

Nehemiah 8-10 – Chapter Study

INTRO

I. FIRST TERM AS GOVERNOR Chs. 1-12

A. Return & Reconstruction Chs. 1-7

B. Revival & Renewal Chs. 8-10

1. Ezra teaches the Law Ch. 8:1-12

Since we looked at the first 12 vs. of ch. 8 Sunday, we'll just briefly summarize them tonite.

The walls & gates of Jerusalem that had lain in ruins after the destruction of the city by the Babylonians have now been rebuilt in a miraculous 52 days.

All of this took place under the spectacular leadership of Nehemiah.

But Nehemiah knew that the physical work of rebuilding the walls had to be followed up with a spiritual renewal of the people or it wouldn't be long before the walls were in ruins once more.

At his urging, when the people of the surrounding province gathered in Jerusalem for the holidays, they called for the priest & scribe Ezra to bring forth & read the Book of the Law.

A special platform was erected so all could see & here Ezra.

13 of the main leaders of the province stood next to him, showing their full support of what was taking place in the public reading of God's Word.

To make sure the people understood what was being read, Ezra would pause every so often to explain.

There were many other teachers scattered among the crowd who also facilitated the teaching.

When Ezra got to that portion of Deuteronomy where God warned what would happen to them if they forsook Him, the people realized all the ruin they & their ancestors had experienced was the result of their own failure and foolishness.

So they wept great tears of repentance.

As soon as Ezra & Nehemiah saw this evidence of spiritual brokenness, they moved to affirm & confirm God's forgiveness & called the people to dry their tears in the awareness of their reconciliation to God.

⁹ And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep." For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

We didn't get a chance to dig into this verse this Sunday so I wanted to come back to it tonite.

How can we **NOT** sit here in the glory of this for a while?

Again – Ezra & Nehemiah saw in the weeping of the people the evidence of

genuine repentance.

Because they understood the heart of God, they knew He was present to forgive & restore His people.

Though the Apostle John wrote his first epistle 500 years after this – the *truth* of 1 John 1:9 was known to Ezra & Nehemiah –

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So they called the repentant to turn their eyes from their failure to their forgiveness & rejoice in the fact of their reconciliation to the Lord.

As we touched on Sunday – look at this: They say “The day is holy to God. So PARTY!”

We don’t usually think of the word ‘holy’ & ‘party’ as going together, do we?

For many, the word ‘holy’ conjures up an image of somber, joyless formalism.

Ezra & Nehemiah tell these repentant ones to wipe their wet cheeks, crack a smile, put some tri-tip on the grill, open a Snapple & celebrate!

“For the Joy of the Lord is your strength,” they say.

That is – it’s God’s delight to forgive & restore you!

Because you’ve repented, God isn’t angry at you.

He’s not frowning down on you with malevolence.

God is stoked about you. He’s thrilled that you recognize your spiritual poverty and desperate need of Him.

And now that you see how weak you are – well—now for the first time, you can be truly strong!

Christian – what Ezra & Nehemiah told them is equally true for us.

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” [Matt 5:3]

Paul said, “When I am weak, then I am strong” [2 Cor 12:10]

After 300 years of persecution, the Roman emperor Constantine made Christianity a tolerated religion.

Some time later, another emperor came to the throne who wanted to *restore paganism*.

Julian recognized the threat Christianity was to the old superstitions & fired up another wave of persecution.

He hated the Faith & those who held it.

His complaint was this: He said:

Have you looked at these Christians closely? They are hollow-eyed, pale-cheeked, flat-chested all. They brood their lives away, unspurred by ambition. The sun shines for them, but they do not see it. The earth offers them its fullness, but they desire it not. All their desire is to renounce and to suffer that they may come to die.

What Julian observed in the Christians of his day wasn’t the life Jesus came to give, but a sad mockery.

You see, the Church had unfortunately welded Greek philosophy to its theology.

Christians had come to believe anything physical was unalterably evil.

So they shunned the world in favor of a totally-separated life.
This is what sparked the monasteries & the hermits who went off to live alone
in the desert.

In such a distorted idea of godliness, any sign of pleasure was considered a sin.

So as Julian saw it, Christianity took the joy & vitality out of life.

Sadly, that view of Christianity prevailed for hundreds of years.

Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once said, "I might have entered
the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked & acted so much like
undertakers."

The famous author Robert Louis Stevenson wrote in his diary, as if he was
recording an extraordinary event, "I have been to Church today, and am not
depressed."

This is *tragic!*

Christians are all too often identified as those who are perpetually sorrowful &
depressed.

They give the impression being a believer means just waiting to die.

That this life is nothing more than a trial to be endured; *that faith & joy are
mutually exclusive.*

Yet if someone who'd never met a Christian nor heard the Gospel were to read a
Bible for the first time, they'd conclude that the followers of Christ ought to
be the happiest people in the entire world!

