

1 Chronicles-Nehemiah: Grace Greater Than a Nation's Sins - Lesson 2.

Ezra and Nehemiah: Up From the Ashes.

I. General Introduction to Ezra-Nehemiah.

The key words to keep in mind for the books of Ezra and Nehemiah both begin with the letter "r": return and rebuilding. That is what these books are about. It is also useful to appreciate the fact that they really are a unit. In the same way that 1 and 2 Samuel are essentially one book (1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles likewise), Ezra and Nehemiah are one book, one unified story.

A. Return to Judah.

The return aspect is an important thing to appreciate for us. Both Ezra and Nehemiah are returning to a place where they have never been. Ezra and Nehemiah are later figures than the figures say in days the chronicler describes. By the decree of Cyrus, the Persian king who did not practice exile and so allowed captured populations to return home, the Jews had been able to go back from captivity in what was formally Babylon, now part of the Persian Empire, as early as 540 B.C. By 539 B.C., waves of people were traveling back. But that is long before Ezra and Nehemiah come on the scene.

Ezra returns "to the place he had never lived" in 458 B.C., and Nehemiah returns to a place he had never lived in 444 B.C. If they had never been there (these people had grown up in Mesopotamia and never seen Judah with their own eyes), how is it that we can speak of them as returning? Well, the answer is that they saw themselves as living where they did not exactly belong. They saw themselves as having been born in a land of captivity, in a foreign land, in a place that was not their home. They understood that their home was the place God wanted them to be. It really is a remarkable analogy to our own situation, we who follow Christ understand that our home is not where we are now; we have not been to our home yet. We are headed for it; we are bound to go there; it is a promise. We look forward to it, but we are living in another land. We are living in the land of our birth, but not the land of our home.

B. Rebuilding a Holy People.

Well, this certainly was their feeling. They knew the Law of Moses, and they had grown up on it. They were righteous Jews; they had been trained in the Scriptures. They knew the stories of how their people had come into captivity. They knew the background from Samuel and Kings and Chronicles. They knew what could have happened and did not in the history of Judah; and of course, they knew also the teachings of the great prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah. They knew how those prophets had denounced corruption and evil and social injustice and disobedience to God's covenant and idolatry. They came, when they returned to Judah, armed with a great asset, a confidence in and a knowledge of the Word of God. Indeed, what seems to have happened is that a large number of the Jews in exile got really serious about obeying God's Word.

Orthodoxy became important to the people. People saw what it was like to live in a purely idolatrous culture as Babylon was, and indeed, as Persia was after the Babylonians. They knew what it was like to experience the wrath of God on their nation. They knew the humiliation of being a captured and exiled people. They wanted relief from that; they wanted to do the right thing. They were converted back to faithfulness in God. Both Ezra and Nehemiah are contemporaries and are undoubtedly friends, who surely prayed for one another and met together often. We see them, in fact, cooperating together in a number of activities. These two great leaders came to Judah, where they had never been in order to do what good they could for the Lord's Kingdom.

II. Restoration of the Temple (Ezr 1:1-6:22).

Now by the time Ezra arrived in 458 B.C., the temple had been already built and was in existence a long time, but the book that bears the name Ezra actually started earlier than that. We must appreciate the fact that Ezra comes on the scene, in the book that bears his name, only in chapter 7.

A. Decree of Cyrus.

Let us go back to the first few chapters, chapters 1-6 in Ezra, and see how they fill in for us the period from the first chance for Jews to return until the period when Ezra comes back as one of many ways who return from exile. Chapter 1 opens, again, with mention of the decree of Cyrus and with further elaboration on it. Cyrus was only too happy to allow Jews to return.

We know that Cyrus was one of the people that Daniel dealt with, and we have reason to believe that Daniel's significant influence in the Persian court produced a kind of favorable attitude that a king like Cyrus had toward the Jews. Because he did not just let them go home, he did not just say, "Okay, I do not do exiles, so you guys can go home." He said instead, "I am going to send you home with a purpose, and I am going to send you with money to carry out that purpose. I want you to build the temple in Jerusalem." Now he had a selfish motive. He certainly was not converted to the Law of Moses. His selfish motive was that the people would pray for him and his family once they rebuilt that temple. Now to a righteous Jew, this was no problem; they were glad to pray for any king or ruler. They understood what Paul tells us in Romans 13 about praying for and caring about any government, no matter how corrupt. That was a fine deal from the point of view of the Jews. Here they could get full official permission and support and financing to rebuild the temple.

