Lessons on Ezra and Nehemiah

Taken from the Old Testament.

John Hendershot

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Cover: Dore, *Nehemiah Views the Ruins of Jerusalem's Walls,* Public Domain.

Dedication

To the memory of John B. and Lillian V. Hendershot – who taught us to "pass it on."

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Rationale

This lesson begins a study of two of the history books of the Old Testament: Ezra and Nehemiah. For most Christians this would seem to be a waste of time. Of all the histories in the Old Testament these two are probably the dullest. Both books are amply supplied with genealogies and in addition have a number of accounting lists. Other than a cure for insomnia, there would seem to be no reason to study these books. But all Scripture is profitable, as we shall see.

Relevance to America

It is both regrettable and undeniable: America no longer follows the word of God. Indeed, it can be argued quite successfully that in many things the church no longer follows God in America. Unless God graciously gives us a spirit of revival this will mean only one thing: the destruction of the America we know. I hate to sound so pessimistic, but if you know the flood is coming, build an Ark. We will need to know how to get back to what God wants us to do. Ezra and Nehemiah are a study of Israel returning to God, and there are some significant lessons therein.

Israel a Picture of the Christian

Often in the Scripture the nation of Israel can be seen as a picture of the Christian to come. There are moral lessons to be learned from the conduct of Israel and the results of that conduct. In particular we shall see in these two books certain characteristics:

- First, there is the virtue of a humble attitude. This is the second time the Israelites have returned to the land of Palestine; the first being under Moses. Humility was not particularly a strong point for the nation of Israel as they came out of Egypt. We shall see that the attitude is different as they come out of Babylon.
- Next, there is the virtue of taking small steps. Sometimes we believe that only the gigantic leap of God will prevail — and if we don't see that leap in view, we sit back and do nothing. In this study we shall see that the Israelites took things in small steps but accomplished great things.
- Finally, we shall see that their actions were fortified by prophecy. Their courage, strength and attitude were reinforced by the fact that there were prophets among them. A parallel may be drawn for us today; the Scripture should play an equal role in this for us.

History

Now admit it: you haven't the foggiest notion of what Ezra and Nehemiah did or when they did it. Welcome to the pack. So let's take a little tour of the background.

Prophecy

This process of returning to the land is bathed in prophecy.

- Isaiah, writing at about 710 BC, prophesied the name of the king who would let the people return to the land of Palestine. He declared his name to be Cyrus.[1]

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[1] Isaiah 45:1-6

- Jeremiah, writing about twenty years before the beginning of the exile, prophesied that there would be seventy years of exile. [2]
- Daniel interpreted the handwriting on the wall for Belteshazzar; Daniel also is the key to prophecy. He knew Jeremiah's prophecy; he therefore prayed that God would live up to his word.

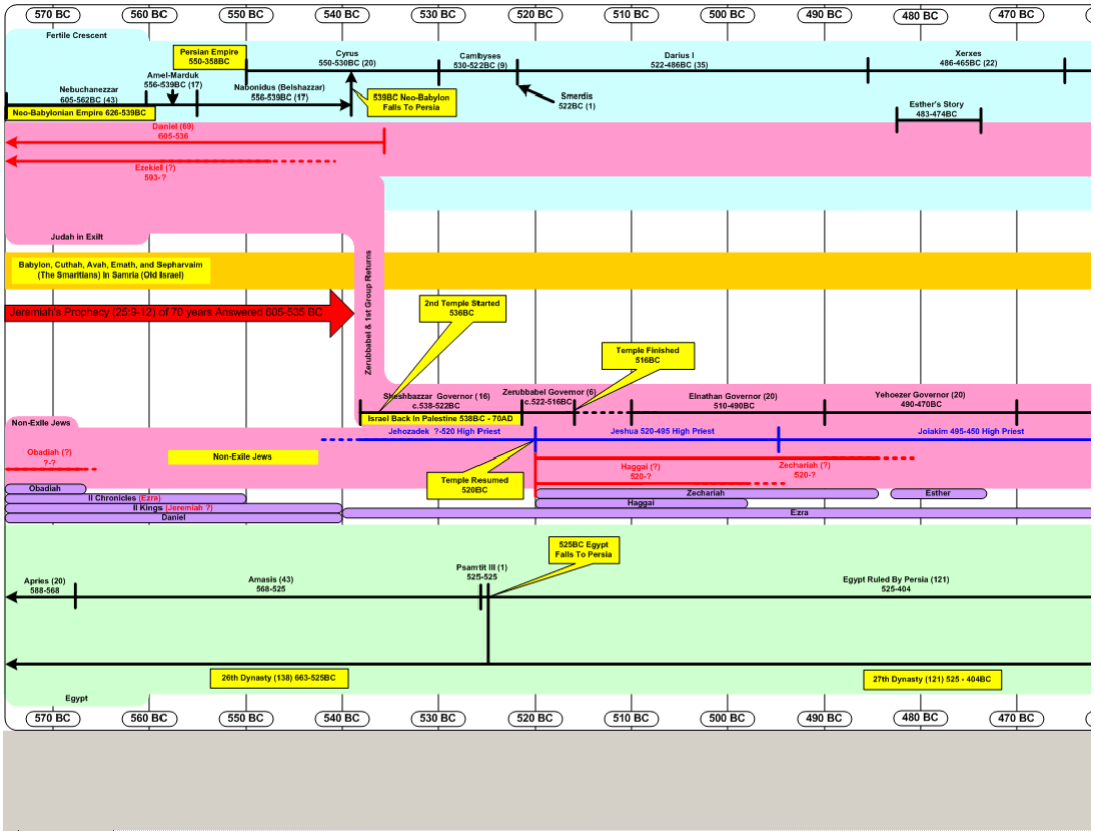
The result of this — and as we shall see other prophecies which concern Nehemiah — was that the Jews took prophecy quite seriously. If God said they would return to the land in seventy years, return they would.

Time Points

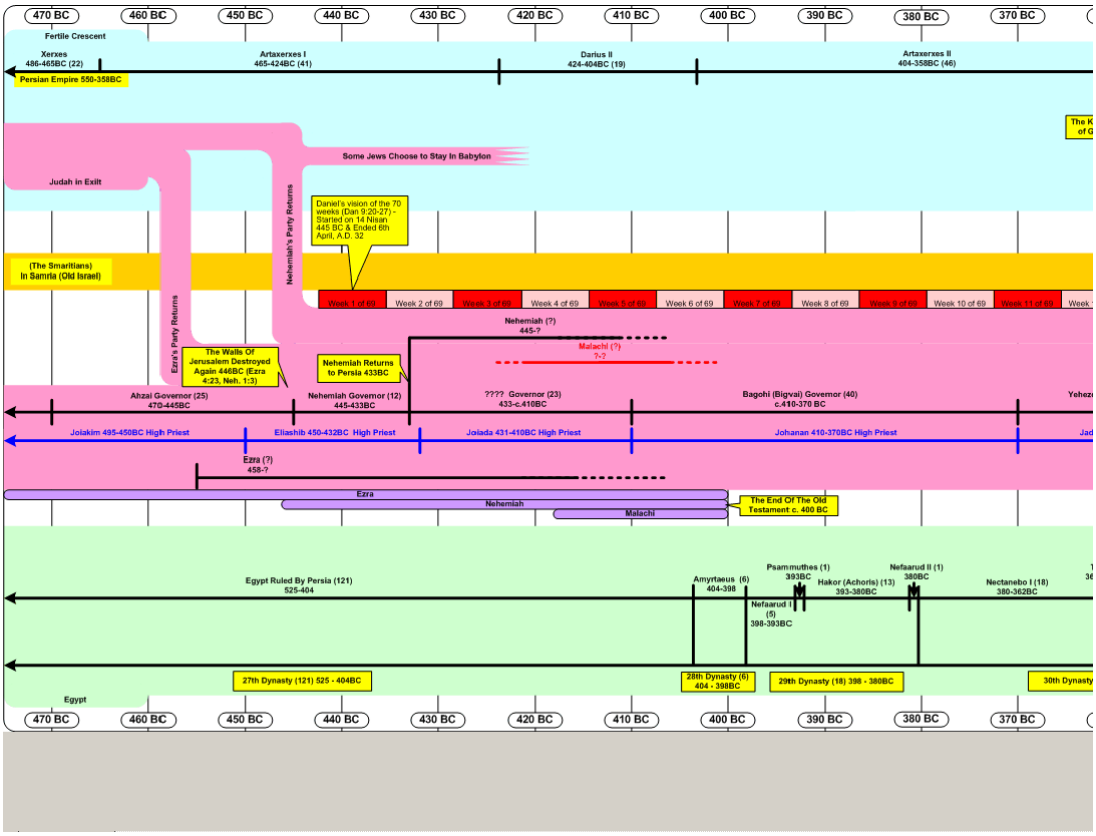
It helps to have some idea of when each of these little events happens. So here's a brief list of important times:

