

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 continue our journey in the book of Nehemiah. We continue on from a period of hardship (both internal as well as external) to one of spiritual renewal and rejoicing. There are several key variables regarding the text we will explore today that might easily be overlooked during a cursory reading. We will pause to consider the relationship to the events herein described in light of God's continuing faithfulness to His covenant people.

The sub-title of the lesson today is, *A Twig Plucked from the Fire*. The subtitle derives from the prophecy of Zechariah. In response to Satan accusing Joshua, the High Priest, during this period, Zechariah declares, "...*The Lord who has chosen Jerusalem rebuke you! Is not this a brand (twig) plucked from the fire?*" (Zechariah 3:2). To aid in our understanding of this passage, we will explore, 1) The Enumeration of the People of God; 2) The First Day; and 3) Confession & Repentance.

Part One: *The Enumeration of the People of God* – It has been stated before that this period of Israelite history can be characterized by regulation – regulation of access to the land of God, the people of God, and the temple of God. Many of the reforms described in the book of Ezra were the same if not similar to the ones mentioned in Nehemiah. The reference to the timing of this genealogical reckoning is offered in 7:1 where we read, "*Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed...*" This reference is the same as that made in 6:15-16, where the following is stated, "*So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies had 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.*" People often respond to fear with hostility, so it made good sense to have the guards of the temple also guarding the city: "*I gave my brother, Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and god-fearing man than many. And I said to them, 'Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot. And while they are still standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors. Appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, some at their guard posts and some in front of their own homes.'*"

As we witnessed last week, the intention of the enemy of the people of God was to sneak in unawares and kill them one by one. Therefore, the precautionary measures taken by Nehemiah were well-grounded and easily understood. The wall surrounding the city of Jerusalem had been completed, and the city, though much smaller than prior to 586 B.C., was sparsely inhabited. The people who returned under Zerubbabel and Ezra were many (upwards of 40,000) but not all were inhabitants of Jerusalem.

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Nehemiah begins the next section of our text with the following words, “*Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first...*” What follows is a reproduction of Ezra chapter 2 with exception of a few minor differences. Before we outline the chapter’s contents, we will devote some attention to the reason that genealogy would have taken on such importance for the people of God during this time, after all, they weren’t seemingly too serious about it prior to 586 B.C. since one of the major problems plaguing the people of God was intermarriage with surrounding nations. Why was a genealogical record revealing the “purity” of the descent of the people of God so important?

Prior to the Babylonian captivity, there were a series of promises given to certain descendants of the families and clans of God’s people, all of which were related to the covenant of redemption between God and His people. The first was the covenant of the *seed* making up the substance of the Abrahamic covenant. In Genesis 22:18, God tells Abraham, “*...in your offspring, shall all the nations of the earth be blessed...*” therefore, tracing one’s lineage to Abraham was of the base-line importance for the exiles seeking to appeal to the past for a future identity. Likewise, all allowed to draw near to God in worship, and especially the one allowed to approach God to make atonement for the sins of the people, were selected through the natural descent of a promised lineage. Only the Levites could be priests, and only a direct descendant of Aaron, and his sons could be the high priest. Such a promise was pursuant to the Mosaic covenant (Exodus 28:1-3). Finally, the Davidic covenant ensured that only a descendant of King David would reign forever as the lawful claimant to govern the people of God (2 Samuel 7:8-17). For the fidelity of all three of these covenants to remain intact, it was necessary for the people of God to maintain and retain good records of genealogies. This was seemingly easier done prior to the Babylonian captivity than afterwards, or at least there is heightened appreciation in the post-exilic literature for the preservation of one’s lineage. Regardless, the heart and motive for such a quest into the genealogy of the returned exiles was a desire to see the redemptive purposes of God continue. The possibility of a vulnerable redemptive plan of God became increasingly entertained by a generation born in exile, who experienced what previous generations would not have thought possible: the diaspora.