Garrison Keillor once said, "Some people think it's difficult to be a Christian & to
laugh, but I think it's the other way around. God writes a lot of comedy, it's just
that He has so many bad actors."

As I said, joyless Christianity is largely the result of the influence of Greek
philosophy in the early centuries of the Faith.

During that time another unfortunate thing occurred.

Most of the Jewish origins of Christianity were systematically erased.

In Judaism, there's no shunning of the world in the pursuit of holiness.

There's a shunning of sin, certainly – but not a neglect of creation.

Not an attitude toward life that says holiness & joy are mutually exclusive.

On the contrary, the Good Life – the one lived before the Face of God is filled
with joy.

The Hebrew language has more different words for "joy" & "rejoicing" than any
other.

In the OT, 27 different words are used for joy or a joyful participation in
worship.

Do a study of worship in the Bible & you'll discover that it's nearly always
marked by a mixture of both awe & joy.

While the worship of the other religions is marked by cringing fear, the
worship of God is a joyous celebration.

In Psalm 16:11 the worshiper says to the Lord, "You show me the path of life; in
Your presence there is *fullness of joy*, at Your right hand are pleasures
forevermore."

Nehemiah said, "Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord **is your strength.**"

Not the walls they'd just recently completed!

Walls of stone may repel a *physical* enemy, but they're not the source of strength needed to *live in peace* - because our *real* enemies aren't physical, they're spiritual.

It's only *spiritual* strength that can deal with them.

That strength comes from a confidence of being in right relationship with God thru the *forgiveness* He gives.

It comes from knowing that because Jesus has reconciled us to the Father, God takes joy in us.

That divine good-pleasure overflows into us. = "The joy of the Lord is our strength."

The *joyless* Christian is a contradiction.

In Galatians 5, one of the fruits of the Spirit is Joy.

Jesus told His followers to "Ask, and you shall receive, that your joy may be full."

In 1 John 1:4 we read, "These things write we unto you, that your joy may be full."

Paul repeated told his readers to "Rejoice in the Lord! Again I will say it - Rejoice!"

How sad it is when believers live joyless lives.

A church is in a bad way when it banishes laughter from the sanctuary & leaves it to the theater & the club.

Charles Spurgeon was criticized by many of the ministers of his day because they thought he used too much humor in his preaching & was too joyful in the pulpit.

In his classic work *Lectures To My Students* he wrote. . .

 Sepulchral tones may fit a man to be an undertaker, but Lazarus is not called out of his grave by hollow moans. I know brethren who from head to foot, in garb, tone, manner, necktie and boots are so utterly parsonic that no particle of manhood is visible. Some men appear to have their clerical collar twisted round their souls, their manhood is throttled with that starched rag. An individual who has no geniality about him had better be an undertaker, and bury the dead, for he will never succeed in influencing the living. There are more flies caught with honey than with vinegar, and there will be more souls led to heaven by a man who wears heaven in his face than by one who bears death in his looks.

In contrast to the joyless Christian is the one whose life is *infused* with it.

 He/she was come to the cross & gone away forgiven & reconciled to a loving Father.

A Hindu trader in India once asked a missionary, "What do you put on your face to make it shine?"

 Surprised, the missionary answered, "I don't put anything on it!"

 The Hindu lost patience & said emphatically, "Yes, you do! All of you who believe in Jesus have it. I've seen it in the towns of Agra & Surat, & even in the city of Bombay."

 The missionary then understood & his face glowed even more as he said,

“Now I know what you mean, and I will tell you the secret. It's not something we put on from the outside but something that comes from within. It's the light of God in our hearts.”

11 So the Levites quieted all the people, saying, “Be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.” 12 And all the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly, because they understood the words that were declared to them.

2. The people repent & worship Ch. 8:13-9:37

13 Now on the 2nd day the heads of the fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law.

Ezra's reading of the Word of God on the 1st day of the 7th whetted the appetite of the leaders for more.

Again – Ezra had probably only read the Book of Deuteronomy the day before. So these guys gather the next day to hear the rest.

As the elders charged with leading the people they wanted more instruction from God's Word.

As Ezra read, they discovered that there was a holiday they were to observe in a few days, the Feast of Tabernacles

14 And they found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the 7th month, 15 and that they should announce and proclaim in all their cities and in Jerusalem, saying, “Go out to the mountain, and bring olive branches, branches of oil trees, myrtle branches, palm branches, and branches of leafy trees, to make booths, as *it is written*.”

The Feast of Tabernacles lasted a week, from the 15th to the 21st day of the 7th month.

The feast commemorated Israel's 40 years in the wilderness & how God had taken care of their needs.

They were to celebrate the holiday by going to Jerusalem, & making little bivouac lean to's where they would sleep each night.

It was a joyous, week-long family camp out.