- 723 BC — the northern kingdom, composed of the ten tribes, is deported to Assyria. These tribes become the famous "ten lost Tribes."
- 586 BC — the southern kingdom is destroyed; the temple burned down and ruined and the people deported to Babylon.
- 539 BC — Babylon falls to the Persian King, Cyrus.
- 536 BC — 516 BC: the temple is rebuilt in Jerusalem.

Linked below are a couple of timelines provided with the Bible study software known as E-sword.



[2] Jeremiah 25:11-12



The Role of Daniel

We have already mentioned the fact that Daniel went to his knees in prayer, confessing the sins of the nation of Judah, and referencing the prophecy of Jeremiah. Daniel spent most of his adult life in the court of Babylon, followed by Persia. His last service to the Babylonians was to point out the Belteshazzar that he had been weighed in the balance and found wanting. It is entirely possible that this story reached the ears of Cyrus, and thus created a friendship between Cyrus and Daniel.

More than that, Daniel is the central key to prophecy in the Old Testament. It is Daniel who lays out the seventy weeks which tell us of the coming of the Messiah. We do not necessarily have written record of all the prophecy and revelation Daniel was given. But given how closely Daniel receives prophecy, it is likely that Cyrus kept him on as an advisor.

Temple and State

The reader must understand that the Jews are rebuilding the temple while they are under the control of the Persian Empire. A glance at the map will give you an idea of how big this empire was:

The God of Moses

The most obvious fact in this account which concerns the God of Moses, the God in whom all of these Jews believed, is the complete absence of any miraculous evidence. The God of Moses is absent. In that respect these Jews are dealing with the same kind of performance from God that we are dealing with today. It can be very frustrating to a Christian to know that Moses performed miracles at God's behest on a frequent basis. Most of us would settle for seeing one or two miracles — and we see none. Yet this is an event which is described in prophecy; it is an event which is very much parallel to the return of the ancient Israelites from Egypt to Palestine; and as we shall see there is certainly sufficient opposition that would make the miraculous seem appropriate. It's just not there.

So the question of course is why? The answer seems to be that there is such a thing as divine economy. If you will recall, the Israelites who came out of Egypt were not particularly noted for their faith. In fact, most of them had trouble maintaining what faith they had from day to day, despite all the miracles. These are not the same people. To be specific, these people are a remnant. God has a habit of filtering out most of the people and dealing with those few who have the faith he requires. This band of Jews has demonstrated that. After all, they left a fairly comfortable life in Babylonia where they had settled down. They now take an approximately five-month journey (on foot) to get to a city that they

know is in ruins. When they get there they build an altar for sacrifices, then they start about the twenty year process of building the temple again.

In this regard they are much more similar to us than they are to the ancient Israelites. This action is taken by the prompting of the Holy Spirit, which is the most common method by which God communicates to individual Christians. God, in the form of the Holy Spirit, is much more familiar to us than the God of Moses dispensing miracles. These people are very much like us, and their interface with God is very much like ours. Most of us do not actually want the ability to do miracles; we want the ability to do magic. We don't want to display God's power; we want to display our own. This group of ancient Jews is well aware of the sins of their nation, and it seemed sufficient to them to be allowed to return to their homeland.

Cyrus

It may be the most surprising thing about Cyrus: one of the first things he does is released the Jews to return to their homeland — and sends with them all the loot that Nebuchadnezzar collected when he sacked the city. Josephus gives us a little help here. Writing several hundred years after the event he tells us that Cyrus was influenced by Daniel, the prophet. In particular Josephus tells us that Daniel showed Cyrus the prophecy in Isaiah which mentions Cyrus by name. As Isaiah wrote more than 200 years before Cyrus came this may indeed have been fairly impressive. The story of the handwriting on the wall might have been impressive too.

Whatever the reason, Cyrus parts with a fairly large quantity of loot. He adds to that instructions that the Jews are to get all the help they need from their fellow Jews. What's impressive here is that the loot in question is carefully measured out, recorded and put down in a formal accounting which has survived into the Scriptures today. It's obvious Cyrus does not wish to part with this part of his empire, but considers the building of the temple to be part of the ordinary course of affairs of state.

The really interesting part is this: Cyrus says that God told him to build the temple. That's right, Cyrus is the guy who is to build the temple. This may be just a case of the king taking credit for something; it may be just a case that it happens under his direction and therefore it's his problem; or maybe this just the Imperial style. It's likely that Cyrus considered God to be a local God, the God of Jerusalem. But in this time a monarch was well advised to placate each and every God which resided in his territory — and just in case additional help was needed, the ones in the territory outside his own. Cyrus is being prudent.

Sheshbazzar

We are not certain whether or not Sheshbazzar is the same person as Zerubbabel. But whoever he was, we know that he is a careful person. He is careful about the accounting for the gold and silver dishes; he is also careful about genealogies of people. The man would've made a good project manager; he's highly detail oriented.

One thing he is not, however, is poetic. In his section of this text there is no lamentation for the national sins of Israel. This section reads like somebody's status report. His inclination for things spiritual

seems to extend only to the genealogy of the priesthood (see Ezra 2:62). Everything else is rather civilian.

This is characteristic of the remnant of God. If you had to pick an attitude which describes the remnant, it would be “matter of fact.” They’re the kind of people who just go out and get things done. There is, behind the scenes, the presumption that the Providence of God will work in such a way as to favor them. As we shall see, their first resort is to God — not to their own strength. It’s the kind of faith that goes through day by day without the exaltation (or simple emotional high) considered so necessary today. If I had to pick a word to describe these people it would be “craftsman.”

Altar and Temple

Most of us, if asked what we were going to do at the end of a long journey, would answer that we were going to unpack. But there is always a question in the mind when you take on a new assignment: what’s the first thing I should be doing? What is step one?

Step One

Remembering that these people have seen no miracles whatsoever you might think that they would place their first reliance in their own strength. They do not. They know that they got into this mess by being disobedient to God; they have a sense of national guilt which is entirely absent from us today. We think that the evil in America is someone else’s problem. They were not such fools.

