

EZRA/NEHEMIAH: BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE

6. THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD

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Nehemiah 8:1-12

We are nearing the end of this summer sermon series on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Today is the next-to-last sermon of this seven-week series.

Our reading for today is without a doubt the high-point of the series. It is what we have been building toward. If you have ever heard a sermon from the book of Nehemiah, it was probably based on the accounts of chapter 8 where the people gather in Jerusalem to hear God's Law read aloud for the first time in generations.

To summarize how we got here, in the year 597 BC, the nation of Judah was defeated by the armies of the Babylonian Empire led by King Nebuchadnezzar. The Babylonians tore down the walls of Jerusalem and destroyed the great temple which had been built by King Solomon. They also carried many of the elite members of the nation back to Babylon to serve the Empire. This event is known as the Exile and is one of the defining moments in Jewish history.

Fifty-eight years later, the Babylonian Empire fell to the Persian Empire led by King Cyrus. One of Cyrus' earliest decrees was to allow those Jews who had been taken from Judah to return home. The first wave of exiles (about 50,000 of them) returned. It took them twenty years, but finally, they were able to rebuild the temple. About thirty years after the temple was completed, Ezra was sent by the king to assess the situation in Judah. Ezra was an exile in Babylon. He worked for the king as a scribe. His specialty was the Jewish Torah, also known as the Law—what we know as the first five books of our Old Testament. Ezra returned to Jerusalem to discover some societal problems which he worked to rectify.

Approximately 30 years after Ezra, Nehemiah returns to Judah. Nehemiah was working for the king in Babylon when he receives a report of the dreadful state of affairs in Jerusalem, a place he identified as *the city of my ancestors' graves*. Nehemiah requests that the king allow him to return to Jerusalem in order that he might rebuild the walls of the city. Without walls, the city was defenseless and subject to being despoiled by any passing army. The people lived in fear and shame. The king permits Nehemiah to return and names him interim governor. Nehemiah returns and despite obstacles and opposition he rallies the citizens to work together to rebuild the wall around the city.

This brings us to our reading for today in chapter 8. The city of Jerusalem has been fortified, the temple has been rebuilt, the descendants of those kidnapped by the Babylonians have returned. Life is not back to how it had been before the Babylonians (and never would be) but it is getting closer. In our reading for today,

we are told that the *all the people gathered* in an open space in Jerusalem. The people inform Ezra to bring to them the book of the Law of Moses, the law *which the Lord had given Israel*. Ezra complies and brings the scrolls which contain the Torah (what we know as Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy).

If you've been watching closely then the mention of Ezra should cause you to scratch your head. Here we are, deep into the book of Nehemiah. What is Ezra doing here? Wouldn't he be dead by now? Yes, he would. But the writer of this book wants to utilize Ezra because he is crucial to the overall story. The work of Nehemiah and Ezra complement one another. Nehemiah represents the building program of Jerusalem and Ezra represents the God's Law. They are both doing God's work but in different ways. Ezra is dead, but for the sake of the story, the author includes him here.

So, the people request that Ezra bring the Law to their assembly. It is important to note that *men and women* are present. This is not just a men-only event. Everyone is here. A special platform is built for the occasion and Ezra stands on the platform and he reads. He reads from morning to mid-afternoon. And the people listen with *attentive ears*. Ezra is not alone on the platform. He has assistants. These assistants help the people to *understand the law*. Scholars are not sure exactly if the assistants were there to translate the law from Hebrew to Aramaic (which was the language spoken by the people) or if they were there to explain the readings and answer questions. I like to think that it was a little of both. Hearing the words is one thing. Understanding them is another.

So Ezra presents the scroll for all to see and when he opens it the people rise to their feet. Ezra offers a blessing to God and the people respond, *Amen, amen*. But as the word of God is read, the people begin to mourn. This was no mere weeping. This was full on grieving. The question I raise for you is "why?" Why did the people respond in this matter?

How do you think we would react in this situation? Imagine I told you that next week we are going to gather on the square and stand outside all day while I read from the bible? What would you think of that? I suspect the biggest question on your minds would be 'will wifi be available?'

Through this sermon series, I don't believe that I have emphasized how traumatic the events of the exile had been. Judah was not a large country. It would have been devastated by the loss of its capital, the destruction of its center of worship, and the loss of so many of its population. The events that we are reading about today took place 150 years after the destruction of Jerusalem. That is about the same time period our nation has experienced since the end of the Civil War. The Civil War is history but for many it is still fresh. And I don't mean those people who continue to fight it, but the stories of the war are still handed down. My grandmother was born in 1900. Her grandmother who lived in west Tennessee told

her stories about the war that have in turn been told to me. Many times I heard about when the Yankees were coming towards their home in Haywood County that the family was in the back burying the silver. I'm not a fan of the War but the family stories are very much alive.

For 150 years, the Jews had lived the trauma of loss and destruction, of being forcibly removed from their land, of serving a foreign king, of losing their homes, their cities, their society and, the thought, their God. And in their hearts, they knew why these things had happened, they were aware of what had caused it, they knew the answer. It was simply because they had sinned. Their situation was a result of their sin against the Lord.

When Ezra stood up that day with the scrolls he read to them from Genesis of the story of Creation and Fall, of the covenant made with Abraham, of slavery in Egypt and the flight to freedom through the wilderness, of the giving of the Commandments at Mt. Sinai, of delivery to the Promised Land. But this line sums it up when Ezra prays, *Nevertheless [our ancestors] were disobedient and rebelled against you and cast your law behind their backs and killed your prophets... and they committed great blasphemies. Therefore you gave them into the hands of their enemies, who made them suffer. Then in the time of their suffering they cried out to you and you heard them from heaven, and according to your great mercies you gave them saviors who saved them from the hands of their enemies. But after they had rest, they again did evil before you, and you abandoned them to the hands of their enemies, so that they had dominion over them; yet when they turned and cried to you, you heard from heaven, and many times you rescued them according to your mercies.*

That is the story of the Jewish people that Ezra tells that day. This is what caused the people of Judah to weep and grieve. They looked back at their history and they realized that all the pain they had experienced could have been avoided if only they had stayed faithful to God. Hearing the Word of God read aloud was a form of confession. It was a recognition and acceptance of truth that felt like a punch to the gut.

However, the Levites that were there assisting Ezra urged the people not to weep or mourn telling them, *This day is holy*. The Levites encouraged the people to go and celebrate, to *eat the fat and drink sweet wine* and share with those who have less. The message of the Law is not that God judges, but that God loves. As the Levites tell the people, *The joy of the Lord is your strength*. So, the people do as the Levites direct. They go and celebrate this holy occasion.

Then, as an act of communal promise, the people draw up a document in which they make an oath *to walk in God's law*. The leaders of the people sign the document.

Ultimately, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are about community, about rebuilding a broken and devastated people. The hand of God is present throughout these books as God leads the people back to Judah and assists them in rebuilding their temple and their city. But ultimately, what God is doing is leading them back from sin. That is their where their brokenness lies. When the people hear God's Word read to them, they realize how much they are loved, and how in sin they had turned their backs on that love. God's house is not a temple; God's house is where God's people reside together in God's infinite love.

Amen.