

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

The Exile & Return: Ezra; Nehemiah and Esther. This class is the current installment of the Bible track and explores the world immediately following the return of God's OT people from Babylonian exile. We will learn of God's faithfulness to His covenant people in the story of Esther; how God saved them from satanic inspired annihilation. In Ezra and Nehemiah, we will witness God's promise fulfilled through the mouth of Jeremiah: God indeed brought His people back into the land during a time of both conflict, and unprecedented spiritual renewal.

The objective of this class is to develop a thorough understanding of God's redemptive plan among the community of post-exilic Jews who returned to the land of their forefathers to rebuild the city of Jerusalem as well as those Jews who chose to remain in exile. The continuation of God's historical purposes is expressed in the pages of these three books (Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther) in a manner unique in the OT canon of scripture.

Introduction: This week we will explore the opposition that Nehemiah encountered from the enemies of the Jews when he began constructing the walls surrounding Jerusalem. We will also see the opposition from within, and ponder his response to both instances. The subtitle for the lesson today is, *Conflict Inside and Out*. We will explore the following three themes: 1) From Ashes to Bricks; 2) Enslaved by the Redeemed; and 3) Good Governance.

Part One: From Ashes to Bricks – Last week we noted that the work on the reconstruction of the wall began under the careful oversight of Nehemiah, a man especially chosen by God for such a task. However, the rebuilding created quite the stir among the enemies of God's people. The leader of the opposition was a man named Sanballat, the Horonite. He and Tobiah, his companion, jeered and made fun of the Jews because of their efforts at reconstruction. It is believed by many that Sanballat was a leader among the Samaritans, and it is to this group, identified as "brothers" in the text that he makes his statements, albeit in the presence of the Jews. He states, *"What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?"* There are a few notable comments that should be made regarding this statement. First, there is reference to the feebleness of the Jews. It is true that since their return to the land under Zerubbabel and Sheshbazzar nearly a century before, they had become the objects of scorn among the inhabitants of the land (Samaritans). Indeed, it was for this reason that Nehemiah took pity on them when he was yet in Susa and heard of their condition. Instead of this period being marked by consistent progress and spiritual maturity, the spiritual and physical state of the people of God vacillated between fear and oppression and faith and spiritual renewal. Under the leadership of such prophets as Haggai and Zechariah, and possibly Ezra, the temple was rebuilt and the people of God came to realize that their strength did not derive from the protective decree of a foreign monarch, but from the great God of heaven and earth. Nonetheless, this lesson had to be learned and relearned with each succeeding generation.

Second, there is an inquiry into whether the people of God would sacrifice, *"...Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day?"* The Hebrew phrase here translated, *"Will they sacrifice?"* is הִיָּעָבוּ לָהֶם הַיִּזְבָּחוֹ, the key word being, יָבַח which can be translated no other way than the offering of sacrifice as in burnt offerings in the temple. It is quite probable that the temple itself had been neglected at this time and Nehemiah's reforms entailed the refurbishment or renovation of the temple in addition to the reconstruction of the city walls. This seems to be supported by the reference to the, "fortress of the temple" mentioned in 2:8. It is there obvious that some of the wood Nehemiah would be requesting

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

would be used in the renovation of the temple. We read, "... a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." Whether this should be understood as referencing the cessation of the offering of sacrifices in the temple, which would resume after the construction was complete, is uncertain. What is clear is that the enemies of God's people (the Samaritans) associated the work of the walls of the city with the temple cult and the religion of the returned exiles.

Finally, there is reference here to the types of building materials being used. Obviously, wood itself would be insufficient a material from which to construct the walls of the city proper. Instead, it would have been used as scaffolding for the stone masons and possibly as a frame around which to lay the finished stone. What is significant is that the stones themselves were, "rubbish" and "burned". There could no better description be given to characterize the people of God during this time of rebuilding. Indeed, they had been burned by the fury of God, and had suffered judgment, exile from their land and the devastating destruction of city and temple. Now, God was rebuilding them, and teaching them to trust in Him.

Tobiah, here described as an Ammonite and later identified as someone who married the daughter of a Jewish leader (6:17-18), also takes advantage of the opportunity to ridicule the people of God. He states, "Yes, what they are building – if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall." Here is an OT example of God using the weak to confound the strong. Immediately, Nehemiah makes an imprecatory prayer associating the provocation of God's people as a direct provocation against God Himself (4:5). The immediate response of the people was to continue to build, "... for the people had a mind to work" (4:6b). The Hebrew states, לֵב לַעֲמֹל לַיְשׁוּת and can be translated as, "the people had a heart to work." In other words, the condition of their heart for the time being was not influenced by the taunts of the enemy, but by the good grace of God manifested to them in the person of Nehemiah.

