

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: We commence the exploration of the second of the two chronicles believed to have been written by Ezra, or perhaps his contemporary, Nehemiah, which detail the unique challenges faced by the returning exiles in the generations immediately following the return from Babylonian captivity. We have witnessed the first spiritual reform that occurred under the leadership of Ezra. Now, we will witness the continued providential work of God in the life of Nehemiah, the man whom God will use to bring protection and spiritual renewal to His people. The title of the day's lesson is, *From Cup Bearer to Wall Builder*. We will explore Nehemiah chapters 1 through 3 and look at the following three sub-headings: 1) Nehemiah's burden; 2) Nehemiah's bravery; 3) Nehemiah's building campaign.

Part One: Nehemiah's Burden – The first few verses of the first chapter of Nehemiah reveal a court official during the reign of king Artaxerxes, whose devotion to his ancestral land was surpassed only by his devotion to his ancestral God. Whether Nehemiah had been to Judea prior to the events herein described or no, we are not told. What we are told is that his brother, Hanani, and certain men from Judah came to him and informed him of the condition of the City of Jerusalem. It is interesting to note the importance that this City already had for the exiled people of God. They were undoubtedly taught from the earliest age and upwards to turn and face Jerusalem when they prayed. Jerusalem became synonymous with the temple of God, and the temple, with the covenant making, covenant keeping God of their fathers.

The text reveals that Nehemiah, "...asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem." Before, we discuss their response, let us first note the way the people in Judea were referenced. They were known as those who *survived* the exile. In Hebrew this is stated, עַל־הַיְהוּדִים הַפְּלִיטָה אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁאַרוּ מִן־הַשְּׁבִי, and is a direct reference to those who returned from captivity (the remnant) and were living in the land of their fathers. There is no doubt that such people were considered special for redemptive purposes for those who remained behind in the land of their captivity, even if the extent of those redemptive purposes were unknown. Isaiah foretold of such people when he stated, "For out of Jerusalem shall go a remnant, and out of Mount Zion a band of survivors. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this" (Isaiah 37:32). Likewise, Ezekiel declared to the recent captives of Judah, "Yet I will leave some of you alive. When you have among the nations some who escape the sword, and when you are scattered through the countries, then those of you who escape will remember me among the nations where they are carried captive, how I have been broken over their whoring heart that has departed from me and over their eyes that go whoring after their idols. And they will be loathsome in their own sight for the evils that they have committed, for all their abominations. And they

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shall know that I am the Lord. I have not said in vain that I would do this evil to them” (Ez. 6:8-10). It was the presence of the remnant, those who returned to the land, that made those living in captivity aware of the gravity of their past and present condition. The remnant, and the condition in which they lived, contributed to the burden of Nehemiah.

According to those who were returning from the land of Judah, *“The remnant there in the province who have survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire”* (1:3). This burden led Nehemiah to pray and cry out to the Lord God of heaven. His prayer shall be considered in length below, and is here recorded in its entirety. *“As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand”* (1:4-10). The following comments should be noted concerning this prayer. First, Nehemiah acknowledges the God of the covenant. He declares, *“...the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.”* By now, the term “hesed” should be familiar to most students of scripture. It refers to the covenantal love of God whereby He displays mercy for the sake of His eternal covenant. The conditionality of the covenant, not the endurance of the covenant, are here mentioned in the end of the above statement.

Second, Nehemiah, after acknowledging the means by which he can address the maker of heaven and earth (the covenant), repents and denotes that such repentance was not a one-time thing, but had become a lifestyle: *“...I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.”* He also takes ownership for these sins, even those which he did not individually commit. He includes himself in the statement, *“...We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.”*

Third, Nehemiah reminds God of His covenant promise to bring His exiled children home. He declares, *“Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.”* Finally, he acknowledged that the returned exiles are, *“...your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.”* It is interesting that here, he does not include himself with having received the blessing of the covenant, he is content to differentiate between those who have been, *“...redeemed by your great power...”* and the rest of the people of God living in captivity. So, the burden of Nehemiah was both for the people of God (the redeemed ones) as well as the context in which they lived (the

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platform of redemption). His prayer is an assertion of covenant promises, and a reminder that the people of God remain at His mercy. The Hebrew term for redeemed is *קָדַם* and is the same word used to describe the exodus from Egypt. The initial redemptive event for the OT covenant community no doubt remained in the background and characterized the longing for their present situation. This is affirmed by the associated phrase, “... *by your great power and by your strong hand.*” This phrase is often used when referring to the redemption from Egypt (Ex. 6:1; 9:16 and 32:11).

Part Two: Nehemiah’s Bravery – The prayer previously referenced was submitted seemingly with one purpose in mind – obtaining pleasure in the eyes of the king. In fact, the end of the prayer states, “*O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man*” (1:11). It is clear, that Nehemiah was about to ask the king for permission to attend to a very important expedition, and that doing so placed him in jeopardy of falling out of the king’s good graces or possibly something more serious. His position as cup bearer, meant that he was in close, daily, proximity to the king, and would be given ample opportunities to ask for such a favor.

One note regarding his position in the royal court. The role of cup-bearer entailed serving the king wine. Often, during times of heightened paranoia, the king’s cup bearer might even be expected to sample the wine first to ensure that it was free of poison. At the very least, the cup-bearer was expected to appear pleasant in the presence of the king, especially during times of feasting. It seems that Nehemiah was forcibly placed in the path of providence, and did not go seeking it out. Neither did he run from it. We read, “*In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid*” (2:1-2).

