of 537 B.C.
- Beginning from the inside out, their first project is to rebuild the temple altar, which they complete. But shortly after beginning work on the temple itself, they experience repeated opposition by the Samaritans, and others living around Jerusalem. Discouraged, they abandon their work on the temple for about ten years.
- God sends the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to light a fire under the Jews. Subsequently, around 520 B.C., Zerubbabel and Jeshua get the people organized and back to work on the temple. So the rebuilding project begun under Cyrus is now to be completed under Darius in 515.
- Fifty-seven years later, in 458, the Lord God once again moves in the heart of a Babylonian king—this time Artaxerxes I, who sends Ezra and a second group of exiles back to Judah. The king's purpose in sending Ezra is to
 - return the implements and wealth of the temple that had been removed by Nebuchadnezzar,
 - and to reinstate "the laws of your God" in Judah.
- The true motive behind this benevolence is revealed in Ezra 7:23, near the end of his official decree:
Read Ezra 7:23.
[i.e., "Hey, be sure to put in a good word for us to your God. Couldn't hurt."]
- In 445, thirteen years later, God once again works in the heart of Artaxerxes through his cupbearer, Nehemiah, who becomes the governor of Judah. In an astounding 52 days the wall is completed. And now, after the interim of public gatherings dealing with the spiritual condition of the people, it is time to formally dedicate the new restored Jerusalem wall.

DEDICATION OF THE WALL

I am reminded of the year the third film in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy won the Oscar for Best Picture. Everyone knew that the award was not just for that picture, but for all three. They had just waited until the trilogy was completed before making the award.

It is the same situation in Jerusalem. Although it is referred to as the "Dedication of the Wall," everyone knows it really is to dedicate and sanctify the rebuilt *Jerusalem*—all of it, from the restored temple, the repaired houses and streets, places of business, to the rebuilt gates and wall encompassing the city.

But even more than that it is to dedicate the city on a *spiritual* level—the re-institution of corporate worship at the temple; the sacrifices, feasts, and holy days; a restored priesthood; and a renewed dedication to God's Law. It is not

just the dedication of a restored city wall, **but a consecration to God of a restored people in their homeland.**

And this really is the high point, the climax of the Ezra-Nehemiah story. Everything up till now has been leading up to this joyous celebration. If I were writing the story, it would end on the upbeat tone of this chapter. [\[roll the credits\]](#) I am *not* writing it, however; God is, and He has His reasons for ending the narrative on a down-note in Chapter Thirteen. We will see that by the end of the story, even Nehemiah has fallen a bit in our estimation.

But we are not there yet. Now is the time of rejoicing. And what a moment it is.

Sidebar: Interesting word, “dedication” in v27.

dedication = *hanukka* (khan-ook-kaw') [\[Chanukkah!\]](#) = initiation, consecration.

Yamauchi: After the recapture of the temple by Judas Maccabeus from the Seleucids in 165 B.C., the temple was again rededicated, an act that was the basis for the Jewish holiday of Chanukkah.

Getting the Band Back Together

Read Nehemiah 12:27-30.

[\[Netophathites = neh-tah-faw-thites' \(a town near Bethlehem\)](#)

[Azmaveth = az-maw'-veth\]](#)

In vs31-43 Nehemiah organizes two groups to march and sing around the city wall.

Group 1: Ezra

- choir using the musical instruments of “David the man of God” led the way
- followed by half of the leaders of Judah
- Ezra led the group

Group 2: Nehemiah

- choir leading the way
- Nehemiah next, at the head of half of the leaders of Judah

The word translated “choirs” in the NASB is literally—as included in the text in the other versions (the NASB puts it in a margin note)—“thanksgiving choir.”

choir = *toda* = from <H3034> (yadah); properly **an extension of the hand**, i.e. (by implication) avowal, or (usually) **adoration**; specifically **a choir of worshippers** :- confession, (sacrifice of) **praise**, thanks (-giving, offering).

Both groups probably started in the vicinity of the Valley Gate, in the western wall. Ezra’s group headed south, down past the Dung and Fountain Gates, heading north up the eastern wall. Nehemiah’s group headed north, up the Broad Wall, turned east, passed the two Towers and the Sheep Gate, then headed south. The two groups probably met somewhere around the Muster Gate, which would have been adjacent to (just east of) the temple entrance.

Then everyone came together as one group on the temple grounds.

Read Nehemiah 12:40.

After listing the names of the priests, v42 includes some interesting details—and good counsel for every choir, or group leading worship, and their leaders. On the surface it seems pretty mundane—

And the singers sang, with Jezrahiah their leader,

—but the counsel lies behind the text:

sang = *shama* = to *hear* intelligently; that is, **they sang so as to be heard** and the director’s name, Jezrahiah, means **“Yahweh shines forth.”**

Read Nehemiah 12:43.

Not just a time of thanksgiving and praise, but they wanted every living soul in Samaria to hear their joy—and, by the way, their triumph over their foes.

They ended this celebration day by taking care of a few housekeeping details. They assigned duties to the temple workers. And this too was part of their joy,

for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who served.

Reading this final paragraph, I scratch my head over the misguided priorities of some of today's churches, in which the leading of singing and the leading of worship is just a sort of last-minute, whoever-is-willing-to do-it affair. Listen to how it is mentioned here.

Read Nehemiah 12:44b-47.

From this passage and many others in God's word we see that in the economy of His worship and praise, those who lead the singing and praise are very important to God. After all, we call it a "service of worship"; shouldn't that mean that we take seriously the leaders *of* that worship?

SESSION 31: NEHEMIAH 13:1-14 : *The Evil Within*

PREFACE

God, in His plan to reestablish Israel in their homeland after their exile, put forward several key leaders [pages 3 & 4 in booklet]:

- In the book of Ezra,
 - Zerubbabel: “prince of Judah,” grandson of the last Davidic king, governor
 - Jeshua: high priest
 - Haggai and Zechariah: prophets
 - and, of course, Ezra: a priest (descendant of Aaron) and scribe
- In the book of Nehemiah,
 - Nehemiah: governor, former cupbearer to Artaxerxes
 - Eliashib: high priest
 - and, still, Ezra: priest and scribe

From what we know of their personalities, perhaps the greatest contrast is found between Ezra and Nehemiah—the namesakes of the two journals we have been studying.

- Ezra was a man of profound spiritual depth, a scholar, a thinker
- Nehemiah was a man of dynamic action, an organizer, a “doer”

To the point of the remainder of our study—Nehemiah 13—when faced with the people’s sin, Ezra’s heart broke, and he went into mourning.