16 Then the people went out and brought *them* and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their courtyards or the courts of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. 17 So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and sat under the booths; for since the days of Joshua the son of Nun until that day the children of Israel had not done so. And there was very great gladness.

Both 2 Chr 8:13 & Ezra 3 tells us the Feast of Tabernacles had been celebrated before this.

What Nehemiah means is that not since the days of Joshua had the holiday been

observed by so many & with such joy.

18 Also day by day, from the first day until the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. And they kept the feast 7 days; and on the 8th day there was a sacred assembly, according to the prescribed manner.

Ezra continued the “Bible conference” during the entire week of the Feast, day by day reading & explaining the Word of God.

The combination of joyful fellowship, feasting, & hearing the Word strengthened the people greatly.

The week concluded with a special assembly at the Temple.

9:1 Now on the 24th day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads.

Just 2 days after the Feast of Tabernacles, a time they’d spent celebrating the goodness & faithfulness of God, the people became even more sensitive to their sin & the ways they were falling short.

Has that every happened to you?

You’re overwhelmed by God’s goodness, & suddenly it throws your own lack of devotion into high relief?

Many of us have had the experience at Christmas or an anniversary, where we get another a minor gift while they lavish us with something really special.

Then we get that horrible feeling of regret that we didn’t get them a nicer gift.

That’s what’s happening here.

As the people have now heard about how good God has been to them, their own lack of faithfulness moves them to a new level of conviction and repentance.

As we’ll see, there was some stuff going on among them still that was simply rotten & they knew it.

2 Then those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners; and they stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers.

Many of the Jews had married Gentiles though it was forbidden.

It was such intermarriage with pagans that had led to Israel’s demise years before.

When Ezra had first arrived in Jerusalem years before & learned about these mixed marriages he’d demanded they be ended but the people hadn’t fully complied.

Now that the Spirit of God has worked thru the Word of God in the people of God, they take measures to do what was right even though it was so difficult.

3 And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for 1/4th of the day [3 hours]; and for another 4th they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God. 4 Then Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Chenani stood on the stairs of the Levites and cried out with a loud voice to the LORD their God. 5 And the Levites, Jeshua, Kadmiel,

Bani, Hashabniah, Sherebiah, Hodijah, Shebaniah, and Pethahiah, said: “Stand up and bless the LORD your God forever and ever! “Blessed be Your glorious name, Which is exalted above all blessing and praise!

Now, in the rest of the Chapter we have a recounting of the history of the nation of Israel to that day.

This is a bit like Stephen’s address to the Sanhedrin in the book of Acts.

It’s a wonderful thumbnail sketch of their history.

9:6-37

3. Renewing the covenant Ch. 9:38-10:39

38 “And because of all this, We make a sure covenant and write it; Our leaders, our Levites, and our priests seal it.”

Reminded of the covenant love God had toward them, they want not to renew the covenant God had made with them at Sinai.

They wanted to put the sin & failure of their past behind them & press forward into a new day of blessing as God’s people.

As the followers of Christ God has made a new covenant with us.

That covenant isn’t based on our performance of the Law but on Christ’s performance at the Cross.

10:1 Now those who placed their seal on the document were: Nehemiah the governor, the son of Hacaliah, and Zedekiah,

So earnest were these leaders in renewing their identity as the people of God, they wrote up a document and fixed their names to it.

This was a way for them to show that they wanted to go on record as being men who would implement real change.

There once was a man who always ended his prayers in his small group by saying, “And, Lord, clean the cobwebs out of my life!”

One of the other members of the group became weary of hearing this same *insincere* request week after week, because there was no change taking place in the man's life.

No follow thru on the prayer – no practical steps taken to *make* a change.

So, the next time he heard the man pray, “Lord, clean the cobwebs out of my life!” he interrupted with, “And while you’re at it, Lord, *kill the spider!*”

Here in ch. 10, the leaders were not only asking for forgiveness, they were taking steps to distance themselves from the sins that needed to be forgiven.

Vs. 2-27 gives us a list of the leaders who affixed their seal to the covenant.

28 Now the rest of the people—the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the Nethinim [temple go-fers], and all those who had separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, and their daughters, everyone who had knowledge and understanding—²⁹ these joined with their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and His

ordinances and His statutes: ³⁰ We would not give our daughters as wives to the peoples of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons; ³¹ if the peoples of the land brought wares or any grain to sell on the Sabbath day, we would not buy it from them on the Sabbath, or on a holy day; and we would forego the 7th year's produce and the exacting of every debt.

There were specific issues Judah faced that were causing trouble & they were spelled out in this new covenant.

These issues were . . .

- 1) Intermarriage with foreigners
- 2) Working on the Sabbath
- 3) Keeping the Sabbath year

These 3 things had been *ignored* for *most* of their history, dating all the way back to the time of the Judges.