The cause for Nehemiah’s fear could well have been the unpredictable response of the king to his request or it could be that he was afraid his sad countenance itself would meet with speedy requital. Regardless, he seized the opportunity and asked a rhetorical question, “*Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?*” One note about the condition of the city as herein described by Nehemiah, which shall resurface later is reference to the gates having been destroyed by fire. It is quite possible that such destruction was recent, a retaliation from those who opposed the earlier building under Ezra. It is also possible that the gates had remained in this condition since the destruction of the city by Nebuchadnezzar nearly 125 years before. In either case, the condition of the city, the place where his fathers were buried meant much to him for reasons stated above.

The king offered a commission to him if he would not be gone long enough to incite a riot. He allowed him to return to the land of his fathers’ graves and granted permission from the governor to pass freely as well as the keeper of the king’s forests that he might use the wood to rebuild the, “*gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy*” (2:8). The fact that Nehemiah was willing to do something about the condition in which the people lived, and granted the permission from the king as well, is correctly attributed to the hand of God in his life. He states, “*And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me*” (2:8b). Such bravery does not end once Nehemiah leaves the province of Susa, the palace. When he arrives in Judea and informs the people of the land of his authority from the king, authority which was supported by a retinue of

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officers and horsemen, the current governor, Sanballat were displeased. The text states, “...it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel” (2:9b). When one compares the record of the rebuilding that occurred in the book of Ezra with that mentioned here, it becomes obvious, that the returned exiles never lacked for enemies who would oppose the work of God.

After Nehemiah was in Jerusalem for three days, he arose in the middle of the night and took a tour of the city to assess the damage. We read, “...I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire” (2:13). Concerning this comment, Fensham remarks, “This expression is also not clear. It may be taken as a recent disaster which struck Jerusalem, perhaps action taken against the Jews when they rebuilt the wall illegally in the early years of Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:8). Another view is that this phrase refers to the destroying of Jerusalem in the time of Nebuchadnezzar. From that time, onward the wall and gates were in ruins. The one and only attempt to restore it in the early years of Artaxerxes was thwarted. Jerusalem was still a city without defenses. The temple of Jerusalem could be destroyed easily by the enemies, because no proper stand could be made against the enemies without a defense wall. After a hundred and forty years Jerusalem and its inhabitants, the Jews, were still easy game for any enemy who wanted to attack them. The latter view seems to be the more acceptable.”¹ The latter part of Fensham’s analysis must be understood to grasp the intensity behind the burden of Nehemiah. God’s temple was vulnerable; not that He needed a fortified city wall to protect His temple, God can and does save with or without fortifications of man, but He also protects His redemptive purposes through the responsible actions of human agents. It seems clear to Nehemiah that he saw himself as one such agent.

Part Three: Nehemiah’s Building Campaign – Nehemiah inaugurated a building campaign with the following speech: “Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.” And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, “Let us rise up and build.” So, they strengthened their hands for the good work” (2:17-18). The admonishment of Nehemiah addresses the fact that the people of God were suffering derision as a result of the city lying in ruins. The Hebrew word here translated, derision is דִּרְפָּה and means, “disgrace or shame”. One might ask, why would the ruins of the city and the lack of city walls cause the people of God to suffer disgrace and shame? The answer, as understood above is two-fold.

First, the city of Jerusalem was the one place where God promised to place His name. Therefore, for the city to be in disrepair reflected poorly on the God whose name was there. Second, the lack of city walls limited the people’s ability to control access to the city, and consequently to the temple. This, in summary, characterizes this period of Israelite history: the attempt to control access to God’s holy temple. This becomes further elucidated by the response of the people of the land, “But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, ‘What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?’ Then I replied to them, The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem” (2:19-20). Nehemiah’s building campaign was predicated on the assertion that those outside the covenant community, “...have no portion or right or

¹ Fensham, Charles F. *The New International Commentary on the OT – The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*. P. 152

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claim in Jerusalem". As much as the pre-exilic period is concerned with assimilation, the post-exilic period is concerned with differentiation. Consequently, those who are selected to participate in the building campaign are listed by name in chapter 3.

Conclusion: Think of what motivated Nehemiah to take the risks he took and make the journey he made. There appear many concerns in the text: concern for the redeemed people of God, concern for the redemptive purposes of God, concern for the welfare of the city of Jerusalem. However, at the core of his concerns was the desire to see access to the temple, the place of worship rebuilt under the leadership of Ezra, restricted to the true worshippers of God. One might argue from the vantage point of the covenant between God and His people, that such a concern originated from an isolationist mentality that failed to grasp the global design of the God of the covenant. Remember, at this point, Israel, the OT people of God, had deviated far off course, and were attempting to redirect their spiritual purposes to become more aligned with God. The universal nature of the covenant would have to await the coming of one who would embody the calling of prophet, priest and king. This does not mean that God's purposes for His people changed, just the ability to accomplish such a purpose given Israel's infidelity. Indeed, they were called to be a light to the nations, a visible demonstration to the entire world of the dominion of God on earth. Instead, their unfaithfulness to the covenant had caused the name of God to be blasphemed by heathen nations and resulted in the destruction of the city and temple wherein God had placed His name. Their return to the land was a sign of God's mercy more than their penitence.

As we ponder these timeless truths from scripture, think of ways that God's redemptive work might appear to be hindered by the shortcomings of His people today. What are some ways that we respond for good or ill? What should be the modern burden of the people of God?