Read Ezra 9:3-5.

In contrast to Ezra’s response, when Governor Nehemiah learned of the people’s sin, he got mad. Where Ezra pulled out his own hair, Nehemiah pulled out the hair of others!

Read Nehemiah 13:25.

If Nehemiah has been active during the last twelve chapters, in Chapter Thirteen he kicks his industry into high gear.

NEHEMIAH’S ABSENCE

As we mentioned last week, after twelve years in Judah, Nehemiah returned to Babylon for a while—one would assume at the behest of the king.

Read Nehemiah 13:6.

The Elephantine [Egyptian] papyri records that in 407 B.C. Bagohi was governor of Judah, so while we cannot say with certainty the length of Nehemiah’s second term, we can say with reasonable certainty that it could not have been longer than approximately 23 years—and was probably considerably shorter.

So Nehemiah was gone from Judah for a while, then returned.

vs1-9

A Difficult Chronology

It is difficult to nail down the chronology of the first few verses of Chapter Thirteen because of the first few words that open v1, v4, and v6: “On that day...”, “Now prior to this...”, and “But during all this time...”

Taken at face value, vs1-3 seem to be a continuation of the previous chapter. Look at v12:44—“**On that day** men were also appointed...” That is, after the triumphant, celebratory dedication of the wall and the gathering on the temple grounds, they immediately began installing the priests and Levites in their jobs at the temple.

The next paragraph, which just happens to be in the next chapter, begins with, again, “**On that day** they read aloud...” Based on the previous events, it would make perfect sense that on the day of the dedication and installments of the Levites the ceremony would include a public reading from the “book of Moses” and that they would be in a state of mind to put into effect its dictates.

Read Nehemiah 13:1-3.

But then the chronology becomes even more troublesome with the next paragraph, beginning with v4. The despicable behavior of the priest Eliashib with his good buddy and—perhaps—relation [the word just means “close to” or “near”], Tobiah, is placed *before* (at least) vs1-3. But if vs1-3 are a continuation of the events of Chapter Twelve—during which Nehemiah was certainly in Jerusalem (leading the band!)—then how can he say in v6 that “During all this time I was not in Jerusalem”?

There’s the problem—and where I will call a halt to the sausage-making. The problem of chronology should not, and need not, become an obstacle to discerning what the Lord is telling us here. At some point the priests and people of Judah were reminded that Ammonites and Moabites were to be excluded from the assembly of Israel. They then implemented that. At another point in time, during Nehemiah’s absence, Eliashib and Tobiah got up to their shenanigans. When Nehemiah returned from Babylon, he learned of this and immediately did something about it. So, what did they do?

vs4-9

Read Nehemiah 13:4-5.

What was Tobiah? An Ammonite.

Who was to be excluded from even the “assembly” of Israel? Ammonites.

Who was now living *in* the temple? Tobiah the Ammonite!

You see the problem with the chronology? If, as the text suggests, Tobiah moved into the temple before the events of vs1-3, which ends with “So when they heard the law, they excluded all foreigners from Israel,” why was Tobiah still there when Nehemiah returned?

Who was Tobiah?

Read Nehemiah 2:9-10.

Read Nehemiah 6:1-2.

Let’s bring this home.

Someone living in Norwalk hates Martensdale Community church (let’s call him “Harry”). Harry despises every person there, what they stand for, and spends every waking hour conspiring to wipe them off the map. One day Pastor Jeremy invites Harry to back up a moving van to the front door of the church building and take up residence in the Fireside Room. So every Sunday when we come to worship, there’s Harry, in his easy chair, sipping cocktails and watching TV.

That’s precisely what was going on in Jerusalem during Nehemiah’s absence.

So Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem, and early on he goes to the temple to pay his respects to the high priest. And in keeping with his skill-set, I can imagine the governor asking Eliashib how things had been going in his absence. “Couldn’t be better!” The high priest assures him. Then, while he is still there on the premises, Nehemiah decides to do a little looking around, and he begins opening doors.

He comes to the chamber where all the offerings other than meat were stored, the money, and all the utensils used in the sacrifices—a fair-sized room. And what does he discover when he opens the door? None of what was *supposed* to be in there, but the belongings of Tobiah the Ammonite—and perhaps even the man himself!

If this was Ezra, he would have closed the door, torn his robe and thrown ashes over his head. But this is Nehemiah; what does he do?

Read Nehemiah 13:8-9.

He kicked out the enemy, had the room hosed down [ceremonially purified], and everything put back where it belonged. And we hear nothing of Tobiah again. Now, *that's* a man of action.

Application

More than a few commentators cross-reference this with Jesus cleansing the temple of the money-changers. And there *is* a connection between the two. But for applying this to our lives, we need to lift it away from a physical building—for this reason: The illustration I offered earlier, of an enemy of this church moving into the Fireside Room, was a flawed correlation. The later *synagogues*, not the Jerusalem temple, would be more synonymous with our church buildings. This building is not holy; all kinds of things take place within its walls: Awana kids play games; we play basketball and hold potluck dinners; Alcoholics Anonymous meets here; we collect money for charities—even *sell* things on Crafts Day.

The Jerusalem temple was a holy place (with, admittedly, graduated levels of holiness, from the outer courts to the inner holy of holies). One did not have children playing games in the temple building. The temple represented their corporate connection to God: without it, they were adrift; with it, they had a “firm foundation” for their faith in Him.

And I believe that is the better application for us. We need to apply Nehemiah’s actions in the temple not to the church building, but to **the condition of our faith**.

- What has taken up comfortable residence in your life that doesn’t belong there?
- Has the enemy taken up residence in some back closet of your faith to corrupt the purity of the whole? [actually, Nehemiah’s actions are a perfect tie-in to our forthcoming study of Colossians—a church where spurious philosophies were corrupting their faith in Christ]

W. P. Lockhart: We must never forget that the Christian is now what the temple was of old, the dwelling-place of the Most High (1Co_6:19). Luther observes: “A Christian may be compared with the tripartite temple of Solomon. His spirit is the holy of holies, God’s dwelling amid the darkness of faith (he believes what he neither sees, nor feels, nor grasps); his soul is the holy place, where are the seven lights of the golden candlesticks; his body is the fore-court exposed to general view, where every one can observe how he lives and what he does; in the fore-court stands the altar of burnt-offerings, whereon we are to lay our bodies as living sacrifices unto God.” How sad when the temple in any part of it is desecrated! When the heart in which Christ should dwell is occupied by the world, many things must be cast forth, in order that it may become the abode of the King.

vs10-12

It can be no accident that at the same time that Tobiah the Ammonite had taken up residence in the temple storehouse, tithes and contributions to the temple had ceased. Just think about it: If Harry from Norwalk was still in residence in the Fireside Room, would the congregation pop for the cost of the room’s redecoration? If you knew your offerings of grain and oil would go to the care and feeding of a despicable enemy, would *you* bring them to the temple? This was Nehemiah’s second discovery.