Therefore, their first step was to build an altar on which they might offer sacrifices to God. Having established communication with the Almighty, their second act was to celebrate. In particular they celebrated in accordance with the Law of Moses. It’s significant to note that they did not start on building the temple immediately; rather, they started with the common obedience of the devout Jew of the time.

There is a parallel here for the modern Christian. Often enough we hear someone explain that the reason they can’t come to church is that they don’t have their act together yet. They need to clean up their life before they would be good enough to be accepted in the church. We try to tell people like that our motto is, “come as you are.” But it’s hard to believe that. Here’s an example of the “come as you are” principle in action. These people are sinners; they know they’re sinners; their first action is obedience. There is no sense of dramatic purification; no sense of national mourning; really, there seems to be no display of repentance. But consider what repentance means: it means to turn around. If you’re going the wrong way on the freeway you get off at the next off ramp and find the on ramp to the opposite direction. You don’t need a big show to do that. You need a steering wheel. Remember these people the next time someone tells you he isn’t good enough to come to church.

World’s Order

If you will, note that these people are afraid of the population living around them. They have good reason to be. They are in a city which has no defensive walls. In that place and time a defensive wall around the city was considered absolutely necessary. Explosives had yet to be invented and overcoming a city wall was a process that would take several months of siege. A wall, in effect, multiplied your military forces, giving you the advantage of choosing whether or not to attack your

opponent. If you had enough food and water stored — Machiavelli says that a year's supply is usually sufficient — the fellow surrounding you would run out of food and find himself starving in front of your gates. He would therefore go home. The balance of power in military affairs had swung to the defensive.

So if you are performing this expedition in the world's way of doing things, your order of priority would be something like this:

- First, build a good set of walls around the city.
- Second, build your temple.
- Third, now that everything was in order, you could start worshiping God.

The world's way is exactly backwards from what they did. In the world's way, God is the last resort. These folks knew better; they were afraid of the people around them so they built an altar and began to offer sacrifices to God. God is their first resort.

Celebration

Have you ever noticed that people like to celebrate good beginnings? That's what they're doing here. When they lay the foundation of the temple — no small amount of work — they hold a great celebration. We do the same in our lives; we celebrate the birth of children, the start of marriage and such things as moving to a new house.

One thing that is clear from this account is that they held to the idea that only the Jews could build the temple. The work belongs exclusively to the people of God. In that, there is a delicate problem which faces us yet today. In the conduct of matters of the church, how much activity can be performed by those who are not members of the church? Somehow we must balance out the work between the members of the nonmembers. You'll notice, for example, that they ordered cedar logs from Tyre and Sidon. Sometimes we get so puritanical about things that we figure we have to grow the cedar ourselves and wait for forty years before we can harvest the trees. Other times we call in a contractor and say, "I want you to build me a temple." The question is not particularly trivial.

The Scriptures put it clearly to us: we are to be "in the world, but not of the world." That often seems to be confusing guidance. It would be completely confusing if we had no idea of the Providence of God. It is the mark of the Christian that he acts as if God will provide, because he knows that God will. That knowledge covers the area that the Christian himself must do; the rest can be subcontracted to the outside world.

There is one last thing I would have you notice. In the midst of all the celebration there are some men who are crying; old men. They are the ones who saw the original temple in their youth, and they know that nothing they can do now would match its magnificence. They are doing what the old men do: shedding tears for what might have been. We cannot go back and repair sin; we can only go forward in repentance.

Rebuilding the Temple - Ezra 4-6

As a preliminary note, the reader should once again examine the timelines in the previous lesson. It can be confusing with regard to kings and dates.

The Opposition Strikes

To avoid copyright restrictions, we will reference the Scripture only in large sections. Please read Ezra 4.

Who Are These People?

The enemies of the Jews described in chapter 4 are not particularly obvious on the face of the Scriptures. We must examine a little history:

2 Kings 17:24-33 NASB The king of Assyria brought *men* from Babylon and from Cuthah and from Avva and from Hamath and Sephar-vaim, and settled *them* in the cities of Samaria in place of the sons of Israel. So they possessed Samaria and lived in its cities. (25) At the beginning of their living there, they did not fear the LORD; therefore the LORD sent lions among them which killed some of them. (26) So they spoke to the king of Assyria, saying, "The nations whom you have carried away into exile in the cities of Samaria do not know the custom of the god of the land; so he has sent lions among them, and behold, they kill them because they do not know the custom of the god of the land." (27) Then the king of Assyria commanded, saying, "Take there one of the priests whom you carried away into exile and let him go and live there; and let him teach them the custom of the god of the land." (28) So one of the priests whom they had carried away into exile from Samaria came and lived at Bethel, and taught them how they should fear the LORD. (29) But every nation still made gods of its own and put them in the houses of the high places which the people of Samaria had made, every nation in their cities in which they lived. (30) The men of Babylon made Succoth-benoth, the men of Cuth made Nergal, the men of Hamath made Ashima, (31) and the Avvites made Nibhaz and Tartak; and the Sepharvites burned their children in the fire to Adrammelech and Anammelech the gods of Sepharvaim. (32) They also feared the LORD and appointed from among themselves priests of the high places, who acted for them in the houses of the high places. (33) They feared the LORD and served their own gods according to the custom of the nations from among whom they had been carried away into exile.

It's not entirely obvious, but the people who were planted in what used to be the northern kingdom of Israel are in fact those people known in the New Testament as Samaritans. That's right, as in Good Samaritan. It's not clear whether or not they were sincere in their offer of help to build the temple. There are three possibilities:

- It's just possible they are sincere. While they do worship their own gods, they have a worship of Jehovah also. The problem is that they're not Jewish — they're not even close.
- It's also possible that what they want to do is to co-opt the process of building the temple. Let us help you out, and will make some excellent adjustments along the way. Some of those adjustments would include worshiping other gods — but it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere, right?
- It's also possible that they're being destructive. They want to take over the process of building so that they can stop it.

Zerubbabel turns them down flat. That might not have been the most politically correct thing to do, but evidently the man thought it was the right thing to do and didn't mind saying so. He probably appeared to be a pious idiot to the Samaritans.

It brings up a point in contemporary life: why is it that Christians just can't be reasonable? Let me give you some examples:

- Why is it that you people are so rigidly stuck on your opposition to abortion? Can't we reach some reasonable compromise on this and move on?
- You seem to have the same problem with regard to marriage as well. What on earth is wrong with divorce?
- Good heavens, Christians, if the government says it's all right, who are you to disagree?

The people of God often appear to be unreasonable to the rest of the world. This causes problems. It is well to know the distinction between being polite and agreeable on the one hand and agreeing politely on the other.

The Attack of Satan

The methods by which Satan attacks the people of God have changed very little over the years — though the technology has improved quite a bit. We see some examples here.

- Discouragement is the first technique. We have an example recently of parents in a local school district to object to Eastern mysticism being taught in the form of yoga in the schools. They are unreasonable, of course; everyone knows that yoga is nothing more than exercise. Nothing more, unless you look at it carefully.
- These folks hired counselors — we would call them lobbyists today — to influence the government of the time. The forces of Satan usually have quite a bit of money; greed is often their objective. If you don't think so, look into the finances of Planned Parenthood.
- Then there are the accusations. Some of them are false (like building the walls of Jerusalem, which doesn't happen until quite a bit later). Others are historical; the Jews did indeed revolt. Of course, we had to look in the history books to find that out. The truth on the ground was something different. But, as is often said, truth is the first casualty of war.

