

NOON BIBLE STUDY: NEHEMIAH 7&8

SUMMARY:

THE WALL HAS BEEN FINISHED AND THE ENEMIES OF GOD ARE SILENT (FOR NOW). THE HAND OF GOD HAS BEEN AND IS WITH NEHEMIAH TO COMPLETE THIS TASK. BUT GOD'S PURPOSES FOR HIS PEOPLE GO BEYOND JUST A PHYSICAL STRUCTURE TO BUILD - HE WANTS TO BUILD A GENERATION OF FAITHFUL MEN AND WOMEN WHO WILL LIVE FOR HIM AND HEAR AND OBEY HIS WORD. NEHEMIAH WILL ASSESS THE CONDITION (AND SIZE) OF THE PEOPLE AND WILL CALL FOR A NATIONAL ASSEMBLY TO UNTIE UNDER GOD'S WORD (AND HE WILL BE AIDED BY AN OLD FRIEND OF OURS). HERE WE GO.

NEHEMIAH 7:1-4

A BIG PORTION OF NEHEMIAH'S WORK IS DONE. REMEMBER HE CAME TO JERUSALEM FROM PERSIA TO OVERSEE THE REBUILDING OF THE WALL. HE WASN'T COMING TO BE A PERMANENT RESIDENT OR GOVERNOR. THIS HELPS US UNDERSTAND WHY HE MAKES THESE APPOINTMENTS. THE PEOPLE HAVE PRIORITIZED THE BUILDING OF THE WALL OVER THEIR OWN HOMES (V. 4) AND NOW THEY WANT TO MAKE SURE THE CITY IS GUARDED SO THAT THE NEXT PHASE OF RESETTLING CAN BEGIN.

THERE IS A UNITED GROUP OF RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL LEADERS WHO ARE SELECTED TO GUARD THE WALLS AND THE CITIES. BEING A WATCHMAN FOR THE NATION WAS AS MUCH A SPIRITUAL ROLE AS IT WAS GOVERNMENTAL.

WE HAVE SEEN GREAT LEADERSHIP QUALITIES IN NEHEMIAH DURING OUR JOURNEY THROUGH THIS BOOK. AND NOW WE SEE AN ADDITIONAL QUALITY, ONE THAT SPEAKS TO HIS HUMILITY. HE APPOINTS OTHER PEOPLE TO LEAD WITH HIM, AND ULTIMATELY IN HIS STEAD. HE IS NOT POWER HUNGRY, NOR TRYING TO BOLSTER HIS OWN PERSONAL LEGACY. HE ESSENTIALLY APPOINTS IN HANANI AND HANANIAH AS HIS REPLACEMENTS! NEHEMIAH'S OWN DESCRIPTION OF HANANIAH GIVES US SOME INSIGHT INTO WHAT QUALITIES MATTERED TO NEHEMIAH:

NEHEMIAH 7:2 - THEN I PUT HANANI MY BROTHER, AND HANANIAH THE COMMANDER OF THE FORTRESS, IN CHARGE OF JERUSALEM, FOR HE WAS A FAITHFUL MAN AND FEARED GOD MORE THAN MANY.

NEHEMIAH 7:5-7 - NEHEMIAH RECORDS THE RETURNED EXILES

NEHEMIAH 7:8-42 - THE RECORD OF THE PEOPLE

NEHEMIAH 7:43-60 - THE RECORD OF THE PRIESTS, LEVITES & TEMPLE OFFICIALS

NEHEMIAH 7:61-65 - PEOPLE RELATED TO THE PRIESTS WITHOUT PROOF

WITHOUT A VERIFIABLE CONNECTION TO THE BIOLOGICAL LINE OF AARON AND LEVI, THESE INDIVIDUALS WERE GOING TO BE EXCLUDED FROM THE TEMPLE SERVICE UNTIL SUCH A TIME WHEN IT COULD BE CONFIRMED. THEY ARE BETTER SAFE THAN SORRY WHEN IT COMES TO SERVING THE LORD IN THE HOLY PLACES.

NEHEMIAH 7:66-73 - TOTALS & FINAL ACCOUNTING

A LOT OF NAMES AND NUMBERS.