Alfred Edersheim in his monumental work, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, states well the above realization: “Among the outward means by which the religion of Israel was preserved, one of the most important was the centralization and localization of its worship in Jerusalem. If to some the ordinances of the Old Testament may in this respect seem narrow and exclusive, it is at least doubtful, whether without such a provision monotheism itself could have continued as a creed or a worship. In view of the state of the ancient world, and of the tendencies of Israel during the earliest stages of their history, the strictest isolation was necessary to preserve the religion of the Old Testament from that mixture with foreign elements which would speedily have proved fatal to its existence.”¹ During the post-exilic period, the strict isolation intended to preserve the religion of OT Israel was a careful attentiveness to the genealogies of the people of God.

The chapter is divided into at least four enumerations: the lay people who were descendants of a named individual, patriarch or elder (7:6-25), the lay people who were associated with a specific geographical location (7:26-38) priests, Levites, and temple servants 7:39-60, and those who could not prove their lineage 7:61-65. Among those who could not prove their lineage, there is one notable name: Tobiah.

¹ Edersheim, Alfred. *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*. Pg. 1

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Part Two: The First Day – There is a spiritual significance to the day on which the reading of the Law of God took place that might easily be overlooked. According to the text, “...when the seventh month had come, the people of Israel were in their towns...” This is a very interesting statement because we know that many of the people were *not* in their towns. In fact, there were probably more members of the covenant community residing outside the land of Israel than the number of returned exiles re-inhabiting the land. This will continue to be the case, and will have no small effect on shaping the identity of the people of God in the centuries leading up to the birth of Christ. Although this reference is seemingly missing from the Masoretic text, it would seem to convey the notion that all those redeemed from exile, were accounted for, and were safely dwelling in their cities. The safety of the city of Jerusalem and the controlled access to the temple, established the people of God, at least for the time being, and offered relative security.

Chapter eight begins with the following: “*And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. So, Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women, and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month*” (8:1-2). When one calls to memory that there were at least three times during the year that all male Jews were to appear before the Lord (Pesach, Shavuot, and Sukkot), otherwise known as the *Shalosh Regalim* or pilgrimage festivals, a better understanding of both the national mood for repentance as well as the significance of reading the Law of God as a community may be ascertained (see Exodus 34:18-23; Leviticus 23:42-45 and Deuteronomy 31:10-13).

The first day of the seventh month (Tishri) is significant because it is the feast of trumpets or Rosh Hashana. It is the first day of the religious calendar, and marks the beginning of the High Holy Days in the Jewish religion, culminating in Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement on the tenth day of the month. It is believed by Jewish Rabbis, that Rosh Hashana marks the day on which Adam & Eve were created, and is purportedly believed to be the birthdate of the Messiah. Yom Kippur or the Day of Atonement, is the one day of the year in which the High Priest was permitted access into the most holy place to offer atonement for the sins of the people (Leviticus 16).

In the same month (Tishri) we have the following command given to the people of God, “*On the fifteenth day of the seventh month, when you have gathered in the produce of the land, you shall celebrate the feast of the LORD seven days. On the first day shall be a solemn rest, and on the eighth day shall be a solemn rest. And you shall take on the first day the fruit of splendid trees, branches of palm trees and boughs of leafy trees and willows of the brook, and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God seven days. You shall celebrate it as a feast to the LORD for seven days in the year. It is a statute forever throughout your generations; you shall celebrate it in the seventh month. You shall dwell in booths for seven days. All native Israelites shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God*” (Lev. 23:39-43). This description of the inauguration of the Feast of Tabernacles, is telling because it discloses the reason for the feast as set forth by God, “... that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.” The historical redemptive acts of God would serve as a constant reminder to the people of God of His divine election. The Feast of Tabernacles was designed to remind God’s people of the way God redeemed and preserved His people. He made them to dwell in booths (temporary housing) when He redeemed them from Egyptian bondage, and He brought them to Himself to demonstrate through them

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how the people of God should live. Similarly, the redemption from Babylonian exile was followed by the rebuilding of the city of Jerusalem and the temple, where God placed His great name, both equally symbolic of God's covenantal faithfulness.