On this occasion, as on so many others, the attack was a success. The Jews were told to stop building the temple.

Jewish Reaction

The reaction of the Jews at this time is interesting to modern Christians. We have been raised on civil disobedience, protest and other forms of self-expression common in our current form of government and therefore would not see the sense of their reaction. To a king of this time however such actions would be viewed as rebellion and met with the sword. So what did they do?

- First, they were obedient to the civil authorities which God had placed over them. They recognized that the Persians ruled them because God wanted it so — and therefore they were obedient. This is called submission, and it is not a popular thing today. Perhaps we have something to learn.
- They waited for a new king to take the throne.

That second one is interesting: it shows patience. So many Christian leaders are convinced that if something can't be done in their lifetime, by their organization, then it cannot be done at all. We

sometimes forget that we are members of the church universal, militant and triumphant — and not just our local congregation.

New King

Please read Ezra 5.

Role of Prophecy

Haggai and Zechariah are in fact two prophets among the minor prophets of the Old Testament; their works of prophecy correspond very nicely to the history recorded here and in Nehemiah. The major concern of their prophecy is with the advent of Christ. Zechariah, in particular, is a favorite of students of prophecy. It is sufficient for our purposes here to note that there is no contradiction between their prophecies and what is recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah.

The first role of a prophet is forth-telling. The message in this particular case is simple: why haven't you built the temple yet? This provokes an interesting set of reactions.

- First, it gives the people a clear sense of God's timing. We been waiting for a new king; is this the one were looking for? Is he going to approve progress on the temple? The prophets make it clear that God wants it done now.
- This is interesting because the previous version of the temple was delayed — David was not allowed to build it; Solomon was. It seems that God is not in a hurry, but he does have a timetable for these things. It is well to remember whose universe this is.
- There is a connection as well to the other side of prophecy. It concerns the reliability of the prophets themselves. If they're right about the temple, then the rest of their prophecy should be right as well.

The other role prophecy is foretelling. Particularly in Zechariah we have a strong indication of the coming of the Christ. It is beyond the scope of these lessons to go into that. We should, however, note that Zechariah's words on the temple were fulfilled and thus give greater confidence to the fulfillment of his prophecies concerning the coming of the Christ. As we live in a time past the coming of the Christ, it's a little easier for us to see. The people of this time, however, wanted to make sure that Zechariah knew what he was talking about.

Tattenai the Governor

It's tempting to regard all of the officials in the neighborhood as being enemies of the Jews. We should not make that identification automatic, however. Tattenai is a good example of the contrary. He is not their enemy; he is a competent bureaucrat. Look at the steps that he takes and see if you can see that:

- First, he checks with the boss. He does it in writing. He asks the boss to have the secretary look into the files and see if there is any truth to what these people are saying. I suspect that, in his little heart of hearts, he knew the Jews were telling him the truth. But good bureaucrats don't take chances on things like that.
- Next, he waits for a reply without stopping the work. They're not going to finish it all that rapidly anyway, and if the Jews are right then he doesn't want to be in the position of having stopped something that the king wants continued. It's the position of minimum risk.
- Notice please that he praises the caliber of the work. This work is happening in his department, under his stewardship so he might as well get whatever credit for it he can.

If the system is working correctly, even the bureaucrats do what God intends. As long as it doesn't get risky — ask Pontius Pilate.

Timescale

It's taken these people eighteen years so far to build this temple; they've got another four years or so yet to go. By way of contrast, Solomon's Temple took a grand total of seven years. Herod built the main temple (or perhaps rebuilt this temple) in about eight years, though the construction went on for quite a bit longer. That might seem like a long time to you, but if your horizon is far enough out it's not that bad. There are freeways in Los Angeles that took forty years to go from design to concrete.

That's an example for us. It took William Wilberforce and John Newton over twenty years to get from the abolition of the slave trade to the complete abolition of slavery in the British Empire. All along the way practical people told him this was just not going to work. Newton was an old man when he got the news. Sometimes it happens in your lifetime; sometimes it doesn't. The modern parallel to this is abortion; I leave it to the reader to decide how long this will take. But right now, everybody knows that abortion is here to stay permanently. It is not wise to reckon without the living God.

Royal Response

Please read Ezra 6.

In the Files

Ecbatana is actually the summer palace of the Persian kings. In those days, without air-conditioning, if you are royalty you migrated in the summer to somebody's mountainside place with a view — and the lower temperature. Remember that much of this region is extremely hot in the summer. What's interesting is that they found the document in the files there. That implies two things:

- First, they must've had one heck of a filing system to find it at all.
- I suspect they looked in the winter palace first, which means that they must've been persistent in their search. No doubt the delay was vexing to the Jews, but the results turned out all right.

One incidental fact about this: it gives us an example of the reliability of ancient records. Modern scholars tend to assume that anything before the invention of the computer is not reliable as a historical document. This shows us that the people of the ancient Persian Empire understood their history and relied upon their records implicitly. One might suggest that it is not too great a stretch of the imagination to think that they had good reason to do so. This document, at the time, would've been less ancient than the American Declaration of Independence. I leave it to the reader to ponder the proper conclusions from these facts.

Instructions

The first thing that we can understand about Darius from his instructions is that he understood the politics of the local situation. He is ruling over an Empire which had over 100 different tribal kingdoms contained within, so I suspect that he understood quite well how nasty and mudslinging local politics could be. That's why he told Tattenai to leave the Jews alone.

Next, he went above and beyond what Cyrus had ordered by telling Tattenai that the expenses for the construction of the temple and for the offerings should be taken out of the royal treasury. This

brings us to the question why he would do a thing like that. I suspect that Darius had a clear sense of just how much the fate of an empire depended upon what he would've called "the will of the gods." The ancient people had a much clearer sense of how the things that determine empire often seem to be random incidents to us. It would've been a first priority to him to placate the local God — in this case Jehovah — and make sure that the local citizens made proper offerings for the benefit of the king and his sons. Kings sought the favor of the gods in what ever way those gods seemed to want — for a very good reason. The psalmists understood this as well:

Psalms 20:7 NASB Some *boast* in chariots and some in horses, But we will boast in the name of the LORD, our God.

Divine Favor

It is interesting that the Jews saw evidence of divine favor in these actions. In particular, there are three things in which the Jews would have seen God's favor upon their building of the temple.

- The first is the existence of prophecy. The fact that God chose to send not one but two messengers with the same message tells the Jews that God is watching over them, wants them to build the temple, and therefore they will be successful in doing it.
- The second is in the heart of the King. The fact that Darius was so inclined to their success as to use tax dollars to support this was quite unexpected, and therefore seen as a sign of divine favor. God must really want this temple built if he gets the king to provide the money.
- What might surprise you is the rejoicing over Passover. The feast in question occurs at about the time of the completion of the temple, and it reminds the Jews of the first Exodus. It reminds them of the mighty hand of God that brought their ancestors out of Egypt. They took this as a sign of divine favor for this second Exodus; sometimes, timing is everything.

Someone building a temple 2500 years ago may not seem particularly important today. But for those of us who have seen the decline and soon-to-be fall of America may need to know how God begins with a people once again.

Ezra - Ezra 7-10

Up from Babylon

It took us six chapters, but we finally get to meet Ezra, the namesake of the book.