Read Nehemiah 13:10-12.

In v11, the NASB “reprimanded” is a little soft (the KJVs are better with “contended”).

rib (reeb) = a primitive root; properly **to toss, i.e. grapple**; mostly figurative to *wrangle*, i.e. *hold a controversy*; (by implication) to *defend* :- adversary, chide, complain, contend, debate, × ever, × lay wait, plead, rebuke, strive, × thoroughly.

The same word is used in v25:

So I **contended** with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God...

v13-14

Once Tobiah was thrown out and the temple cleansed, Governor Nehemiah, in v13, assigns new and more reliable men to be in charge of the storehouses. And then he closes this passage with one of his patented entreaties to God.

Read Nehemiah 13:14.

He does this three times in Chapter Thirteen—four times, if you count v29, which is against others. I'm going to revisit these in a later session.

APPLICATION

Once the offerings had dried up, the Levites realized they could no longer feed their families working at the temple, so they went back to their family lands—to live and work the fields. Remember just last week we read how, at the conclusion of the dedication of the wall, they meticulously assigned all the temple duties for the priests and Levites. And now, not that long after, these same workers have abandoned their work and returned to their land outside the city.

If it is true that the genesis of this situation was Tobiah moving into the temple storeroom, look at all the consequences of that one sin:

- Because the tithes and offerings ceased, the workers were not supported.
- Because the workers were not supported, they had to leave to work elsewhere.
- Because the workers left, worship and sacrifice could not take place.
- Because worship and sacrifice did not take place, the Lord lost His place in their lives, and they remained guilty in their sins, alienated from God. [\[Eliashib\]](#)

And because the parallel for us is not the church building, but our very lives, look at how one sin in our life can expand and multiply to harm, perhaps even destroy our fellowship with God. How important it is to keep "short accounts" with God.

SESSION 32: NEHEMIAH 13:15-22 : A Sanctified Sabbath

CODA

After class last week, Alex told me that the application with which we concluded—

The parallel for us is not the church building, but our very lives, look at how one sin in our life can expand and multiply to harm, perhaps even destroy our fellowship with God. How important it is to keep “short accounts” with God.

—reminded him of a passage from 1 Corinthians 6. He was absolutely correct, and I should have closed with it. So let’s add that coda to last week’s study now.

Read 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

PREFACE

Last week Nehemiah discovered Tobiah the Ammonite living in the temple and that, perhaps as a consequence, offerings to the temple had ceased. As he put it, the house of God had been forsaken. This week the governor discovers even more that has gone awry during his absence.

Let’s set it up by returning to a portion of the covenant the people of Judah drew up at the dedication of the new wall.

Read Nehemiah 10:31.

This week we see just how far Judah has fallen from that pledge. In vs15-18 of Chapter Thirteen we have the offense and Nehemiah’s “reprimand” [there’s that soft word again for vigorous “contending”]; in vs19-22 the offense is rectified by Nehemiah.

VS15-18: THE OFFENSE

The first offense was *internal*, as it were, committed by the Jews of Judah.

Read Nehemiah 13:15.

The second offense was *external*—sort of—coming from non-Jews either living in Jerusalem or at least who had set up shops there. Still, the Jews who had signed the earlier covenant were permitting it and participating in it, so the burden was still on them.

Read Nehemiah 13:16.

So the governor confronts the nobles and leaders who had permitted this.

Read Nehemiah 13:17-18.

Note what Nehemiah is saying: working and selling goods on the Sabbath = *profaning* the Sabbath; he calls it an “evil thing.”

profaning, desecrating^{niv} = *halal* (khaw-lal') = a primitive root [compare <H2470> (chalah)]; properly **to bore, i.e. (by implication) to wound**, to dissolve; figurative **to profane** (a person, place or thing), to break (one’s word), to begin (as if by an “opening wedge”); denominative (from <H2485> (chaliyl)) to play (the flute) :- begin (x men began), **defile**, x break, defile, x eat (as common things), x first, x gather the grape thereof, x take inheritance, pipe, player on instruments, pollute, (cast as) profane (self), prostitute, slay (slain), sorrow, stain, wound.

Their disobedience was not just against the recent covenant they had drawn up, but against God’s original law—that law the reading of which they previously had taken such delight in, and which had so dramatically convicted them.

Read Exodus 31:12-16.

vs19-22: THE FIX

In a moment we'll translate the ancient to the modern for application. But for now let's continue on in the text; let's see what Nehemiah did about this.

Read Nehemiah 13:19.

The Lord told Israel, through the prophet Jeremiah,

"Listen to the word of the Lord, kings of Judah, and all Judah and all inhabitants of Jerusalem who come in through these gates: Thus says the Lord, 'Take heed for yourselves, and do not carry any load on the Sabbath day or bring anything in through the gates of Jerusalem. You shall not bring a load out of your houses on the Sabbath day nor do any work, but keep the Sabbath day holy, as I commanded your forefathers.'" (Jeremiah 17:20-22)

For a couple of weeks some of these outside merchants, assuming that Nehemiah was just another bureaucrat filled with harmless hot air, camped outside the city gates, as usual, ready to enter the city for business as usual on the morning of the Sabbath.

So the governor had to threaten them. He "warned" them [same word translated "admonished" in v15] that if they kept doing this he would have to "use force" against them [lit. (as in all but NASB) "lay hands on" them]. And they finally got the message, and stopped queuing up for the Sabbath.

And I like the shrewd touch he employs in v22.

Read Nehemiah 13:22a.

Nehemiah wanted to make sure this was not seen as just some police action. In v19 he writes that he took his initial action with his own men—his "servants". But if it were to be left at that, the critical connection with Sabbath holiness might be lost. From the narrative we get the impression that the weakest link in the process of civil and spiritual order in Judah was the priesthood. So the governor shrewdly got the Levites personally involved—not just to supplement the police force, but to *sanctify*—to purify, to make holy—the action of keeping out commerce on the Sabbath.

Then, naturally, he concludes this episode with another of his entreaties for the Lord's favor.

Read Nehemiah 13:22b.