The Feast of Tabernacles is concluded by an extra-biblical holiday known as *Simchat Torah*, literally, *Rejoicing in the Torah*. It is believed that God gave the Law atop Mt. Sinai to His people during the Feast of Tabernacles. This bears relevance for the text because the reading of the Law of God, which was followed by interpreting the Law, occurred on the Feast of Trumpets. It was this ceremonial reading and exhortation that led to contrite repentance. If the reading of the Law occurred on Rosh Hashanah, and national repentance followed the observation of the Feast of Tabernacles, sandwiched in the middle was Yom Kippur or Day of Atonement, during which time the High Priest would have offered the blood of the sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people. The prayer of chapter nine is simply an outward expression of a spirit of contrition that had become characteristic of this period of spiritual reform and renewal under the leadership of Ezra.

When one reads the prayer of chapter nine, there is a sense that whereas the original Feast of Tabernacles was observed by a redeemed people in-route to the land of promise, this Feast of Tabernacles was also observed by a redeemed people in search of a land of promise. Even though the aspirations expressed by Nehemiah concerning the hopeful discovery or implementation of the Urim and Thummim to dispel the doubts concerning the lineage of some of the alleged priests continued to be upheld by each succeeding generation, there is no indication either from the scriptures or history that these hopes were ever realized. Whereas the great dedications prior to the exile were accompanied by a visible manifestation of the presence of God in the temple of God (see Ex. 40:34 & 2 Chronicles 5:14), no reference is made to a similar experience following the return of the redeemed exiles. Not until the coming of Christ, at whose baptism the heavens opened and the Spirit (Shekinah) was seen like a dove alighting upon Him, would there be a comparable attestation of God's presence among His chosen people.²

Part Three: Confession & Repentance – The covenantal renewal jointly led by Nehemiah and Ezra reaches its zenith in chapters nine and ten, and part of the strength of chapter ten, our sole topic of discussion next week, is the prayer of chapter nine. Since the prayer makes up the content of the entire ninth chapter, we will not reproduce it here. Rather, an overview of the prayer's most notable features is provided below.

First, the people of God separated themselves from the strangers of the land. The text states, "... *And the Israelites separated themselves from all the foreigners and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers*" (9:2). In Ezra chapter 10, the prayer of confession and repentance precedes the separation from foreigners, here it appears to come after. There are a couple of options. Either the prayer of Ezra instigated the broader spiritual reform referenced here in Nehemiah and verse 2 of this chapter summarizes events in an order other than chronological (not atypical for the author(s) of Ezra and Nehemiah) or the need to repent and separate themselves from the people of the land occurred twice, first under the direct mediatorial repentance of Ezra, and again under the leadership of Ezra and the Jewish elders who seem to be the ones offering up a prayer on behalf of the people in chapter nine.

² It is interesting to note that it was during the Feast of Tabernacles or Sukkot that Christ, following the tradition of Hashana Rabbah (when water would be poured out before the Lord and the offering of a special prayer such as the Hallel of Psalms 118), Christ declared that He was the living water (John 7:38).

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This would explain why they separated themselves prior to the prayer of repentance, since they were already convicted of the sin of intermarriage, and agreed previously (Ezra 10:5) to put away their foreign wives. According to one source³, the events of Ezra 9 -10 occurred in December of 457 B.C., while those described in the current chapter occurred in October of 445 B.C. Thus, the events described earlier in Ezra would have occurred shortly after his arrival in the land (approximately twelve years earlier), and the events described in Nehemiah 9 happened after his return to the land when both he and Nehemiah would have (presumably) been in the land.

Second, the division of this day of fasting and prayer is described accordingly: *“And they stood in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the Lord their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of it they made confession and worshipped the Lord their God.”* The relationship between understanding God’s Word and repentance is hereby solidified.

Third, they begin by acknowledging God as creator and preserver of all things (9:6). Then, progress from acknowledging God as creator, worshipped by all creation – an awareness of *Common Grace*, to declaring His covenantal election of Abraham, which entailed giving his descendants after him the land of Canaan. Concerning God’s commitment to give them the land, from which they had recently been expelled, they declared, *“... And you have kept your promise, for you are righteous...”* Note that God’s righteousness (which He possesses independent of the awareness of His creation) is here declared to be revealed through His covenantal faithfulness.