Ezra 7:6-28 NASB This Ezra went up from Babylon, and he was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given; and the king granted him all he requested because the hand of the LORD his God *was* upon him. (7) Some of the sons of Israel and some of the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers and the temple servants went up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes. (8) He came to Jerusalem in the fifth month, which was in the seventh year of the king. (9) For on the first of the first month he began to go up from Babylon; and on the first of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, because the good hand of his God *was* upon him. (10) For Ezra had set his heart to study the law of the LORD and to practice *it,* and to teach *His* statutes and ordinances in Israel. (11) Now this is the copy of the decree which King Artaxerxes gave to Ezra the priest, the scribe, learned in the words

of the commandments of the LORD and His statutes to Israel: (12) "Artaxerxes, king of kings, to Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, perfect *peace.* And now (13) I have issued a decree that any of the people of Israel and their priests and the Levites in my kingdom who are willing to go to Jerusalem, may go with you. (14) "Forasmuch as you are sent by the king and his seven counselors to inquire concerning Judah and Jerusalem according to the law of your God which is in your hand, (15) and to bring the silver and gold, which the king and his counselors have freely offered to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, (16) with all the silver and gold which you find in the whole province of Babylon, along with the freewill offering of the people and of the priests, who offered willingly for the house of their God which is in Jerusalem; (17) with this money, therefore, you shall diligently buy bulls, rams and lambs, with their grain offerings and their drink offerings and offer them on the altar of the house of your God which is in Jerusalem. (18) "Whatever seems good to you and to your brothers to do with the rest of the silver and gold, you may do according to the will of your God. (19) "Also the utensils which are given to you for the service of the house of your God, deliver in full before the God of Jerusalem. (20) "The rest of the needs for the house of your God, for which you may have occasion to provide, provide *for it* from the royal treasury. (21) "I, even I, King Artaxerxes, issue a decree to all the treasurers who are *in the provinces* beyond the River, that whatever Ezra the priest, the scribe of the law of the God of heaven, may require of you, it shall be done diligently, (22) *even* up to 100 talents of silver, 100 kors of wheat, 100 baths of wine, 100 baths of oil, and salt as needed. (23) "Whatever is commanded by the God of heaven, let it be done with zeal for the house of the God of heaven, so that there will not be wrath against the kingdom of the king and his sons. (24) "We also inform you that it is not allowed to impose tax, tribute or toll *on* any of the priests, Levites, singers, doorkeepers, Nethinim or servants of this house of God. (25) "You, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God which is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges that they may judge all the people who are in *the province* beyond the River, *even* all those who know the laws of your God; and you may teach anyone who is ignorant *of them*. (26) "Whoever will not observe the law of your God and the law of the king, let judgment be executed upon him strictly, whether for death or for banishment or for confiscation of goods or for imprisonment." (27) Blessed be the LORD, the God of our fathers, who has put *such a thing* as this in the king's heart, to adorn the house of the LORD which is in Jerusalem, (28) and has extended lovingkindness to me before the king and his counselors and before all the king's mighty princes. Thus I was strengthened according to the hand of the LORD my God upon me, and I gathered leading men from Israel to go up with me.

Preparation of Ezra

As far as we know, Ezra never performed any miracles. He was also apparently not the most charismatic leaders; as we shall see in chapter 10, he needed some encouragement. So we might ask what prepared this man for the tasks ahead of him. There are two things which are shown in the Scripture which prepare man like Ezra.

- The first is found in the phrase, “set his heart.” Ezra set his heart on three things:
- The first is the study of the Law of Moses. It is fashionable (at least in the emerging church) to minimize the study of the Scriptures as being of relatively little importance. This is a fashion which comes and goes; the usual argument is that the study of the Scripture is something reserved only for those who are experts. Ezra has it right; it is reserved for those who set their hearts on it. The love of God’s word is sufficient qualification to study it.
- The second is the practice of the Law of Moses. There is really no sense in studying the Scriptures if you’re not going to put them into practice; in fact, it’s worse if you do it that way. At least then you don’t have the excuse of ignorance. There is a warning with this; you will be called the legalist. The

fact that you know the Scriptures and obey them is not a sin — but it will get you accused of being a legalist. Sometimes, the accusation comes from the pulpit.

- Perhaps what sets Ezra part is this: he set his heart on teaching the law. It is so precious to him that he cannot bear to keep it to himself, he must share it. In the New Testament, teaching is one of the spiritual gifts. Interestingly, we pay a lot of attention to spiritual gifts which are disfavored (like speaking in tongues, in our particular denomination) or greatly favored, such as preaching. You have to point out the teaching is a spiritual gift for this to be recognized that all.
- The second is simply this: the hand of the Lord was upon him. Most teachers of the law, or teachers of the Scripture, never get the chance to do what Ezra did. It is the nature of the universe that only a certain number of us can rise to prominence; indeed, it is the definition of prominence that it is rare. But somebody has to do it, and in this instance the somebody is named Ezra. God picked him; and Ezra was ready for the selection.

King and Temple

One of the unique things about the Persian Empire was its tolerance of religion. As long as the religion in question did not advocate overthrow of the Empire, the Persian kings were quite content to let you worship however you liked. Loyalty, not religious unanimity, was the requirement. In this relative freedom of religion, the King is allowing all of the Jews who would like to go back to Jerusalem to do so.

Ezra, on the other hand, has a specific task. He is to "inquire" on behalf of the King — and then set things right. In short, he's telling Ezra that the problem belongs to the Jews, and he (Ezra) has been tasked with fixing it. The King is not hesitant to put the power of the monarchy behind this order. This, of course, implies that the state is going to extensively support the reforms that Ezra plans to bring — and note that many of those are very much religious reforms. This implies the state has an interest in those religious reforms. This is not as strange as it sounds.

Let me give you a current example: marriage. There is overwhelming evidence that if you want to raise children to become solid citizens, the best way to do so is in the traditional one man, one woman, husband-and-wife type of family. I realize that it is politically incorrect to say so; indeed, the pastor at our church would promptly disagree that any such statement could possibly be made. It's just that the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of that fact. That being the case, the state has a definite interest in promoting traditional marriage — because of the results it produces. To what extent the state can promote such marriage, is an interesting question. The fact that the state has an interest in it is not a question. The King in this instance understands that obedience to the law — religious or political — is a state interest. Obedient citizens pay their taxes and don't revolt. That's a state interest.

The King has also perceived that the religious establishment must be seen as independent of the monarchy. There's a simple reason for this too. If the King says that something is morally right, the cynical citizen thinks that it's either morally right or politically expedient. When the temple makes the same statement, it is seen as divine command because the cynical citizen can't see any other motive for it. For this reason, the King has prohibited the local authorities from taxing any of the functions of the temple. This is similar to current American law which makes religious institutions tax exempt. The key point for Americans today is to note that the independence of the religious establishment is a key to keeping its authority over its members. We just naturally assume that a state-sponsored church has the best interests of the regime at heart. We just might be right.

Interestingly, the motive that the King has for doing this doesn't seem to be any of this political thought. He probably understands it, but that's not what's motivating him to do it. Like most people of his time, the King is a polytheist. He believes the God of the Jews exists, though he doesn't believe that he is the God that we understand him to be. He does, however, understand that this God is powerful; therefore, he wants the favor of this God. So therefore he asks the priests of this God to take appropriate steps to secure the favor of this God for the King and his sons — and keep them from getting mad at the monarchy. The Kings of Persia understood that not all things were under the control of the state — an understanding which seems to have been lost lately.