When the walls were nearly completed, and the breaches were all closed, Sanballat and his followers were incited to violence. We read, "But when Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites (note the allegiances with the surrounding nations that derived from intermarriage) heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it" (4:7-8). Nehemiah's response is illustrative for every believer in every generation, "We prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night." Both prayer and perseverance should be the response of the one trusting in God.

However, the moment of truth came for the Jews when they stated, "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." This statement was both one of self-awareness – on their own they were not able to rebuild, they needed divine aid – as well as despondency: God's people were discouraged. When the enemy sniffed out this discouragement they spread the rumor, "... They will not know or see until we come among them and kill them and stop the work" (4:11). Two comments must be made regarding this passage. First, there is a notable tendency in the life of any believer once an honest sense of self-awareness has been obtained to feel inadequate: we can't do this, the job is bigger than us. This, of course is true. However, if this awareness alone occupies one's mind, then discouragement is inevitable. Rather, such self-awareness must be accompanied by a greater awareness – a God-awareness. Then one's eyes are lifted away from the self, to the God of the covenant who has promised, and is faithful and just to fulfil that which He has

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

promised (Numbers 23:19). This lesson must be learned and relearned by God's people in each generation, and is one of the most vital examples of the difference between allowing the human perspective to determine our actions, and trusting in the divine perspective.

Secondly, the tactic of the enemy is worth noting. When they realized that they could not discourage the people from doing the work from the outside, they reverted to more covert, and sinister tactics. Their plan is to sneak in among them (possibly among the throngs of people who would daily leave the city to return to their homes after a day's worth of work) and then destroy them. Now, the enemy of our souls has no new tactics, just redressed ones. If he cannot defeat us outright, he will attempt to do so from within. What should be our response? The same as Nehemiah's: *"So in the lowest parts of the space begin the wall, in open places, I stationed the people by their clans, with their swords, their spears, and their bows. And I looked and arose and said to the nobles, and to the officials and to the rest of the people, '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 homes'"* (4:14). The people of God quite literally held a spear in one hand and a spackle in the other (4:18). At night, the people were not allowed to leave the city, but were instructed to sleep inside the city gates. This was no mere encircling of the wagons, this was an internal struggle to continue to fight for controlled access to the people of God, city of God and temple of God.

Part Two: Enslaved by the Redeemed – In the wilderness, Balaam was hired by the king of Moab to come and curse the people of God. Balaam knew that he could not curse those whom God has blessed, and that the only way a curse could be brought against them was by making them a curse to themselves. This he did by introducing Moabite women who led their men astray and convinced them to worship other gods (Numbers 22-24). In the time of Nehemiah, a similar issue had arisen. Those who had been redeemed from Babylonian captivity, ransomed from enslavement to foreign rulers, had, in turn, failed to show the same grace to their less fortunate brothers that they had been shown by God. We read in Nehemiah 5:1-5, *"Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. For there were those who said, 'With our sons and our daughters, we are many. So, let us get grain, that we may eat and keep alive.' There were also those who said, 'We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards, and our houses to get grain because of the famine.' And there were those who said, 'We have borrowed money for the king's tax on our fields and our vineyards. Now our flesh is as the flesh of our brothers, our children are as their children. Yet we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but it is not in our power to help it, for other men have our fields and our vineyards.'"* In essence, what was happening was that the wealthier land owners, elders, and possibly even the priests, were issuing loans to the poorer among them at an exorbitant interest so high that the poor in the community could not afford to pay. Consequently, they were selling their lands, and themselves into indentured servitude in order to afford the taxes and other payments imposed upon them. Nehemiah's reaction was swift – he confronted the exiles about the hypocrisy of their behavior, and demanded restitution.

Before we move on, we must remember that the option of selling one's self into slavery, even between fellow Hebrews was allowed in the Mosaic law (Exodus 21:1-11 and Deuteronomy 15:12). However, the law requires for a release of person once every seven years, and a release of property once every fifty years. It is apparent from the controversy noted in the text that such a release was not happening. The real travesty for the people of God was not only economic, but was spiritual. We know this, because the punishment of the crime always meets the nature of the crime, and to fail to observe the *shemitah* (the

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

release every seventh year) as well as failure to honor the year of jubilee, *yubal*, was one of the spiritual failures of God's people that resulted in the exile (2 Chronicles 36:21 & Jeremiah 25:12).

So, it can be easily deciphered from the text that the spiritual condition of the elders of God's people was beginning the slow decline back into the manner of living prior to their time in Babylon. The response of Nehemiah to this issue might well be considered a spiritual reform, since it addressed both the economy as well as fidelity to the law of God.