B. Returnees.

In 539 B.C., we have the first wave of Jews heading back to Judah over those hundreds of miles of difficult terrain from Babylon to Jerusalem. They are led, at first, by someone who is named Sheshbazzar. He seems either to have died on the way or to have begun using another name, because by the time they actually get to Judah the person we see leading them is named Zerubbabel. At any rate, that difficult problem is not an essential one; we just appreciate the fact Zerubbabel is the name used of the individual who was the governor of Judah. He was a native Jew; he was even a descendant of David. He was appointed by Cyrus, king of Persia, to

start rebuilding the city of Jerusalem, to start repopulating Judah, and to get the temple rebuilt as well. He had as an associate the high priest Joshua, or Jeshua, either name can be used.

C. Restoration of Worship.

In Ezra 3, we see the happy result of their collaboration. The foundation of the temple was laid. There was much rejoicing at this. The end of the chapter describes the fact that all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. This was their center, this was the core of their relationship to God, and to think that they were finally getting the completely destroyed temple back with a foundation upon which the rest of the structure would be built. We read also that there were some older priests and Levites and family heads there who had been alive when the original exile had taken place. They had lived through the Exile. They were now elderly, but they had seen the former temple. When they saw the foundation being laid, while others were shouting for joy, they did the kind of thing that older adults more often do at times of great emotion, tears came to their eyes. They were not crying because they did not like what they saw, but because they were deeply moved to think that God had been so faithful, that He had watched over His people during those long decades of exile and was now leading them to a restoration of His presence and favor. We are told the sound was heard far away, a mixture of weeping and of shouting for joy. It looked great, but immediately opposition came.

D. Opposition and Completion of the Temple.

Chapters 4-5 of the book of Ezra describe that opposition; it went on for decades. The temple did get built and happily, we see a description of that in the book after an opportunity for consultation with the Persian successor to Cyrus, that is, Darius, the Persian emperor. The people were able to be reassured that Persian support for the building of the temple was present. Encouraged by that, and also by what the writer of the book of Ezra -tells us was the faithful preaching of Haggai and Zechariah, the people did get moving.

Starting in 520 B.C., they worked earnestly for four years, and the temple was completed as described for us in Ezra 6 in 516 B.C. This was exactly seventy years after it had been destroyed, just as the prophet Jeremiah had predicted. There would be seventy years of exile and then God would again bless His people. They celebrated Passover. They have got the temple again, and they can come to a place and gather and celebrate the meal together. And all Israel, even though reduced in number and reduced in size, joyfully gathers under the leadership of the governor, Zerubbabel, and the high priest, Jeshua, to show their faithfulness to God, their love and appreciation for what He had done for them.

III. Reformation of the People (Ezr 7:1-10:44).

Quite a bit of time passes, and we move from 516 B.C. to 458 B.C.; and, unfortunately, things have not been kept up at the high level they were in 516 B.C. There has been considerable deterioration. It is human nature to expect that when you have worked hard to accomplish something, everything after that is supposed to go well, but it did not. In fact, as people became discouraged, a discouragement that is almost palpable in some of the prophecies of Zechariah and Haggai, we notice that they deteriorate in their faithfulness to God as well.

A. Ezra and His Commission.

By the middle of the fifth century B.C. (by 458 B.C.), when Ezra returns to Jerusalem, things are not good. Now Ezra was a priest. He was trained in the priesthood. He was also a scribe, meaning a scholar in the Word of God. He really was kind of a Bible school professor as it were, one who loved the Word of God and had mastered many, many parts of it, and certainly knew the Law of Moses. It was a big venture for him to come to Judah, but he had official permission to do it. He had support from the king of his time, King Artaxerxes.