Blessed Be the Lord

Take a look at the last two verses of that passage. You will notice that the author of this book — probably Ezra himself — blesses the Lord for his favor to the Jews. At first reading you might ask just what blessing God gave here; after all, it seems the King did everything. Ezra brings three things to your attention:

- He thanks God for putting things into the King's heart which benefit the people of God. Have you prayed recently that God would change the heart of the president?
- He thanks God for extending "lovingkindness" before the King — that is to say, for granting Ezra favor in the King's eyes. There are a lot of people competing for the King's attention; Ezra is grateful that he got it.
- The combination of these two things, Ezra says, strengthened him. It is very comforting and strengthening to know that the Lord is behind what you are doing.

The Trip

Chapter 8 tells us about the voyage to Jerusalem. It's mostly about the genealogy of the folks are going and the things they're carrying with them, but there are three things that we can pull out of this that tell us a little something:

- In verse twenty-two, we find that Ezra is ashamed to request troops from the King. After all, Ezra has been telling them about the might of this God that the Jews worship; it is inconsistent, therefore, to then say that this God is so weak that he can't protect the caravan of the Jews crossing the desert. It is at least a logical consistency.
- In verse twenty-eight, Ezra tells the messengers carrying the items for the temple that they are holy. To be holy is to be separated for God; the fact that you are doing God's work makes you holy — whether you like it or not.
- Again we see the careful genealogies and inventories. While it's not particularly interesting, it does tell us that we are dealing with real people who took a great deal of care in what they did. In other words, we are reading an account which is historically accurate.

Wives and Children

We now come to a most puzzling section of Scripture. In it we find that Ezra feels that the fact that many of the people — including the priests — having intermarried with the local population are in grave sin. This is rather foreign concept to us, and we shall have to take some time to understand it.

Ezra 9:1-15 NASB Now when these things had been completed, the princes approached me, saying, "The people of Israel and the priests and the Levites have not separated themselves

from the peoples of the lands, according to their abominations, *those* of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians and the Amorites. (2) "For they have taken some of their daughters *as wives* for themselves and for their sons, so that the holy race has intermingled with the peoples of the lands; indeed, the hands of the princes and the rulers have been foremost in this unfaithfulness." (3) When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled. (4) Then everyone who trembled at the words of the God of Israel on account of the unfaithfulness of the exiles gathered to me, and I sat appalled until the evening offering. (5) But at the evening offering I arose from my humiliation, even with my garment and my robe torn, and I fell on my knees and stretched out my hands to the LORD my God; (6) and I said, "O my God, I am ashamed and embarrassed to lift up my face to You, my God, for our iniquities have risen above our heads and our guilt has grown even to the heavens. (7) "Since the days of our fathers to this day we *have been* in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings *and* our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plunder and to open shame, as *it is* this day. (8) "But now for a brief moment grace has been *shown* from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped remnant and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage. (9) "For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. (10) "Now, our God, what shall we say after this? For we have forsaken Your commandments, (11) which You have commanded by Your servants the prophets, saying, 'The land which you are entering to possess is an unclean land with the uncleanness of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations which have filled it from end to end *and* with their impurity. (12) 'So now do not give your daughters to their sons nor take their daughters to your sons, and never seek their peace or their prosperity, that you may be strong and eat the good *things* of the land and leave *it* as an inheritance to your sons forever.' (13) "After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited *us* less than our iniquities *deserve,* and have given us an escaped remnant as this, (14) shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no remnant nor any who escape? (15) "O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped remnant, as *it is* this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this."

This Is Forbidden

The reaction of the average Christian at this point is one of astonishment. We would want to know why God would forbid marriage to someone of a different race. This is particularly a problem for Americans who have struggled with race relations throughout the life of the country. It is now politically correct to declare that any marriage between any two races is perfectly acceptable. It's hard for us to imagine a time when that was not the case. It's even harder for us to imagine that God would command such a thing. We need to examine two things:

- First, we need to make sure that indeed God did command that.
- Second, we need an explanation as to why he commanded the Jews not to do this, and why it is acceptable for us to do this today.

We may see the answer to the first in the Scriptures. The specific prohibition is found in Deuteronomy:

Deuteronomy 7:1-6 NASB "When the LORD your God brings you into the land where you are entering to possess it, and clears away many nations before you, the Hittites and the Girgashites and the Amorites and the Canaanites and the Perizzites and the Hivites and the Jebusites, seven nations greater and stronger than you, (2) and when the LORD your God delivers them before you and you defeat them, then you shall utterly destroy them. You shall make no covenant with them and show no favor to them. (3) "Furthermore, you shall not intermarry with them; you shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor shall you take their daughters for your sons. (4) "For they will turn your sons away from following Me to serve other gods; then the anger of the LORD will be kindled against you and He will quickly destroy you. (5) "But thus you shall do to them: you shall tear down their altars, and smash their *sacred* pillars, and hew down their Asherim, and burn their graven images with fire. (6) "For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

The Jews of Ezra's time had further motivation: they had an exquisitely good bad example: Solomon.[3] When you consider that the Jews of this time where acutely aware of their national sins, this example would press the point home to them. They knew that what they had done was wrong. Of course, for us, the question is whether or not we have a similar command. We do:

2 Corinthians 6:14 NASB (14) Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?

When I was a child this verse was quoted as a reason why you did not wish to marry someone who was a non-Christian. This has since fallen out of fashion; however, the consequences of marrying a non-Christian still exist. Interestingly, in my experience this is something which greatly affects women but not so much the men. Over the years I have had many people in my classes who are "single on Sunday." The overwhelming majority of them are women. Perhaps there is some truth to the idea that God has appointed the man the spiritual head of the household. If he follows the Lord, almost always his household will follow him. If he does not, the good example of his Christian wife is most commonly lost. The percentage of Christian wives who convert their husbands is depressingly small.

The key point for us in understanding this passage is that what appears to be a racial prohibition is in fact a religious prohibition. The reason you didn't marry an Amorite was because of their idolatrous faith. Indeed, in the early days of Israel, God condemned these people so much that he wanted them exterminated. There is such a thing as evil in this world, and we should not be partners with it.

Ezra's Reaction

Have you ever noticed that biblical characters tend to pull out their hair and tear their robes a lot? Well, it's an outward sign of distress which was culturally accepted in their culture. Everybody around Ezra knew what he was trying to say by doing this. He is setting an example to them by expressing his shame and humiliation in this way.

Ezra's Prayer

It is useful to us to analyze the prayer that Ezra makes:

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[3] First Kings 11

- First, it is an admission of shame and guilt — personally. This seems a little strange to us, since Ezra wasn't the guy with the foreign wife. But he is the man in charge, and it happened on his watch.
- He acknowledges that this is a national sin — a concept which we ignore completely. To the people of this time it was entirely possible for the Jewish nation, as a whole, to sin. Because the whole nation sinned, each individual sin. If you don't think this possible, consider the attitude the church has today towards sexual matters. A simple look at adultery will convince you that we, collectively, have abandoned the teachings that the Scripture gives us on the subject. Indeed, the pastor in our own church once remarked that "adultery *may* be harmful to your marriage."[4] The reaction of the congregation establishes the guilt.
- Ezra asks for the grace of God *despite* the sins of the people. In so doing, he acknowledges that God has already been merciful to them by keeping them as a remnant of the people of Israel, and by granting them the favor of the Persian King. His plea is that he knows that God has been merciful to these people, more than they deserve, but he asks for yet even more mercy.
- He also acknowledges that God warned them of what would happen if they behave the way they did. He then says that God was right; it did happen that way.
- Finally, he acknowledges the righteousness of God. There is no sense in this prayer that God is somehow to blame for his people's problems. He warned them that if they misbehave this would be the consequence. He then righteously imposed those consequences. Think about it this way: if your child misbehaves, and you tell him that there will be consequences for that misbehavior, you do so to provoke right behavior. If the child continues to misbehave, is it your fault that the punishment arrives?

