

EZRA/NEHEMIAH: BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE

7. THE CYCLE OF SIN

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Nehemiah 13:4-14

Today is the final entry in this Summer Sermon Series from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. To be honest, we should have ended this series last week. That part of the story, without a doubt, is the high point of these two books. The public reading of the Torah to the people in Jerusalem was where the events in these books were leading. It was the perfect ending.

It had been 150 years since the destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonian army. The walls of the city had been torn down, the temple leveled, and many of the population had been carried away. Fifty-eight years later when the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians, the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Many did return. Their work was slow but in time they were able to rebuild their sacred temple. Ezra came from Babylon and instituted social and religious reforms. Years after that, Nehemiah was appointed governor and he began the process of rebuilding the city walls and gates. Jerusalem and its inhabitants, he said, were in disgrace. The rebuilding of Jerusalem took generations to accomplish.

But finally, it was done. The city was functioning more normally. The only thing lacking now was a relationship with God. So the people requested that God's Law, the Torah, the first five books of scripture, be read to them. A platform was built in a public square, and all the people of Jerusalem and Judah gathered there for a great festival to hear Ezra read from the sacred scrolls. Beginning with Genesis, he read the account of Creation and Fall, of the covenants with Noah and Abraham, of slavery in Egypt and the flight to freedom across the wilderness, of salvation in the promised land. This was the story the people heard, and upon hearing it read to them they wept. They wept because they realized that the last 150 years of national trauma could have been avoided if only they had remained faithful to God. Their predicament was a result of their sin.

The people made a pledge that they would live as righteous people. They drew up a document that stated how they would live. They swore to *walk in God's law*, to observe God's commandments, to uphold the Sabbath, and more. They also swore to pay an annual temple tax in the amount of one-third of a shekel. This tax would be used to maintain the temple, support its staff, and provide for the needs of regular worship and holy festivals. The people pledged to bring the first fruits of their harvests and flocks to the temple, to support the priests and the Levites and the singers and the gatekeepers, and more. This was their promise, *We will not neglect the house of our God*. And they had their leaders sign the document.

Even more radically, the people addressed the issue that the population of Jerusalem was too small to function as a thriving city. So the people of Judah cast lots, and one-tenth of the population relocated from their homes into the city. The people literally tithed themselves to the city. And Nehemiah records this in chapter 11 by providing a census of the repopulated city.

In chapter 12, Nehemiah tells of the dedication ceremony the people held for rebuilt city wall. In another great festival, Nehemiah calls all the priests and Levites together in a holy ceremony. They climb up on the wall. Half the group proceeds to the right and half the group goes to the left. They are accompanied by singing and instruments. The two groups walk until they meet on the opposite side of the city at the temple. Nehemiah describes it like this, *They offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. The joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.* It was a noisy celebration.

In addition, Nehemiah appointed people to manage the contributions to the temple and to make disbursements to the temple staff—the priests, the Levites, the singers, and more. [I'm sure our treasurer and bookkeeper are glad that today they only need to cut checks twice a month and don't have to hand out chickens and goats and bags of flour. However, the staff does greatly appreciate the occasional cucumber and tomato and squash that brought to the church—the first fruits of your gardens.]

All these things that the people do are a witness of their commitment to the Lord. They want to do what is right. They have confessed their sins. They have learned the consequence of their sin. They desire to *walk in God's law*. And they do, for a while.

It would be wonderful if the story could end here. But it doesn't. Time marches on and the sin of the people resurface. That is the problem with sin; we can't hold it down forever.

The Protestant theologian John Calvin would address the problem with sin nineteen-hundred years later. Calvin would argue that we, as humans, are rife with sin, that it is baked into us, that we are "totally depraved." To be totally depraved does not mean that we are all terribly people just a swing away from being axe-murderers. It means that sin is within us and that there is nothing we can do to cleanse ourselves of its polluting affects. We cannot come to God by our own will or our own strength. Salvation comes only from God.

Back in Jerusalem, it seems that all is going well. About twelve years after the public reading of the Law, Nehemiah makes the trip back to Babylon to report to the king. It's not clear how long he is gone but the round trip journey would have been at least six months. I figure that he was gone at least a year, possibly three.

When Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem he discovers something that upsets him greatly. He discovers, among other things, that Tobiah has taken up residence in the temple complex. You will recall Tobiah as the Tobiah the Ammonite. He, along with Sanballat, had most vocally opposed the rebuilding of the city wall years earlier. Tobiah was the one who mocked the efforts of the Jews saying that the wall they were building was so pathetic that if a fox were to walk on it, it would fall down. And now, Nehemiah comes home to discover this man literally inhabiting the temple. Eliashib had given him permission.

Once, when Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, he discovered broken walls. Now, he discovers a broken community.

Tobiah has taken up residence on the grounds of the temple. He has converted one of the storage chambers into an apartment. This large room was a designated storage space for the grain offerings, the incense, the worship vessels, and the grain, wine, and oil that were tithed by the people to be given to the temple staff. Eliashib had allowed Tobiah to live in this room. When Nehemiah discovers that one of his longtime enemies, someone he considered to be an enemy of Judah itself, is living in the temple, he becomes violently angry. He loses his temper (who can blame him?). He goes into the room and throws out all of Tobiah's possessions and furniture. He then orders that the chambers be cleansed. Later, he returns the room to its original use.

Nehemiah also discovers that the Levites, singers, and other temple staff have not been paid their salaries. Subsequently, these people had been forced to leave their work at the temple and return to their farms to make a living. Nehemiah calls in the temple officials and demands to know, *Why is the house of God forsaken?* Nehemiah then appoints new treasurers to manage the grain offerings.

In addition to the Tobiah incident, Nehemiah discovers another indiscretion. Despite the pledge they made, the people have been profaning the Sabbath day by working and trading on this sacred day. They are pressing wine, transporting goods. Foreigners, too, were selling goods in Jerusalem on the Sabbath. Nehemiah reminds the people of the grievous consequences of their previous sins.

The story of the Old Testament is the ongoing cycle of sin and forgiveness. Despite our actions against God, God calls us back with the promise of salvation. No matter how good our intent, we always slide back to the temptation of sin.

So, what comes next after the accounts of Ezra and Nehemiah? What is the next story? There isn't one. There is nothing. Literally, nothing. The Old Testament is not arranged chronologically. Ezra and Nehemiah are placed with the other history books near the front of the collection. But in reality, the events of Ezra and Nehemiah are the final words of the Old Testament period. No revelation will be heard for 400 years. Some call this The 400 Years of Silence. The next revelation we

hear will be the gospel of Matthew and its opening words, *An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

It is not correct to say that nothing happens in this time. The Persian Empire falls to the Greeks led by Alexander the Great. The Roman Empire rises. But the word of God is silent for four centuries.

Finally, the Word explodes with the coming of the Christ. This is the Savior of all. This is God in human form who has come to us to bring us to him. This is God's mighty act of salvation, the great act of breaking the cycle of sin and restoring community, of being a carpenter in order to build a house. For this we can be truly thankful. Amen.