APPLICATION AND DISCUSSION

If we distill this down, especially for the purpose of application, what we are really talking about in this passage is less about the specifics of restricting commerce and closing city gates than *reducing the Sabbath day to the level of the mundane*. [Oxford Dictionary: "of this earthly world rather than a heavenly or spiritual one"]

This is the point made by the prophet Ezekiel.

Read Ezekiel 22:26.

Relativism reigns in our world today—lots of grays—whereas in God’s kingdom things are more black and white:

- we say someone made a mistake; God says they sinned;
- we say mankind isn’t very nice; God says they are depraved;
- we say we are just getting along; God says if you love the world you hate Me;
- we say the things of this world are a little less than holy; God says they are profane, depraved;
- we say the Sabbath is just another day in the week; God says that when you do not keep it holy, you *profane* Me.

It is my habit to give little regard to the minor holidays. On special days such as Memorial Day, Labor Day, Halloween, etc., when some people do something special like going to the beach, or having a picnic, or decorating the house, for me it is just another day in which I keep to my normal routine. Even on bigger holidays, such as New Year’s Day, Thanksgiving, I may leave room for some sort of celebration, but still either begin the day with my regular work, or return to it later. [\[I wrote these words on Thanksgiving morning.\]](#)

Good or bad, that attitude is reasonably harmless when it comes to annual holidays. But God says that we are not to have that attitude regarding His Sabbath. *That* day is to be holy. There are some who take the position that the Sabbath, as instituted in the OT, is not pertinent to—or at least as important to—the Christian church. I, along with most interpreters, do not hold to that position.

Alexander MacLaren: The vigour of religious life demands special seasons set apart for worship. Unless there be such reservoirs along the road, there will be but a thin trickle of a brook by the way. It is all very well to talk about religion diffused through the life, but it will not be so diffused unless it is concentrated at certain times.

Sabbath (OT) = *shabbat* (shawb-bawth’) = intermission; ceasing or coming to the end of an activity [e.g. seventh day of creation].

Sabbath (NT) = *sabbaton* = of Hebrew origin [[H7676](#)] (*shabbath*); the Sabbath (i.e. Shabbath), or **day of weekly repose from secular avocations (also the observance or institution itself); by extension a se’nnight, i.e. the interval between two Sabbaths; likewise the plural in all the above applications :- Sabbath (day), week.**

A thorough reading of Scripture, however, makes it clear that as ordained by God for His people, the Sabbath is to be more than just a day of idleness or inactivity. It is to be a day oriented toward worship. For example,

One day during Linda’s and my wilderness years, between our previous church and this, I was out shoveling gravel with Linda’s dad. In the course of our conversation, he pointed out that there was no difference between us: that they didn’t go to church, and we didn’t go to church. True enough at the time—but it missed a critical distinction.

Sunday mornings were to them just like any other morning: get up, put the coffee on, have breakfast, read the paper, do a few little chores around the house, sleep through a baseball or football game, etc.

But even though it is true we were (disobediently) not attending church services, and were not associated with any local body, every Sunday morning Linda and I had a time of worship, and we listened to a recorded message, and held our own Bible Study (Romans) for which we both prepared during the week. Even when company would drop in, we did not set aside our “church,” but included the visitors in it. And, as now, we did not perform any regular labors on the Lord’s day.

Though neither of us attended church services, the difference between Linda’s parents and us was stark: to us, Sunday remained a special, sanctified day, whereas to them it was just another day in the week.

I really like how Lawrence Richards, in his *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, breaks down for us the importance of the Sabbath day. He applies it to Israel, but it takes no stretch of the imagination to apply it to us as well.

1. **“The Sabbath was a testimony to God the Creator, who rested after His six days of shaping our universe.”** Note how it reads in Exodus 20:10 in the ESV: “...the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God.” Just as Communion was instituted as a memorial to Jesus, to remember the great sacrifice He made for us, so the Sabbath itself is a memorial to what God did creating us in the first place.
2. **“The Sabbath became a symbol of Israel’s covenant relationship with the Lord.”** The Lord’s day is when we declare to the world, “We belong to Him!”
3. **“The Sabbath is also intimately linked with deliverance from Egypt.”** For us, it celebrates how God through Christ Jesus has delivered us from a life of death, how He has saved us for eternity in His Son.

Richards summarizes with this:

Each seventh day provided a full-orbed reminder of who God was to His people. He was the source of their life. He was the provider of their freedom. He was the one who ordered their lives and gave them meaning.

No matter who we are, no matter where we are, no matter our present circumstances, the Sabbath is to be sanctified, special. It is not to be just another day, or a day of taking a break from our labors; it is to be a day of worship, of identification, of reverence. It is to be set apart, distinctive. It is to be holy.

SESSION 33: NEHEMIAH 13:23-31 : *This is the End*

PREFACE

Put yourself in Nehemiah's shoes. Artaxerxes calls him back to Babylon. Dutifully he leaves Judah and the progress he has made there in reestablishing the city and its people. After his absence, he returns to Jerusalem. Perhaps he followed the traditional longer but more pleasant route which headed NW out of Babylon, following the Euphrates River, then following the Orontes River south down to Judah.

Just maybe, as he saw Jerusalem in the distance, he felt a builder's pride in seeing the restored wall, standing once again at its full height. And he may have felt a sense of real accomplishment as the one who had been in charge during the reestablishment of the city. As the city wall loomed larger before him, he may have sifted back through all his accomplishments:

- getting the workers organized
- fending off their enemies
- organizing the builders with weapons
- celebrating the completion of the wall, and the installation of the priests and Levites in the new temple

It would be only natural, only human, to enjoy a sense of accomplishment in seeing all that through to completion.

If he followed this route, thus approaching Jerusalem from the north, he would surely have entered the city through one of the three gates located along the northern wall: Old Gate, Fish Gate, or the Sheep Gate, the last of which would have entered directly onto the temple grounds. So it is not surprising that the first visit he records upon his return is to the temple—perhaps he stopped here before anywhere else—where he discovers Tobiah the Ammonite.

What a belly drop. He has just been recalling all that had been accomplished, not least of which the successful restoration of the wall without suffering one enemy incursion. For his entire first term he had kept the city safe and sound from the Samaritans, the Ammonites, the Arabs. And now he finds one of the worst of them securely ensconced *inside the temple*!?

Nehemiah throws him and all his things out of the temple. He then discovers that tithes to the temple had ceased, the Levites—installed to their temple service just before his departure—had returned to their homes outside the city. As a result the temple had become inoperative—in his word, “forsaken.”