Perhaps this might serve as a model for us. We might well ask ourselves whether or not we are blaming God for the things we have provoked.

Separation

If modern Americans have some difficulty in understanding why the ancient Israelite had to be separate from the nations around him, it must be extremely puzzling to note that they repent — to the point of getting rid of their wives and children. Let us examine the facts first.

Ezra 10:1-14 NASB Now while Ezra was praying and making confession, weeping and prostrating himself before the house of God, a very large assembly, men, women and children, gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept bitterly. (2) Shecaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God and have married foreign women from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope for Israel in spite of this. (3) "So now let us make a covenant with our God to put away all the wives and their children, according to the counsel of my lord and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law. (4) "Arise! For *this* matter is your responsibility, but we will be with you; be courageous and act." (5) Then Ezra rose and made the leading priests, the Levites and all Israel, take oath that they would do according to this proposal; so they took the oath. (6) Then Ezra rose from before the house of God and went into the chamber of Jehohanan the son of Eliashib. Although he went there, he did not eat bread nor drink water, for he was mourning over the unfaithfulness of the exiles. (7) They made a proclamation throughout Judah and Jerusalem to all the exiles, that they should assemble at Jerusalem, (8) and that whoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the leaders and the elders, all his possessions should be forfeited and he himself excluded from the assembly of the exiles. (9) So

[4] My wife's response to this was to remark that in my case it would not be harmful — it would be fatal to my body.

all the men of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days. It was the ninth month on the twentieth of the month, and all the people sat in the open square *before* the house of God, trembling because of this matter and the heavy rain. (10) Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, "You have been unfaithful and have married foreign wives adding to the guilt of Israel. (11) "Now therefore, make confession to the LORD God of your fathers and do His will; and separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives." (12) Then all the assembly replied with a loud voice, "That's right! As you have said, so it is our duty to do. (13) "But there are many people; it is the rainy season and we are not able to stand in the open. Nor *can* the task *be done* in one or two days, for we have transgressed greatly in this matter. (14) "Let our leaders represent the whole assembly and let all those in our cities who have married foreign wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of each city, until the fierce anger of our God on account of this matter is turned away from us."

Modern Difficulties

For the modern Christian, this passage poses some immense difficulties. We cannot imagine what would be like to be told that your wife and children were living, breathing example of your sin and therefore needed to be disposed of. ”How can I get rid of the wife and children I love” would be our response. You don’t just throw away a wife and kids.

To understand how they could feel this way we must first note the nature of authority. In particular, we should see that authority is hierarchical. The particular example I would give you here is this: marriage is sacred, and to be preserved, in accordance with the commandment of God. The authority for marriage, ultimately, is God himself; he established it. If you acknowledge his authority over marriage, then you must acknowledge that he has the authority to outline specific instances in which marriage must be overridden. If you appeal to the authority of marriage, you acknowledge the superior authority of God.

The question occasionally comes up for modern Christians. In some denominations it is taught that when a person divorces their first spouse, and later becomes a Christian, that they need to acknowledge their sin of divorce by divorcing their second spouse and going back to the first one. (The author of this series most emphatically does not agree.) You can see some of the logic. The Christian is taught that marriage is lifelong; with the exception of adultery, divorce is a sin. The real question for us is do we go back and fix it retroactively. Most Christian denominations agree that this is not required — and often is not even a good idea. But the principle that we should not be “unequally yoked” still prevails; we don’t tell our children this anymore, but we should.

The issue is more general than that. The Christian is taught that he is to be “in the world, but not of the world.” There is an ongoing question of how we keep ourselves separate from the worldly ways around us while still continuing to exist in the same physical space. The two extremes are to be avoided. Unless you happen to be a monk in a monastery it’s almost impossible to avoid being in the world. But that does not mean you must follow everything the world does. The Christian is supposed to be different. It comes as a surprise to many Christians today, who have been told that Christianity is always hip, cool and modern. Christianity is taught as being fashionable when it should be taught as being true.

Steps in the Process

So what did the people do about this? We can look at the steps in the process:

- First, they admitted that they had a problem. They're not exactly certain what they're supposed to do about it just yet, but they admit that they're wrong.
- Note the next step: they encouraged their leader to take action. Sometimes the man in charge needs to know that he is in charge.
- There is a certain charming pragmatism about this. The people are perfectly willing to let their leaders work out the details of how they are going to implement the stuff. But at the moment they're standing around in the pouring rain, it's cold, and I suspect it's rather hard to hear what's going on. So they appoint their leaders to act for them. This will take about two months.

Ordinary Holiness

You have been waiting around (patiently, thank you) for us to deal with the question of just how the Christian is to be in the world but not of the world. The problem is quite large, but permit me three specific suggestions which I believe apply to all of the Christians in our time.

- The first is, "render unto Caesar." You have obligations to the government, and you should fulfill them as much as possible within the context of the Christian conscience. Do not look for occasions to quarrel with the government. As much as it is possible within you, be obedient. Be the model citizen — so that those who accuse you of being a weirdo right-wing fundamentalist fanatic will have to battle with the facts rather than you.
- Remember that you are an ambassador for Christ. That implies you are not a native of this world (ambassadors are never natives of the country to which they are an ambassador) but you do represent your Lord Jesus Christ. As far as it is possible within you, present him as the eminently desirable Savior of the world.
- You do not live in this world; but you do live in the family of God. On earth, that family is the church. Do not see the church as an extraneous part of your life to which you devote a couple hours a week. Rather, view it as the family of God, totally precious to you. You may not be in God's building for much time during the week; but you should be in God's service all week long.

Building the Wall - Nehemiah 1-4, 6

The Wall

We now move into the book of Nehemiah. In the early days of the Jewish recordkeeping, Ezra and Nehemiah were consolidated as one book. Gradually, over the years, they were separated into Ezra 1 and Ezra 2. Ezra 2 eventually became what is now known as Nehemiah. To understand why this particular book has its own importance to Jewish history, we will need to begin with an explanation of the use of a fortified wall around the city in ancient times.

Advantages to the Defender

Perhaps you've never wondered about this, but all of the significant cities of ancient times had a large, thick wall around the city. This was not simply a method of defining the city limits; it was a military necessity given the technology of the time. The wall gave the defender certain advantages which were indispensable if you wanted to maintain your own empire.

- The first is what the military tacticians call "economy of force." The concept is a relatively simple one; it means that you can achieve the maximum effect with the minimum number of troops. If you put the man behind a 30 foot high wall (or more likely, on the pathway on top of it) he is shielded by the stones from the weapons of the enemy. Attacking a walled city takes a much larger number of troops than defending it. So the king with a smaller number of troops could match the power of his adversary who was standing in an open field.
- There is also the question of physics. If you are standing on top of the wall, and your opponent is down below on the field, the range of your arrows is in general longer than the range of his arrows. He's shooting uphill. You're shooting downhill. The same distinction applies to spears; there is almost no sense trying to throw a spear at someone on top of the wall. The man on the wall, on the other hand, has gravity to increase the speed of his spear. Score one for physics.
- A walled city almost always had what was called a "sally port." This was a gate that was easy to get out of — especially in the middle of the night — so you could launch a raid on your opponent and then run back inside your fortress. This kept the attackers from sleeping, at the very least. It also meant that if this was just one of many walled cities in the kingdom, your opponent had to consider whether or not to lay siege to this walled city.