B. Ezra's Distress over Religious Intermarriage.

Now Ezra left for Judah with a retinue of people (the list of those who returned with him is provided for us in chapter 8), and upon his return to Jerusalem, he found many kinds of things that were not good. The temple was built and the temple courtyard was there with the altar on it where sacrifices could be offered, but the rest of the city remained totally in ruins. They had not rebuilt any other part of it, nobody was living there. A great big city with nobody living there, except near one part of it, the temple mount. Furthermore, Ezra encountered a particularly serious problem among the several that are mentioned in the book, and that was the same kind of problem that had gotten Solomon in trouble, the same kind of thing that caused his heart to drift after other gods and goddesses and not be entirely loyal to the Lord. It was religious intermarriage.

The Bible never prohibits racial intermarriage; it is not an issue. In fact, there was plenty of racial and ethnic intermarriage. Think of the story of Ruth. She is a Moabitess who marries an Israelite, and that is in the lineage of David as well as the lineage of Jesus Himself. Think of Moses who marries a Sudanese woman, a black African woman. These are fine things, perfectly okay; but when religious intermarriage takes place, there are problems. When Israelite men married Philistine women or women of any of the surrounding nations and brought them into their homes, these women brought with them their polytheism, their idolatry, their syncretism.

Ezra, arriving several decades after the completion of the temple, found all sorts of examples of this. Israelite men had married, in large numbers, non-Israelite women; and we are told that the people of Israel, including priests and Levites as chapter 9 describes it, had married people with detestable practices like those of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Moabites, and Egyptians, and so on. That intermarriage presented a serious, serious problem. Ezra said, "I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice." Then he says, ". . . after sitting in dust and ashes, I arose from where I was with my tunic and cloak torn, and fell on my knees with my hands spread out for the Lord my God." Ezra prays a prayer of confession on behalf of the people, "Lord, we have wronged You. We are going as a people little by little right back into the practices that you punished us for by the exile. When we did these things a century and a half prior to this, You knocked us out as a people. You eliminated us from the face of the earth as an independent nation. You made us slaves in a foreign country. And here we are doing it again."

Ezra just wept and prayed and confessed to God. We are told that he even threw himself down before the house of God repeatedly. And as people who came to worship at the temple saw

this, saw what he was doing, heard his prayer of confession, and realized that this righteous man was shocked and grieving over the sins of his people, they began to join him. A revival broke out. Ezra's deep concern, his desire for faithfulness, his chagrin at the sinfulness of his people, led to a catching of the idea that there needed to be repentance.

C. Dissolution of Illegal Marriages.

The book ends with a rather radical solution. These marriages were not legal marriages; they were illegal marriages. They simply could not be countenanced by the Word of God. Ezra forced those marriages to be broken up. This is not a model for normal behavior. We are, in the New Testament, advised that there really are not proper grounds for divorce. You do not solve things by divorce. But, in this particular case, those illegal marriages were set aside; they had never been proper in the first place. So by breaking up those marriages, an unusual and exceptional arrangement, Ezra helped restore righteousness to the people. Otherwise, of course, you would simply have idolatry everywhere in the homes. You would have polytheism everywhere in the homes. You would have syncretism, the merging, melting together of the worship of the true God of Israel with the false gods and goddesses of the surrounding peoples, everywhere in the homes of the families of people of Judah. It could not be tolerated, and radical steps had to be taken.

IV. Reconstruction of the Wall (Ne 1:1-7:73).

A. Nehemiah's Burden and Resolve.

Now Ezra's story is not entirely over, but we begin to focus, right after Ezra 10, coming into the book we now call Nehemiah, with another person from essentially the same time period. It is only fourteen years later (444 B.C.). Nehemiah is working as an important government official. The term that is used is "cupbearer," but we should appreciate the fact that it does not mean he was only some guy who served coffee. A cupbearer is something like the title that we use today when we speak of secretary of state or secretary of defense. These are not people who take dictation; these are people who are major administrators. A worker term is used for them, secretary.

In ancient times, the person who might be in charge of the royal food distribution, or even somebody with a kind of a role that we might describe as something like secretary of the interior, might have the title cupbearer. So we believe that Nehemiah actually had a fairly important position; he was essentially a cabinet member or court official for the king. That is why he has such freedom to speak to King Artaxerxes as he does. Hearing about how bad things are, what a tough time Ezra and others are having, how much corruption there is in his people, Nehemiah also is concerned to return and rebuild.