ESV STUDY BIBLE: "THIS LIST IS VIRTUALLY IDENTICAL TO THE ONE IN EZRA 2. THEREFORE, ITS PURPOSE IS NOT TO GIVE NEW INFORMATION BUT TO HIGHLIGHT NEHEMIAH'S NEXT CONCERN AFTER COMPLETING THE WALLS, NAMELY, TO REPOPULATE JERUSALEM (NEH. 7:4). REGARDING THE DISCREPANCIES IN EXACT NUMBERS BETWEEN THE LIST OF RETURNING EXILES IN EZRA 2:1—67 AND NEH. 7:6—66, VARIOUS SOLUTIONS HAVE BEEN PROPOSED, AND SEVERAL FACTORS MAY HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THE DIFFERENCES. SINCE NEHEMIAH WAS READING FROM A COPY OF AN OLDER LIST (EITHER THE LIST IN EZRA OR AN OFFICIAL LIST THAT BOTH OF THEM CONSULTED), THE LIST MAY HAVE BEEN UPDATED AND CORRECTED TO ALLOW FOR A NUMBER OF BIRTHS AND DEATHS THAT OCCURRED SHORTLY AFTER THE EXILES RETURNED, AND PERHAPS IN SOME CASES PEOPLE WERE COUNTED OR GROUPED DIFFERENTLY OR IN DIFFERENT CATEGORIES. EITHER OR BOTH LISTS MAY ALSO HAVE BEEN CORRECTED AND SUPPLEMENTED BY A NUMBER OF RELATIVES WHO HAD BEEN DELAYED ON THE JOURNEY BY ILLNESS OR FOR OTHER REASONS, AND WERE ADDED LATER. SOME OF THE DIFFERENCES MAY ALSO BE DUE TO COPYING ERRORS."

NEHEMIAH 8:1-4 - EZRA ASKED TO READ FROM THE LAW

CHAPTER 8 BEGINS A LONG NARRATIVE WHICH WILL CONTINUE UNTIL THE END OF CHAPTER 10.

"FOR THE FIRST TIME IN THIS BOOK, EZRA ENTERS THE NARRATIVE. THIS SECTION SHOWS THE UNITY OF HIS AND NEHEMIAH'S PROJECTS. WITH THE WALLS SECURELY IN PLACE, THE CENTRALITY OF THE MOSAIC LAW IS ONCE AGAIN MADE PROMINENT, SINCE IT IS NOT SECURITY ALONE THAT IS ESSENTIAL TO THE LIFE OF THE COMMUNITY, NOR EVEN THE TEMPLE, BUT TRUST IN GOD AND OBEDIENCE TO GOD'S WORD AS REVEALED THROUGH MOSES." (ESV STUDY BIBLE, NEH. 8:1)

THIS FIRST PORTION OF READING TOOK PLACE FROM MORNING TILL MIDDAY! EZRA IS LIKELY READING FROM DEUTERONOMY AND OTHER PORTIONS OF THE MOSAIC LAW AND TAKING BREAKS IN BETWEEN TO HELP THE PEOPLE UNDERSTAND WHAT THE WORDS SAID AND MEANT.

NEHEMIAH 8:5-8 - EZRA BLESSES THE ASSEMBLY AND READS/EXPLAINS THE LAW

WE SEE HERE THE FUNCTION OF EZRA AND THE OTHER LEADERS. THEY ARE READING THE LAW TO THE PEOPLE AND ALSO OFFERING AND EXPLANATION/INTERPRETATION TO HELP THEM UNDERSTAND. THIS IS AN EXCELLENT EXAMPLE OF THE PRIMACY OF THE SCRIPTURE FOR THE PEOPLE OF GOD AND ALSO THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY IN HELPING EACH OTHER UNDERSTAND AND APPLY THE WORD.

NEHEMIAH 8:9-12 - THIS IS A DAY TO CELEBRATE

THERE ARE TIMES WHEN HEARING THE CONVICTING WORD OF THE LORD DOES AND SHOULD BRING SORROW. HOWEVER, THIS DAY WAS A DAY TO HAVE JOY! THE HEART OF THIS CALL TO REJOICE WAS CENTERED IN THE FACT THAT THE PEOPLE OF GOD ARE AGAIN BACK IN GOD'S LAND, IN GOD'S CITY AND HEARING AND RESPONDING TO GOD'S WORD. THIS IS A DAY TO CELEBRATE. THERE WILL BE DAYS AHEAD TO MOURN AND REPENT FOR SURE, BUT THIS MOMENT IS NOT THAT MOMENT.