Not only had the temple proper been forsaken, but the Sabbath itself had fallen into decay, turned into just another market day. Commerce and work went on as usual, foreign merchants came and went, selling their wares as if the Sabbath was just another day of the week. Just imagine his exasperation! I can see Nehemiah standing there on the streets of Jerusalem, throwing his hands up, screaming at the merchants, “*What have you done? What about your vow, the covenant you signed? Why are you so profaning the Sabbath?*”

So he immediately takes steps to fix the situation. He stations his men—and later, Levites—at the gates to make sure they remain closed during the Sabbath. He calls a halt to commerce and business-as-usual for the Sabbath, and threatens with physical violence the merchants who continue to queue up outside the gates prior to the Sabbath.

ACT THREE

And now the curtain rises on the third and final act of this tragedy. In 458 BC, during Ezra's early days in Jerusalem (before Nehemiah came), the same thing was reported.

Read Ezra 9:1-2.

The priest/scribe was “appalled” at this situation, and he went into mourning over it. But the people voluntarily came to him, confessed their wrong, and dedicated themselves to rectifying the situation.

Read Ezra 10:1-3.

Later they formalized this.

Read Ezra 10:9-12.

Now fast-forward to about 28 years later. They've done it again. Nehemiah learns that the Jews have again taken foreign wives—worse, half of the children from these marriages cannot even speak “the language of Judah.”

Read Nehemiah 13:23-24.

The prophecy of Malachi (the last book in the OT) cannot be dated for certain—indeed, opinions are split even on whether the title of the book refers to a proper name, or is just the generic word for “messenger.” But many scholars place Malachi's prophecies around the time of Nehemiah's absence from Judah, between his two terms of office as governor, because in his prophecy he refers to conditions that we know from Nehemiah were in place. In the second chapter of Malachi he speaks to this business of the Jews taking foreign wives.

Read Malachi 2:8-12.

“the daughter of a foreign god” = *worshiper* of a pagan god (cf. Jeremiah 2:27)

That fact that so many of the children from these marriages spoke only the language of their mothers is sufficient evidence that the *ways* of their mothers had not been abandoned. It is a pretty safe bet that one would find somewhere in any of their homes a pagan idol, if not an altar.

The inclusion of “Moab” in the list of foreign nations raises an important clarification. The law did not preclude sincere conversion of a Gentile into the Jewish faith; that was purpose of Jewish baptism prior to John the Baptist and Christ: a public sign of conversion from a different faith into the Jewish faith.

In scripture we are given two dramatic instances of this—both, remarkably, in the hereditary line of King David and Jesus the Christ.

Turn to Matthew 1.

In the genealogy of Christ according to Matthew we find this:

...and to Salmon was born Boaz by Rahab... (Matthew 1:5a)

Rahab the harlot and her father's household and all she had, Joshua spared; and she has lived in the midst of Israel to this day, for she hid the messengers whom Joshua sent to spy out Jericho. (Joshua 6:25)

her confession of faith: “When we heard *it*, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the Lord your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.” (Joshua 2:11)

...and to Boaz was born Obed by Ruth... (Matthew 1:5b)

Now it came about in the days when the judges governed, that there was a famine in the land. And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons. The name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife, Naomi; and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Bethlehem in Judah. Now they entered the land of Moab and remained there. Then Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died; and she was left with her two sons. They took for themselves Moabite women as wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. And they lived there about ten years. (Ruth 1:1-4)

her confession of faith: Then [Naomi] said, “Behold, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her gods; return after your sister-in-law.” But Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you *or* turn back from following you; for where you go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people *shall be* my people, and your God, my God.” (Ruth 1:15-16)

...and to Obed, Jesse; and to Jesse was born David the king... (Matthew 1:5c-6a)

...and to Jacob was born Joseph the husband of Mary, by whom was born Jesus, who is called the Christ. (Matthew 1:16)

Here were two women who by their faith and commitment to the God of Israel were embraced by and married Jews and bore them children.

So the transgression here was less the marrying of foreign women than the fact that they were not assimilating into the Jewish culture. Even their children were not learning the language.

So, true to his character, Nehemiah takes action.

Read Nehemiah 13:25.

And then he cites the story of the great King Solomon, concluding with, “...nevertheless the foreign women caused even him to sin.” Yamauchi reminds us that

According to 1 Kings 11:3, Solomon had seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines, among whom were Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women. Solomon began his reign humbly by asking for wisdom from the Lord. In later years, however, his foreign wives led him to worship other gods, so that he built a high place to Chemosh, the god of the Moabites on the Mount of Olives.

And once again, in Nehemiah’s time, the rot went all the way to the top.

Read Nehemiah 13:27-28.

So the son of the high priest had married the daughter of Judah’s arch-enemy, Sanballat the Horonite. Who was he?

Read Nehemiah 4:1-2.

Good grief; talk about the fox in the hen house. When you combine this with the earlier episode with Tobiah the Ammonite in the temple storeroom, you have to wonder: *What is going on here?!*

And Nehemiah tells us that he “drove him away from me.” So *what*, Governor? It’s not working! One can almost hear the tittering behind his back as he walks through the streets of the city: “*Hey, Gov—why don’t you just let us be.*”

THE END

I’m reminded of the last few lines of The Door’s melancholy song from the ‘60s, “The End”:

This is the end, my only friend, the end
It hurts to set you free
But you’ll never follow me
The end of laughter and soft lies
The end of nights we tried to die
This is the end

T.S. Eliot closes his famous poem, *The Hollow Men*, with

*This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.*

This is how I hear the last few lines of Nehemiah's chronicle.

Read Nehemiah 13:30-31.

Not with a bang, but with a whimper. Nehemiah once again puts things back where they belong, and asks God to remember that he did it for good.

Let us draw the first of several conclusions: Nehemiah was a strong, dynamic leader; he was God's man in the right place at the right time. But did even he imagine that things would remain in place after he left?

SESSION 34: EZRA-NEHEMIAH: *The Journey*

PREFACE

Way, way back, in the early '70s, when your teacher was just a young navy musician, I was constantly being pestered and criticized by the older leader of my section, and I was convinced that I was nothing more than an irritating thorn in his side. Only years later did I learn, from another member of the band, that to the contrary, I was *special* to the lead trombone player—that we wasn't making my life miserable because of his intense dislike for me, but he was, in a manner of speaking, *disciplining* me. In point of fact, he really liked me, and thought me worth improving.