They realized it was their lack of zeal in obeying *ALL* the law that led to the moral decay of the nation - & consequently, their judgment & exile.

Nehemiah knew if they were not brought to *complete compliance* with the Law of God, their enemies would gain a foothold.

So he lead the people in agreeing to alter their practices & start living in *complete, not partial, obedience* to God.

The lesson for us is this--Don't let the enemy gain a foothold in your life.

Don't give any ground to sin, no matter how seemingly small.

Determine that by God's grace you'll give God *all* of you, holding nothing back.

It was easy for the Jews of Nehemiah's time to rationalize why they **COULDN'T** be obedient in these 3 things.

- 1) In the case of intermarriage with foreigners, the issue was about the forming of alliances.

You see, while the province of Judah was supposed to be a Jewish homeland, lots of Gentiles lived there too, powerful tribes & clans.

Judah was surrounded by hostile neighbors and for years before Nehemiah arrived, the leaders of Judah had appeased them by making alliances sealed by intermarriage.

To end such arrangements meant first of all, sending their foreign wives back to their pagan families, which would seen as an insult and an invitation to renew hostility.

Continuing the practice & allowing those pagan wives to stay showed a failure to trust in God & provided an open door for Judah's enemies to influence them to their harm.

- 2) To halt all commerce on the Sabbath *day* was a huge *financial* risk.
- 3) To observe the Sabbath *year* by reverting all lands to their rightful owners & releasing all debts was an *even bigger* financial threat.

The Bottom line in all 3 of these things meant TRUSTING GOD TO TAKE CARE OF THEM, which is in all truth the safest place to be.

To take God at His Word and obey Him in these things mean living by faith, trusting in God instead of their own conniving & efforts.

Our faith needs to be more than just be spiritual fire insurance.

Trust in God should fuel our daily lives & decisions.

Young woman, does your faith extend to God's ability to provide you a godly husband?

Or do you think you have to take matters in to your own hands & settle any guy that'll show you some attention?

Young man, does your faith in God reach to being faithful to give? Or do you withhold because you've crunched the numbers & don't make enough?

You see, when we talk about the Sabbath, about God's command to Israel to work 6 days then rest & trust in Him on the 7th, it's easy for most of us to say, "Sure.

That makes sense. Work 6 days then rest on the 7th and God will make sure your work on the 6 days is enough to cover all 7!"

Yet many of us who will agree with that, will balk at tithing – saying the same thing Israel said when they failed to keep the Sabbath – "I can't afford it."

In the last few months I've had 3 people come to me to share their excitement about God's faithfulness.

All 3 said when they looked at their budget, they couldn't tithe.

Yet they sensed God telling them to do so – so they took a step of faith and did.

All of them said things had turned around financially for them.

One didn't even know how it had happened – but for the first time in a long time, their monthly budget was in the black instead of the red.

That's the kind of thing the prophet Malachi said would happen. Malachi 3:10-11

10 Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, That there may be food in My house, And try Me now in this," Says the LORD of hosts, "If I will not open for you the windows of heaven And pour out for you *such* blessing That *there will not be room* enough to receive it. 11 "And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, So that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground, Nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field," Says the LORD of hosts;

The faith of the people of Nehemiah's day was kindled by the Word.

They understood their need to step out in faith & obedience in these 3 great challenges.

What's the greatest challenge to your faith right now?

It would be a good thing for you to prayerfully consider that, then take specific steps to place your trust in God.

32 Also we made ordinances for ourselves, to exact from ourselves yearly 1/3rd of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: 33 for the showbread, for the regular grain offering, for the regular burnt offering of the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the set feasts; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God.

Since the service of the priests at the Temple was of central importance to their faith, they took steps to ensure the services would be well provided for.

34 We cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for bringing the wood offering into the house of our God, according to

our fathers' houses, at the appointed times year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God as *it is* written in the Law. ³⁵ And we *made ordinances* to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the LORD; ³⁶ to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as *it is* written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God; ³⁷ to bring the firstfruits of our dough, our offerings, the fruit from all kinds of trees, *the* new wine and oil, to the priests, to the storerooms of the house of our God; and to bring the tithes of our land to the Levites, for the Levites should receive the tithes in all our farming communities. ³⁸ And the priest, the descendant of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive tithes; and the Levites shall bring up a 10th of the tithes to the house of our God, to the rooms of the storehouse. ³⁹ For the children of Israel and the children of Levi shall bring the offering of the grain, of the new wine and the oil, to the storerooms where the articles of the sanctuary *are, where the priests who minister and the gatekeepers and the singers are; and we will not neglect the house of our God.*

Part of the covenant they spelled out & put their names to included a list of offerings & tithes they'd bring so that the service of the Temple could carry on without hindrance.

This included the fuel for the altar, and the various sacrifices to be given there or offered to the priests.