THE LORD IS A GOD OF CELEBRATION AND JOY. THERE ARE TIMES OF SORROW AND SOBRIETY. SERIOUS THINGS TO THINK ABOUT AND DISCUSS. SACRIFICES TO MAKE AND RISKS TO TAKE. BUT THE PEOPLE OF GOD SHOULD BE A JOYFUL PEOPLE. HERE IT IS THE COMMAND OF THE LORD TO "EAT", "DRINK" AND "BE MERRY" - WITH AN ENCOURAGEMENT TO SHARE GIFTS OF FOOD (EARLY POTLUCK PERHAPS?) AND TO CELEBRATE A "GREAT FESTIVAL" (V. 12). AND THIS CELEBRATION WAS ROOTED IN THE GOODNESS OF GOD AND HIS WORD BEING MADE KNOWN. THIS IS A GREAT THING TO CELEBRATE!

NEHEMIAH 8:13-18 - THE WORD IS ALIVE AND OBEYED!

THE NEXT DAY OF THE PUBLIC READING, THE PEOPLE HEAR THAT THEY ARE COMMANDED TO CELEBRATE THE FEAST OF BOOTHS/TABERNACLES (SUKKOT) IN THE SEVENTH MONTH OF THE YEAR. HERE'S A REMINDER OF WHAT THE FEAST OF BOOTHS WAS ALL ABOUT:

"THE FEAST OF BOOTHS WAS A WEEKLONG FEAST THAT BEGAN ON THE FIFTEENTH DAY OF THE SEVENTH MONTH. SINCE IT CELEBRATES THE PEOPLE'S SALVATION FROM EGYPT, IT WAS FITTING FOR THEM TO CEASE FROM WORK AND TO WORSHIP BEFORE THE LORD." (ESV STUDY BIBLE, LEVITICUS 23:33-36)

IT WAS A FEAST/FESTIVAL ASSOCIATED WITH JOY AND A REMEMBRANCE OF THE LORD'S DELIVERANCE FROM SLAVERY IN EGYPT, HIGHLIGHTING THE TRUTH THAT THE PEOPLE OF ISRAEL WERE "STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS" WAITING FOR A PERMANENT HOME THAT THE LORD WOULD PROVIDE. HOW FITTING THAT THIS GENERATION BEGINS THEIR TIME BACK IN JERUSALEM WITH SUCH IMAGERY. REMEMBER, YOU DON'T CELEBRATE "FEASTS" IF YOU'RE A SLAVE (IN EGYPT) NOR WOULD YOU IF YOU WERE IN EXILE (IN BABYLON). WHAT A TIME TO REJOICE! (FROM NOON BIBLE STUDY NOTES, EZRA 3).

IT JUST SO HAPPENED THAT IT WAS THE SEVENTH MONTH!

THE RESPONSE OF THE NATION IS REMARKABLE. RATHER THAN RATIONALIZING A REASON TO NOT OBEY RIGHT AWAY (EX: *IT'S BEEN A HARD YEAR, OUR HOMES AREN'T EVEN BUILT, WE'VE BEEN WORKING SO HARD ON THE WALL, WE DON'T HAVE THE SUPPLIES TO MAKE THE BOOTHS, I'M SURE GOD KNOWS MY HEART...* ETC. ETC.) THEY OBEY RIGHT AWAY! THEY LITERALLY CIRCULATE WORD THAT THEY ARE GOING TO CELEBRATE THE FEAST OF BOOTHS (V. 15).

AND SO WHAT COMMENCES FROM THIS HEARING OF THE WORD OF THE LORD IS A WEEK LONG FESTIVAL, CAMP OUT, CELEBRATION! THOUGH THE NATION HAD CELEBRATED THE FEAST OF BOOTHS, THIS TIME WAS SO NOTABLE THAT THERE WAS A SENSE THAT IT HADN'T BEEN THIS GOOD SINCE THE PEOPLE FIRST ENTERED CANAAN (V. 17). THAT IS **QUITE** THE STATEMENT. THIS READING AND CELEBRATION CONTINUED THE DURATION OF THE WEEK.