The Lord God set apart the nation of Israel—before there *was* a nation of Israel. He set in motion His plan to sanctify them, to set them apart as, as He puts it, a special “possession”

possession^{nasb}, **special treasure**^{nkjv}, **special people**^{kjv}, **treasured possession**^{niv, esv} = *segulla* (seg-oo-law') = feminine passive participle of an unused root meaning **to shut up; wealth** (as closely shut up) :- **jewel**, peculiar (treasure), proper good, special; “the leading idea is that of select, precious, endeared; something **exceedingly prized** and sedulously [**persistently, painstakingly**] preserved” (Wilson); **the word is used in Ecclesiastes to describe the treasures of Solomon**

Why did He choose them out? Why did He love them.

Read Deuteronomy 7:6-8.

God says that He loved them because He loved them. That's a pretty good definition of “grace.” He loved them so much that He “disciplined” them: not unlike our lead trombone player with me, for Israel's good, God expected more from them than He did other nations. In return He would pour out blessings upon them that would make them the *envy* of other nations.

God gave Israel a choice: *Love Me in return or suffer the consequences. Be holy, sanctify yourselves to Me, or suffer the fate of the pagan nations. You will always be My treasured possession; nothing will change that. But I will discipline you as a loving father disciplines his children.*

As we all know well by now, Israel chose to suffer the consequences. And that is the beginning point of our study of Ezra-Nehemiah.

REMOVALS

We began this journey 300 years before its conclusion last week. We chronicled four separate removals—foreign invasions of Israel & Judah in which native Jews were either killed or deported to foreign lands.

[These are itemized on page 2 in your booklet.]

At the close of these tortuous episodes, Judah has been exiled to Babylon, Jerusalem and the temple lie in ruin, and all that is left in Judah are some peasants to keep the land. The wealth of Judah—both in treasure and in its leading citizens—has been removed to Chaldean Babylon by King Nebuchadnezzar.

EZRA

The book of Ezra is presented in two parts. In Chapters 1-6 the governor Zerubbabel—in the kingly line of David—is emphasized. That is, **civic governance**. In Chapters 7-10, the scribe/priest Ezra—in the line of Aaron—is emphasized. That is, **spiritual governance**.

Lesson: Both are necessary—for the restoration of Jerusalem *and* for us today. We need a king and we need a priest. The king rules, representing law and temporal order. He is our sovereign; to him we owe our allegiance. We also need the advocacy and spiritual cleansing of a priest. The wonder of the Christian life is that, in Christ we have both.

In Christ Jesus we have not just *a* king, but *the* King of Kings:

Read Revelation 19:13 & 16.

And in Christ Jesus we have our Great High Priest:

Read Hebrews 9:11-12.

Jesus enters within the veil—"a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 6:20)—because, like the delightfully mysterious Melchizedek, He is both king *and* priest, and He reigns and serves forever. [\[the beginning and end of Melchizedek are not recorded so, metaphorically, he "lived forever"\]](#)

It cannot be emphasized too often: God keeps His promises. Repeatedly in Deuteronomy and elsewhere, the Lord promises that if Israel obeys, they will be blessed; He also promises that if Israel disobeys and turns away from Him, they will be cursed. He kept His promise: they were cursed.

But He also promised that a remnant would remain and be restored to their homeland. They would return, Jerusalem would be rebuilt, the temple would be restored.

Read Jeremiah 25:11-12.

Read Jeremiah 29:10-11.

During the period recorded in the book of Ezra—537 BC to 458 BC (79 years)—

- the first group of exiles returns;
- they rebuild the temple altar;
- they replace the foundation of and begin work on the temple;
- they experience opposition (primarily from Samaria, to the north) which discourages them from continuing their work;
- ten years pass in which no work is done;
- God sends two prophets—Zechariah and Haggai—to slap some sense into them, and they encourage and reinforce the authority of Zerubbabel;
- work resumes on the temple;
- the temple is completed in 515 BC.

Lesson: Ray Stedman reminds us that the last thing destroyed in Jerusalem was the temple, but it was the first to be rebuilt when the exiles returned. For us the lesson is that the final straw in our rebellion is rejection of the Spirit's counsel—no longer heeding the voice of God—and, as a result, ceasing our worship of Him. The first thing we *must* do, once we repent of our rebellion, is reestablish that worship—that is, rebuild our temple—and begin once again listening to God.

Spiritually the rebirth of the Jerusalem temple was a cathartic event. As early as Chapter Three of Ezra, once the altar was rebuilt they began making sacrifices, burnt offerings, and celebrating some of the feasts and festivals dictated in the law. And witness the pent-up joy of the exiles when all it took to be released was the laying of the *foundation* for the temple.

Read Ezra 3:10-11.

Lesson: As believers we stand on the surest foundation possible: the Lord Jesus Christ. And that should brings us immeasurable joy.

NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah's first-person chronicle is the story of a man burdened for his people and the city of his heritage. He is at once a man deeply tuned to his relationship with the Lord, and a man with a personality fitted for bold action. We might cast a young Charlton Heston in the role.

We have marveled at his strong leadership, his political adroitness (his ability to sniff out a trap); we have

appreciated the way he communicates with the Lord at the drop of a hat—as if he always had on his direct-line-to-heaven, Bluetooth earpiece; we have respected his no-compromise approach to physical security and the spiritual integrity of his people.

Nehemiah's call was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Living in a country and a society, as we do, in which city fortifications simply do not exist (as they sometimes still do in Europe and the Middle East), it is easy to dismiss this as just another civic improvement project. But this was of critical importance for a number of reasons.

- **Safety:** The narrative of Ezra-Nehemiah itself makes it clear that there were enemies without, eager—even desperate—to prevent the restoration of Jerusalem. In that time and place it was essential to fortify cities against invasion.
- **Physical Integrity:** The only way to control the integrity of the populace and commerce was to have a gated enclosure. (Nehemiah 13)
- **Spiritual Integrity:** Perhaps most of all, the restored wall ensured a sense and spirit of community secured around the rebuilt temple. After seventy years in exile, then ninety-two years without a wall, Judah was once again a true *home* for the Jews

One of the more fascinating aspects of Governor Nehemiah is how he could marry pragmatic action to a dependence on the Lord. We find one of the best examples of this in Chapter Four. Because of the opposition to their restoration of the wall, Nehemiah added weapons to the hands of the builders, and he set up an alarm system, as well.

Read Nehemiah 4:18-20.

Say what you will about Nehemiah—and we *will* be saying more about him—you have to love that! Maybe the governor remembered the history of the sainted King David, and the tale of his meeting with the Philistine Goliath.

Read 1 Samuel 17:45-47.