Fourth, the prayer moves on from creation, to the Noahic and Abrahamic covenant, and then to the Mosaic covenant. They declare, *“And you saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea, and performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants, and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted arrogantly against our fathers. And you made a name for yourself, as it is to this day. And you divided the sea before them, so that they went through the midst of the sea on dry land, and you cast their pursuers into the depths, as a stone into mighty waters”* (9:9-11). God further revealed Himself to His people through His redemptive historical acts – He redeemed them with a mighty hand, and made a name for Himself. What was the name He made for Himself? It is the covenant name of YHVH. The name whereby He becomes the Lord (YHVH) their God who redeems them from the land of bondage.

Fifth, after referencing His presence among them in the wilderness by means of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, they declare His continued faithfulness to them evidenced through the giving of the Torah, His Law, as well as the holy Sabbath. He preserved them in the time of their wilderness wanderings. This culminates with the command to, *“... go in and possess the land...”* They rightfully acknowledge that they, *“... acted presumptuously and stiffened their neck and did not obey your commandments.”* Then they declare, *“But you are a God ready to forgive, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (hesed)...”* They then continue to extol the manifest faithfulness of God who preserved them in the wilderness for forty years, though their fathers rebelled against Him.

Sixth, they transition to declaring His covenantal faithfulness to the generation of conquest. After they took possession of the land (in fulfillment of the Abrahamic Covenant), they *“... became fat, and delighted themselves in your great goodness.”* Then, they rebelled again against God, and violated the covenant He made with them and their fathers. This theme of acknowledged infidelity to the covenant is

³ Footnotes to the ESV Reformation Study Bible.

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consistent throughout their prayer – so much so that the terms of the Covenant materialize to form the essence of how God’s people relate to Him as well as He to them. They declare, *“Nevertheless, they (their forefathers) were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their back and killed your prophets, who had warned them in order to turn them back to you, and they committed great blasphemies.”* God’s just response: *“Therefore, you gave them into the hand of their enemies who made them suffer...Yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you delivered them according to your mercies.”* This happened more than once, as they attest. *“Nevertheless, in your great mercies you did not make an end of them or forsake them, for you are a gracious and merciful God.”*

Seventh, this historical background provides the redemptive historical overview of God’s covenantal dealings with His people up to that point. The elders, then transition into the following prayer, *“Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love (Hesed), let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people, since the time of the kings of Assyria until this day. Yet you have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. Behold, we are slaves this day; in the land that you gave to our fathers to enjoy its fruit and its good gifts, behold, we are slaves. And its rich yield goes to the kings whom you have set over us because of our sins. They rule over our bodies and over our livestock as they please, and we are in great distress”* (9:32-33; 36-37). They summarize what has already been stated: God keeps covenant and is justified in all that has come upon them. However, they ask Him to, *“... let not all this hardship seem little to you...”* In the Hebrew, this phrase is, אֶל־יִמְעַט לְפָנֶיךָ אֶת כָּל־הַתְּלָאָה and can literally be translated, *“do not cause to diminish before you, all this travail”*. In other words, let all our suffering be worth something, even if it is not half as much as we deserve.

To summarize this part of the covenantal prayer of repentance, it will simply be stated, that the leaders of God’s people are here declaring that God is faithful, and they are unfaithful. They have been redeemed from the land of exile and brought back to the land of promise, but remain slaves. They request that all the suffering they have experienced, and continue to experience might be favorably considered before Him, not because it comes close to atoning for their wrong, but because they are ultimately incapable of representing God’s dominion rule while slaves to foreign rulers. Thus, the heart of this prayer of repentance can be summarized by one line of a prayer Christ taught His disciples: *“Let your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”* The second part of this covenant renewal, which continues this thrust to see God’s kingdom come, will be explored next week.