Nehemiah's response is recorded for us in 5:9-13, *"So I said, 'The thing that you are doing is not good. Ought you not to walk in the fear of our God to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us abandon this exacting of interest. Return to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.' Then they said, 'We will restore these and require nothing from them. We will do as you say.' And I called the priests and made them swear to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, 'So may God shake out every man from his house and from his labor who does not keep this promise. So, may he be shaken out and emptied.' And all the assembly said 'Amen' and praised the LORD. And the people did as they had promised."* The response was simple: show the grace to your brothers that God has shown to you. Nehemiah concludes his accounting of the issue with a figurative shake of the folds of his garment. According to one source, the folds of the garment was the location where money would often be stashed on one's person.¹ What Nehemiah was doing was symbolic as if to say, "I will keep nothing of the proceeds of such gain". The modern-day equivalent might be the inside of a man's pant pockets turned outside as to reveal no money or loose change.

What applications can be made from this passage for NT believers? Of course, on the spiritual level, there is the issue of showing others the grace that God has shown to us. This message is mirrored by Christ in the gospels when He told the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35). On a monetary (and economic level), I think a convincing argument can be made against debt and the exacting of exorbitant interest. Obviously, the interest rate is often determined based on risk, which is ascertained based on the solicitor's past. However, it is more the case that such high-risk solicitors will be under more duress to repay a larger sum than someone who is low-risk, so the profit from interest is arguably one-sided. Now, there is very little one can do in our current culture to avoid debt of some kind; however, there is much to be said for the relationship between the need for instant gratification and one's willingness to accept high-interest loans. This is not to say that all debt is bad. However, debt that is issued with an unreasonable high amount of interest is equivalent to stealing, since the debtor is stealing from the lender if he cannot repay, and the lender is stealing from the debtor if he can repay.

The *shemithah* as well as the *yubal* were part of the ceremonial law, which was abrogated by the coming of Christ. Nonetheless, the appeal to rest and release (of debts, or property) was the cornerstone of the economy for the OT people of God, so it must have significance which exceeds the conditions of its inauguration. The challenge is then placed upon the NT people of God to determine what equivalent principle should govern the economy of a Christian society or business, and in what way must the Christian businessman/woman work to ensure that these principles govern their decision-making process?

¹ Fensham, Charles. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Books of Ezra & Nehemiah*. Pg.196

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

Part Three: Good Governance – The concluding chapter (6) of our text for this week illustrates the ways in which the governance of Nehemiah contrasted with that of other governors. We saw early on the ease of access Nehemiah would have had to the court of the Persian king. Whether he was astute in the tactics of leaders and governors employed in his own day or simply allowed the teaching of God’s Word to guide his heart and mind (or both), is uncertain. The truth remains that he proved himself a good governor who had a nose for would-be assassins.

Chapter 6 verses 1 through 14 describe two different scenarios in which the well-being of Nehemiah was threatened by his enemies. Both times, he was able to prevent their satisfaction by wisely discerning their plot and rejecting their requests. The first request was from three of his enemies (Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem). They wanted to meet with him in a remote, obscure location. He distrusted their motives, and declined the offer. Then, Shemaiah, the son of Delaiah, son of Mehetabel asked to meet in the house of God and tried to encourage Nehemiah that he should hide for fear of his life. Nehemiah’s response is to offer another imprecatory prayer on behalf of those who oppose him.

Then, in verse 15, we reach the crescendo of this experience, the day that Nehemiah had longed for, hoped for, and for which he prayed. We read, *“So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God”* (6:15-16). In other words, the burden of Nehemiah identified last week had produced results and the need for the people of God, the redeemed among the exiles, had been met. The city was secure, and access to the temple, the holy place where God put His name, was limited. After the wall had been rebuilt, the outcome was summarized as, *“...all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.”* Three comments concerning the outcome: first, the nations surrounding them more than likely refers to the Samaritans as well as their sympathizers (Ammonites, and Arabs). These nations were afraid. The very emotion they sought to engender in the heart of God’s people, they felt when they saw and witnessed the rebuilding of the wall. Second, these nations who were afraid, fell in their own esteem. Their assessment of who had the upper hand, was reversed and they realized that the infeasible became a reality despite their attempts to the contrary. Finally, when the enemies of God’s people saw the finished product, they knew that the reconstruction was a result of God’s work through His people.

We will conclude this lesson with three points of application derived from the text above. First, the work of God in the midst of His people will cause the enemies of God to be afraid. How people respond to fear varies, but most respond with hostility. Second, the presence of God evidenced in His people, causes others to become more self-aware. Instead of seeing this as God’s grace, and responding in genuine repentance (possible only through the work of the Holy Spirit), and in the absence of an alternative view of themselves, they often respond in hostility. Finally, the enemies of God come to acknowledge His existence through His abiding work among His people. Again, this acknowledgement, when unaccompanied by the saving work of God’s grace, does not bring comfort, but fear. Fearful man will run and hide from the voice of God, and will seek to cover up perceived shame, which the holiness of His presence engenders, with other things. John tells it this way, *“Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed”* (John 3:18-20).