Lesson: This is part of “Lordship.” This is part of our having a *heavenly* worldview rather than a temporal worldview. No matter who we are, no matter what we do, ultimately the Lord God is in charge, because He is Lord. He may place weapons or tools into our hands, but *He* will have the victory, *He* will be glorified.

FINAL TAKE-AWAYS

- **The Lord God will and has used *anybody* to accomplish His will.** No one is beyond His reach; no one cannot be made useful:

Tiglath-pilaser king of Assyria
Shalmaneser king of Assyria
Sennacherib king of Assyria
Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon
Cyrus king of Persia
Darius king of Persia
Artaxerxes king of Persia

Tattenai governor of Trans-Euphrates
Zechariah
Haggai
Ezra
Nehemiah
Zerubbabel
Jeshua

- Very often the more dedicated we are to serving the Lord, the more intense our desire for righteousness and holiness, or even the more important the task—the **more we will experience opposition**. One common denominator between the books of Ezra and Nehemiah is the **physical** opposition from those determined to stop their progress in restoring the temple and the city itself. But inherent in this is also a **spiritual** opposition. Their enemies knew that the best way to weaken the Jews, to render them impotent and inconsequential, was to disconnect them from their God. If He was their strength (and He was), then by inciting in them disobedience and rebellion, they would effectively sap the Jews of their strength.

There is nothing new under the sun. That is precisely how Satan still works today. If he can get us to believe his lies, he renders us of little or no consequence in God's kingdom.

Perhaps we discover a good defense against this in the description of Ezra found in Chapter Seven.

Read Ezra 7:9b-10.

He set his heart to...

- **study** the law of the Lord: *to tread or frequent; usually to follow (for pursuit or search); by implication to seek or ask;*
- **practice** (do) it: *to act upon it, obey it*
- **teach** His statutes and ordinances: *to goad, to instruct, to train*

What was Jesus' defense against the lies of Satan? "It is written..." "It is written..." When the enemy—whether in the spirit or through a person—tells us, "You know, God doesn't care..." we can immediately answer, "Hold it. I *know* God's word—and that's a lie."

In two weeks we will wrap up our study of Ezra-Nehemiah with additional lessons learned—but especially with analysis of two important components of the book of Nehemiah: the maddening vacillation of the Jews, and the man himself.

SESSION 35: EZRA-NEHEMIAH: A Reappraisal

PREFACE

In my library are several resources that contain tips or suggestions for approaching or interpreting passages from God's word. Most are designed to help pastors and teachers decide how to present Scripture truth to their audience. For example there is the wonderful old resource, *The Treasury of David*, in which that "prince of preachers" from the late nineteenth century, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, presents his devotional interpretation of each Psalm. For each Psalm he includes the work of other scholars and preachers as well as a section entitled "Hints to Preachers," which offers a variety of 3- or 4-point structures for organizing a sermon—in other words, a variety of ways to approach or interpret a passage from Scripture.

I was reminded of this as I struggled for a way to best conclude our study of Ezra-Nehemiah. We have concluded that long journey, and I would not go back and change any conclusions already drawn. I would not change the colors with which we have painted the story and characters in this narrative. Still, at the end, I realize there are certain colors we have *left out* of the palette to-date—some almost contrary to the aforementioned conclusions.

So what to do?

Imagine a room with windows on three of its sides (North, East and West) and someone is seated in a chair in the center of the room, facing North. From outside you peer in the East window, viewing the profile of the person in the chair. From that perspective he appears a certain way. You then move to the West window and do the same. From that perspective he appears a different way. Finally you move to the North window and view the person in the chair head-on. From that perspective he appears an even different way. Yet, no matter the perspective, the person remains the same.

Or think about those Hints to Preachers in *The Treasury of David*. Each three-point outline comes at the same Scripture passage from a different direction, with a different perspective. It is the same passage, but scholars have found different lessons to draw from it.

And that will be our approach today. The previous interpretation was not incorrect, but we can draw additional lessons as we consider additional colors in the narrative and its characters. So this morning we will consider three aspects of this study as we draw it to a close.

REVIVAL SOURING INTO LEGALISM

When true revival—or, as D.A. Carson calls this, "reformation"—takes place, it is wonderful. It is invigorating; at times it is essential. There is considerable evidence that real revival took place in Judah after the return of the first group of exiles. That it did not hold for long should not diminish its integrity.

Ezra

But the narrative includes some examples in which this revival—this reformation—resulted in something that very often happens even today: legalism. We find one of these examples in Ezra 9. Vs 1-2 describe the situation.

Read Ezra 9:1-2.

In the next chapter Ezra stands before the congregation and formally denounces their action.

Read Ezra 10:10-11.

In fact, an earlier declaration from a spokesman for the group goes even further.

Read Ezra 10:2-3.

[note conflict between “according to the law” and “according to the counsel of my lord (or master)”]

When we first studied this passage in July, we emphasized their confession and willingness to repent, to change their ways—and there is no reason to retract that. But let’s examine the text of the law they cite.

First the “do not do”:

Read Deuteronomy 7:3.

Followed by the reason why:

Read Deuteronomy 7:4.

But now note carefully what the Lord commands to do about it:

Read Deuteronomy 7:5.

Nowhere does it say they should divorce or “put away” their wives and abandon the children of the marriage. In fact the law gives specific instructions for converts to Judaism: if they are willing to put themselves under the Law, men to be circumcised, etc., they are welcomed into the community—just as people are today. Let’s look at one more example of this in the book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah

In Chapter Thirteen of Nehemiah something similar occurs.

Read Nehemiah 13:1-3.

This is a pretty faithful summary of the original episode from Deuteronomy 23, so we needn’t go back and read that. They were reading the Law and discovered this passage about Ammonites and Moabites; and what was their response?

...they excluded all foreigners from Israel.

Where did they get that? The law was specific to Ammon and Moab because of their behavior toward the sojourning Israelites. There is no blanket rejection of *all* foreigners. Then too, the Lord even sanctioned exceptions to this specific rule: remember the example we cited two weeks ago, of the Moabitess Ruth—who became no less than the great-grandmother of King David! [cf., [Isaiah 56:6-7](#)]

Lesson

What we have here are two examples of authentic revival taking a left turn into the extremes of legalism. Why? Because in each case the spirit of flesh won out over the Spirit of God—that is, man’s proclivity to take things too far won out over the facts put down, by the Holy Spirit, in God’s word. The mob, caught up in the moment, ignored the hard truth staring them in the face.

And note: Even the man on the scene most knowledgeable of Scripture—the priest/scribe Ezra—took things to “un-Lawful” extreme.