Sometimes people will say Ezra's rebuilding was essentially spiritual and Nehemiah's was essentially physical. That is a bit of a distortion. Yes, Nehemiah does attend to the physical needs of the city, and in particular the rebuilding of the walls around Jerusalem, which still were broken down in most places. But he actually is doing that with a spiritual concern as well. Nehemiah, like Ezra, is an orthodox Judean in exile, someone who knows and loves God's Word

and wants to be obedient to it. He petitions the king to allow him to return to this place he has never seen, to Judah, his ancestral homeland, that he might help the people.

B. Rebuilding of the Wall Around Jerusalem.

Upon his arrival, in chapter 2, he rides around the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah spends three days doing that. He does not tell anybody about it, yet he just keeps making a circuit of that wall, checking out everything, analyzing what needs to be done. In ancient times, if a city did not have a wall around it, it was terribly vulnerable, not just to invading armies (and there were plenty of groups that would not have hesitated to invade Israel and try to subjugate Jerusalem once again), but also just to banditry, just to burglary, just to various kinds of crimes where people could walk right into a city and perpetrate those crime.

How could the people rebuild the holy city unless they could first rebuild the walls? Nehemiah was an organizer of that rebuilding; he came with real clout. Ezra had come with the privilege of functioning as a priest and a religious leader. Nehemiah came with the privilege of the governorship; that is what Artaxerxes, the Persian king, had appointed him to. Using that power, he gets the people organized and starts rebuilding the wall. Now as you can imagine when people from surrounding nations see that wall being rebuilt, they are not pleased. They oppose it in all kinds of ways: they hire lobbyists; they write letters; and they try to influence Artaxerxes to prevent it from happening.

C. Completion of the Wall in Spite of Many Obstacles.

But Nehemiah organizes the people all the more, and when necessary solves whatever problems come, such as the fact in the process of rebuilding the wall, some people did not have their husbands and sons with them to work the fields and were becoming impoverished in that way. Others were so poor that they had gotten into terrible debt just to try to keep alive. Nehemiah straightens out financial problems; he straightens out social, legal, economic issues as well as straightening out those walls and getting them patched up. It was a quick job; it was a fast job. The basics of it were completed in fifty-two days. It was not an easy job to do that. A lot of what they did was to fill in gaps in the walls with rubble and finish them or face them on the outside so that they would be adequate for at least deterring an invading army. For fear that they would be attacked, they had to keep their weapons either in their hands or at their sides or close by. Some of them were standing guard all night, even after having worked heavily during the day. But the wall got built.

V. Restoration of the People (Ne 8:1-13:31).

A. Ezra Reads the Law.

Then having that protection, Nehemiah got Ezra to come out of retirement, as it were, in chapter 8 and to read the Word of God to the people hour after hour. They were all gathered into a square in Jerusalem known as the Water Gate Square. There, hearing the Word of God, the people confessed their sins and committed themselves, as chapter 9 describes it at length and also on into chapter 10, the following of the Law. In other words, they renewed their commitment to God's covenant, to becoming again His covenant people, obedient to Him.

B. Repopulation of Jerusalem.

After that most important stuff was taken care of, it was then Nehemiah's concern to start repopulating the city. Everybody was living in the surrounding towns. Lots were drawn, and one out of ten people agreed that they would move into the city, clear the rubble, and begin building houses, and so on. He also put priests and Levites into service in the temple. As one of the final reforms, he got the Sabbath respected once again. Even such a basic thing as work on the Sabbath, as having the markets open on the Sabbath day, had to be straightened out, the people had degenerated so far.

C. Conclusion.

At the end of the book, which is autobiographical at many points, Nehemiah says, "Remember me with favor, O my God." He understands himself and his people to be dependent upon God's favor. I think, in fact, it is clear to us that God did remember him with favor. We certainly do. We think of Ezra and Nehemiah as rescuers of a nation that had deteriorated so far, after so much good, and so much benefit was sitting right there for them to reach out to. They needed revival; they needed return and rebuilding, both physically and spiritually, and Ezra and Nehemiah provided it.