

Pastor's Bible Study

Nehemiah: Rebuild and Renew

Lesson 6: Restoration through repopulating Jerusalem

Key Verse: "So my God put it into my heart...." – Nehemiah 7:5

Consolidating the Holy People (7:1-73)

- There were three returns to Israel, just as there had been three deportations.
- The first return from exile was allowed by Cyrus, the King of Persia, in 538 BC. It was led by the governor Zerubbabel. The rebuilding of the Temple was the key objective of this group of returnees. (Ezra 1-6; Haggai; Zechariah)
- The second return was under Ezra (chapters 7-10) in 458 BC. Artaxerxes, King of Persia, allowed them to return. The purpose of this return was to bring reforms to the Israelites. To focus on the Torah and rebuilding the community.
- The third return was led by Nehemiah in 444 BC. Nehemiah's primary purpose was to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem and to lead the people back to obedience to God.
- Nehemiah 7 is a genealogy that repeats Ezra 2. It ties the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem to the people who returned from Babylonian exile and rebuilt the temple.
- There continued to be external and internal threats, so Nehemiah acted. What are some of the things he does in the first few verses?
- First, he appoints Hanani – Why does Nehemiah pick his own brother?
- Hanani was the one that alerted Nehemiah of the terrible situation in Jerusalem while he was still in Susa.
- Hananiah – a more faithful, and God-fearing man than many. In charge of security in Jerusalem.
- Second, the strengthening of the system of the gates was to guard against external threats.
- Third, to go back to the original census of the returning people from Ezra 2 will promote unity from within. He claims this census as the founding document of his mission of return and restoration. All total there were 42,360.
- The significance of the seventh month: All these events culminated in the feasts of the seventh month – the day of praise, the day of repentance, and the feast of booths. The original group celebrated the feasts of the seventh month immediately upon their return to the land (Ezra 3). Nehemiah needs more of the leading families to live in Jerusalem and strengthen the city.

The Restoration of Joyful Worship (8:1-18)

- In Nehemiah 1-7 the leader is Nehemiah, but in 8-10 the leader of the spiritual reforms is the priest and scribe Ezra.
- In Nehemiah 8-10, there is no opposition and external threats.

Scene 1: Joyous Renewal (7:73-8:12)

Key verse: "This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." – Nehemiah 8:10b

- This is not a normal worship service. Did people just naturally gather or did one of the leaders call the assembly together on the first day of the New Year?

- The Water Gate was on the eastern wall of Jerusalem, up the hill from the Gibon Spring and not far from the Ophel hill (3:26). It was not in the temple precincts where only males were allowed.
- The thrust of the text is decidedly not on Ezra's reading of the scroll. It is the actions of the people.
- They are eager (1), attentive (3, 7b) and worshipful (6b).
- Their solidarity is also emphasized. The phrase "all the people" occurs 10x's in this scene. The repeated phrase "both men and women" continues to underscore "all".
- Who were the men in vs. 4?
- What elements were in their spontaneous worship service in vs. 5-6?
- What role did the Levite men have? Read in Hebrew, they would translate into Aramaic and answered questions in the local dialect. Involved going over historical information, giving theological evidence, explaining various images symbolized, giving application. All comments were meant to clarify.
- The Torah was not just for the elite but for all in Israel.
- Why did the people weep when they heard the Law?
- New Year's Day was "holy to the Lord" set aside for rejoicing and blowing of trumpets. Ezra and the Levites prohibit grief and urge rejoicing.

Scene 2: Festival Renewal (8:13-18)

- One of three pilgrim festivals – two in spring – Passover, Pentecost, and one in the fall autumn harvest which is the feast of tabernacles or booths.
- Built structures covered in plant material.
- Reminder of the temporary structures they had during the forty years in the wilderness.
- Festival lasted seven days (God's creation). Ezra reads the Torah every day. On the eighth day (A new creation – begins the history of Israel anew) they had an assembly.
- By learning to celebrate the feast that reenacts the exodus, they are formed as a people journeying toward dwelling with God in the land.

Sources:

- Matthew Levering, Ezra and Nehemiah, Brazos Theological Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: BrazosPress, 2007).
- Gary V. Smith, Ezra-Nehemiah, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2022).
- Mark A. Throntveit, Ezra-Nehemiah, Interpretation (Louisville KY: John Knox, 1992)