The lesson for us today? We must never let the passion of the moment supersede the truth of God’s written word. Can it not be concluded that this at least partially explains the maddening fickleness, vacillation in the faith of the Jews? When we demand over and above what God commands, are we not sowing the seeds of rebellion? God’s law is perfect as it is; we are not to subtract from it or add to it.

[i.e., rebellion will not stop with just those laws beyond God’s word]

WHAT ARE WE TO MAKE OF NEHEMIAH?

By my reckoning, throughout his chronicle Nehemiah has called upon the Lord to either remember the good he has done, or the bad others have done against him, a total of six times. Remarkably—but perhaps also understandably—four of those six are in the last chapter alone! Two thoughts about this:

Cranky Old Man

If Nehemiah had done this just once or twice, we might give him the benefit of the doubt, even associating it with something the apostle Paul wrote in 2 Timothy.

Read 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

But when in the last chapter he lays it on so thick—four times over the course of just seventeen verses!—we begin to wonder, *What's going on here?*

Have you ever noticed how so often the work and attitudes of dynamic, effective men and women go to seed near the end? Not in every instance, but so often for various reasons—not the least of which the common fleshly malady of (as Chuck Swindoll puts it) they start believing their own stuff, their own press clippings—things just start going sour. They get puffed up, or get their heads turned by sycophants, or let their imaginative philosophies run wild.

D. A. Carson says that by Chapter Thirteen, Nehemiah “sounds like a man getting old and cranky.” Or maybe he is just someone getting so fed up with what is going on around him that he wants to make sure *someone* out there remembers what he has accomplished. Which brings us to a more positive spin on this.

Always Looking Above

Could this not just be the natural outflow of a life spent in steady, close communion with God? Back in September of this year, when we were studying Chapter Five, I pointed out that this proclivity of his speaks to

Nehemiah's relationship with and devotion to God. Every aspect of his life was ruled by that relationship. When he chose *not* to do something, it was because of his fear of God:

But I did not do so because of the fear of God. (v15b)

And when he decided *to* do something, it was because he knew his God was watching:

Remember me, O my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people. (v19)

Nehemiah's was a life that did not just know God on Sunday mornings; that life walked in close fellowship with God every day of the week.

Maybe Nehemiah *does* carry it a bit too far at times; can we blame him, considering the frustration, even anger he must have felt with the people he was serving. But I think v22 in Chapter Thirteen strikes the true balance found in his heart. Here he asks God to remember him with favor, but he balances it with a call to God's mercy for any wrong he has done.

Read Nehemiah 13:22. (not NASB)

When our devotion to and relationship with God is the most important thing in our life, we are going to share with Him even some thoughts and feelings that others might not understand.

THE ANTICLIMAX OF CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Finally, I doubt that I am the only one who wishes that the Book of Nehemiah ended with Chapter Twelve—with the dedication of the wall. That would make a perfect conclusion to the story about the *rebuilding* of the wall. That would end the story on an upbeat, affirming note. Instead its conclusion is depressing, discouraging.

The writers of God's word, however, are not story tellers, but chroniclers of truth. They are serving not the fragile sensibilities of man, but the will of God through the power of the Spirit.

We should also keep in mind that Chapter Thirteen sets no precedent in closing a narrative on a negative note. For example,

- **At the end of the Pentateuch Moses**, the great leader and man of God, is turned away from entering the Promised Land because of an earlier sin; he would die, alone, and be buried on the far side of the Jordan in Moab.
- **At the end of Paul's last letter, written to Timothy**, he is in custody and nearing his end. Save for the physician Luke, he is alone. He pleads for Timothy to come to him soon, for "Demas, having loved this present world, has deserted me," and "Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm," and "At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me."

If indeed it is true what Paul writes to Timothy in that final missive, that

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;
(2 Timothy 3:16)

then we must take it as it is, knowing that God is teaching us through it. So, three thoughts:

We Need Christ

Would it have been realistic for Nehemiah to end with Chapter Twelve? Taking Scripture as a whole—especially the OT as a whole—would that have accomplished the purpose of Scripture to lead us to Christ? Just because it may be a simplistic conclusion it should nonetheless not be ignored: If the purpose of the OT is to point man to his need for Christ—that there is no salvation in the Law—then the inclusion of Chapter Thirteen makes this point with nauseating force: Sin and rebellion are hard-wired into the flesh of man. No set of laws, no endless series of revivals or reformations will suffice. **We need a savior. We need Christ.**

God was Working

One more lesson we might take away from this depressing end to Nehemiah. If we are critical of Ezra and Nehemiah and those who returned to rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem and its surrounding towns, we must keep in mind—and thus measure our criticism—that **God was at work in this**. This narrative is replete with God working through Jew and gentile alike to fulfill prophecy and keep His promise to the exiles.

- He said the temple would be rebuilt—and it was.
- He said the city would be rebuilt—and it was.
- He said He would keep His people safe and give them victory over their enemies—and He did.

Let us not be sidetracked by the failings of man, and miss the historic fact that Jehovah God keeps His covenant with men.

Are we so different?

Finally, we must confess that even under the redeeming, sanctifying blood of Christ, **are we so different?** How many revivals have you experienced? How many times have you wept before the sword of the word, or danced with joy over the promises of God fulfilled in your life? Has any of that yet resulted in a life of uninterrupted communion and bliss with the Lord God?

If one lesson of Ezra-Nehemiah is that "people need the Lord" Jesus, then perhaps the *ultimate* lesson is that even that positional state—glorious as it is—is still but a stepping stone to the final positional state of kingdom sinlessness and bliss yet to come. We are not there yet. Ezra, Nehemiah, and the rest of the Jews were not there yet—and neither are we.

But we *will* be—and that's the promise.

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BIOGRAPHY

We are David and Linda Lampel, and we live in a large country house in the rural area outside Winterset, Iowa, in the middle of the United States. Our home is surrounded by fields of corn and soybeans, and by dense woods that are home to deer, raccoons, possums, wild turkeys, woodchucks, coyotes, and myriad birds of all shapes and colors. The tranquility and beauty of this place contribute to what we do. In fact, we believe that the Lord brought us to this home because He knew that here we would best be equipped to serve Him and others.

Both of us work at home—Dave with his writing, and Linda (now retired) with her baking, needlework, and crocheting projects that are given to charities. Now that she has been unshackled from the business world, Linda has expanded our gardens, and has returned to baking all our bread—and spending more time with our family of five cats. The Lord has given us a good life, and we are most grateful to Him—especially for our 44 years together as husband and wife.