IN MANY WAYS WHAT WE CONCLUDE WITH HERE IS A NATIONAL ASSEMBLY WHICH WILL DETERMINE THEIR DIRECTION FOR YEARS TO COME. IT'S COMPARABLE TO A CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION WHERE THE PARTICIPANTS ARE WORKING TO FORMULATE A DOCUMENT THAT WILL SERVE AS A GUIDE FOR THE GENERATIONS TO COME, THAT WILL LIVE ON PAST THE FOUNDING FATHERS. IN THIS CASE THOUGH, THE DOCUMENT IS GOD'S LAW AND IT HAS BEEN GIVEN TO THE PEOPLE BY THEIR CREATOR, RATHER THAN THEM NEEDING TO WRITE THEIR OWN.

THE WORD OF GOD CONTAINED IN THE BIBLE, IN THAT DAY, AND FOR US TODAY IS THE LIVING AND ENDURING WORD WHICH TRANSCENDS SOCIETAL UPS AND DOWNS, OPINIONS OF HUMANITY, OR THE BROKEN MORAL COMPASSES OF POLITICAL LEADERS. THE NATION OF THAT DAY HAD TO ALIGN THEMSELVES NOT ONLY WITH THE SPIRIT OF GOD, BUT WITH THE LETTER OF GOD. IT WOULD BE HOW THEY WOULD KNOW RIGHT FROM WRONG, GOOD FROM EVIL, WHAT WAS PLEASING TO GOD AND WHAT WAS ABOMINABLE. IT WAS A RECORD OF THEIR HISTORY AND A

LIVING TESTAMENT TO GOD'S CHARACTER. THE WALLS MIGHT HAVE BEEN MORTARED TOGETHER, BUT IF THE PEOPLE DIDN'T LET THE WORD OF GOD SATURATE THEIR LIVES, THE NATION WOULD SOON BE IN SHAMBLES.

DITTO FOR US. WE CAN'T NEGLECT THE WORD OF GOD. WE CAN'T IGNORE THE WORD OF GOD. WE CAN'T MINIMIZE OR DOWNPLAY THE WORD OF GOD. WE HAVE TO HAVE IT BE A CENTRAL GUIDING DOCUMENT FOR OUR LIVES AND FAMILIES AND CHURCHES AND RELATIONSHIPS. WE SHOULD OFTEN ASK, "WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?" WE SHOULD ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER WITH IT, TEACH IT, READ IT, HEAR IT, SPEAK IT AND MEMORIZE IT. AND WE SHOULD MODEL OUR DESIRE TO OBEY IT AFTER THE SAINTS OF NEHEMIAH 8 - WHO DID NOT WANT TO JUST READ AND HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD, THEY WERE READY, WILLING AND ABLE TO BE DOERS OF THAT WORD.

FINAL POINT FOR TODAY: WE HAVE SPOKEN EARLIER IN NEHEMIAH ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF "MORALE." I THINK IT'S JUST AS IMPORTANT TO CHECK OUR "JOY" LEVELS. JOY IN THE LORD IS POWERFUL. IN FACT, OUR TEXT TODAY ALIGNS "JOY" WITH "STRENGTH". OUR ASSEMBLIES SHOULD BE MARKED BY JOY. JUST THINK ABOUT OUR TYPICAL EVANGELICAL PROTESTANT WORSHIP SERVICE - SING, PRAYER, HEAR THE WORD OF THE LORD FROM THE BIBLE, HAVE IT EXPLAINED TO US, AND (IN SOME CASES) A TIME OF CELEBRATION AND A MEAL - EITHER IN THE LORD'S SUPPER OR IN "REFRESHMENTS" AFTER THE SERVICE. THESE ARE GOOD THINGS, BIBLICAL THINGS. BUT WE MUST CHECK THAT WE'RE JOYFULLY PARTICIPATING IN THESE THINGS AS THE ASSEMBLY OF NEHEMIAH 8 WAS - NOT JUST GOING THROUGH THE MOTIONS, WAITING FOR THINGS TO GET OVER, CHECKING OUR WATCHES TO ENSURE THINGS DON'T "GO LONG" AND THEN RUSHING OUT SO WE CAN GET TO WHAT WE REALLY WANTED TO BE DOING ON A SUNDAY. THAT'S GOING TO CHURCH, NOT BEING THE CHURCH. OUR GATHERINGS CORPORATELY OR IN PAIRS ARE OPPORTUNITIES TO BE RECHARGED OR POUR OUT INTO OTHERS THE JOY OF THE LORD. TAKE THOSE OPPORTUNITIES AND FIND STRENGTH IN THE JOYFUL CELEBRATION OF THE GREATNESS OF GOD.