Disadvantages to an Enemy

Modern logistics have made light work of many of the disadvantages of ancient times. One of the four weapons Dwight Eisenhower cited as being crucial for success in the World War II was the 2 ½ ton truck. (The others were the DC-3, the bulldozer and the Jeep — and none of the four was originally designed for combat.) It goes to the heart of the problem of dealing with a fixed fortification. Specifically, an attacking enemy had to consider these things:

- He had first to decide whether or not to lay siege to your fortress, or simply mask it. You mask a fortress by putting enough troops are rounded to keep the troops inside, inside. This takes less in the way of military manpower, but you have to leave the folks in position. That's a drain on your resources; it means you have so many fewer troops for the next attack.
- There is also the little problem of food and water. Your opponent in all likelihood has left you no food and no water out in the open country. Standard procedure would be to stop up all the springs and gather all the food in the area into the fortress. This meant that if you're going to lay siege to

that fortress, you are going to have to find a way to eat and drink. There was also the little difficulty that concentrating that number of troops in such a small area might produce an epidemic of disease. Armies of this time were best fed by marching on.

- Remember too that campaigns in those days were usually conducted by alliances of small kingdoms. The Persian Empire, for example, had well over 100 different tribal groups. Many of these would be together on the same campaign. Troops were motivated by the thought that they would plunder their opponents. If you have to conduct a siege, that means the troops have to put up with delayed gratification. It was considered standard fare that the troops were entitled to rape all the women and then select the best and prettiest as slaves. So, for example, if you decide to mask the fortress that means that the tribal groups doing that don't get the ordinary privileges of rape and pillage; they just have to sit there. This might not be politically stable.

Peacetime Advantages

The wall also had its peacetime advantages. It defined the existence of a city, and the city meant civilization. In the little villages of the countryside you can have no organized police force; the walls of the city to find a place where you could. Typically, the city was much larger than anything that did not have a wall. That meant that you could have people specializing in certain economic activities — money lending, for example. The parallel today would be something like living in a small town without a bank or an ATM.

The city was also a natural magnet for trade. Since there were a sufficient number of citizens there for business, it would not take long for roads to be defined which led to the city. Think of the advantages today to owners of a store in a strip mall if that strip mall is right at the bottom of a freeway off ramp. The simple act of trading generally produced economic benefits for all those involved. It allowed the gold diggers to dig gold without worrying about where they were going to find turnips.

Being a citizen of a particular city also carried its advantages. The power and prestige of that city went along with citizenship. You will recall Paul telling us that he was a citizen of Tarsus, which in the King James he described as "no mean city." In a sense, it defined the city sophisticate and the country bumpkin.

So, as I hope you can see, if you have a city of any significance, you need a wall around it. Nehemiah knew that; this is the story of how he built that wall for Jerusalem.

Nehemiah's Prayer

Let's take a look at how Nehemiah started this project.

Nehemiah 1:1-11 NASB The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol, (2) that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped *and* had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. (3) They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire." (4) When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. (5) I said, "I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, (6) let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of

Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned. (7) "We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses. (8) "Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; (9) but *if* you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.' (10) "They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand. (11) "O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man." Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

Preparation

It would be wise for us to note that Nehemiah begins his account with a short mention of the detail that he had obtained the facts before going to God in prayer. This carries with it certain implications.

- It implies that he is serious about the problem; in other words, he cares. This is not the case of a man asking God for something that he thinks is a good idea though he personally would not want to contribute to its solution.
- It specifically implies that he is willing to do something about it — and since he's is in a prominent position in the king's court it will be a personal sacrifice.
- As is customary in the Old Testament with the Jewish people, he approaches this with mourning and fasting. This is the spiritual complement of his willingness to take action.

His Prayer

An outline of Nehemiah's prayer will show us his approach. Kindly note the following:

- He begins by acknowledging who God is. If you want a personal relationship with someone, you need to understand who they really are. Nehemiah acknowledges who God is in three particular aspects:
  - He describes him as "great and awesome." There is no aspect here of the "me and Jesus in the phone booth" theology. Nehemiah knows he is addressing the Lord of the universe, one who is far greater than he is.
  - He invokes the fact that God has made a covenant with the people of Israel. In other words, he is establishing the basis for his plea not upon his own personal worth but upon what God has promised to the people of Israel.
  - He also recalls God's promise of loving kindness to those who are obedient to him. In this, he appeals to the eternal nature of God. The New Testament tells us that "God is love"; that fact was well known to the people of the Old Testament times. It is still a basis for our appeal in prayer today.
- Next, he makes full confession of the sins of the nation of Israel. This may seem strange to us; we seldom hear of the idea that a nation can sin. But I submit to you that the Christian in a democracy is particularly vulnerable to this. We bear some responsibility for what our country does, and we should be willing to confess when our nation has sinned.

- He then goes on to claim the promises of God's word. It's interesting to note that the promises given were first enunciated almost 1000 years earlier. Nehemiah is implicitly depending upon the unchanging, eternal nature of God. It is a disease of our modern times that we assume that anything which is older than we are must be unreliable. The things of God are eternal.
- His appeal echoes with the phrase, "your people." He is reminding God that he chose the Jews to be his selected people, and asking him to care for them as he did before. In short, he is reminding God who the good guys should be, even if they haven't been all that good.
- He then makes his specific requests. He asks in general for success in what he is doing, and in particular asks for compassion on the part of the king. That's particularly important; he is asking God for favor within the system of government that exists, not to overthrow the government and restore the monarchy of David.[5]

Before the King

We may now take a look at the results.

Nehemiah 2:1-8 NASB And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine *was* before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. (2) So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart." Then I was very much afraid. (3) I said to the king, "Let the king live forever. Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?" (4) Then the king said to me, "What would you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. (5) I said to the king, "If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." (6) Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, "How long will your journey be, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I gave him a definite time. (7) And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors *of the provinces* beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, (8) and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city and for the house to which I will go." And the king granted *them* to me because the good hand of my God *was* on me.

It is fascinating that the King's permission turns upon a point of emotion. Ataxerxes evidently was a man of perception; and Nehemiah is taken by surprise by this. He evidently wasn't quite ready to talk to the king just yet. But in the midst of the affair he utters a little prayer to God and steps forth in faith.

The king seems to be fond of the young man — but he's still a king. He's used to wheeling and dealing. So he does not give Nehemiah unlimited resources and time to get this done. He limits the time that Nehemiah is going to get; after all, the man is a valued advisor and a trusted servant. He commits certain royal resources to the project and has the prudence to provide an army escort.

You can see why Nehemiah said "the good hand of my God was on me." He's been obliged to roll the dice a little too early in the game; he hasn't had time to prepare the King for his request. But his

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[5] As a side note, you might look at Daniel 9:25-27. The King's decree letting Nehemiah go forth to rebuild the wall is the starting point of the sixty-nine weeks described by Daniel. Most good commentaries will give you the timeline for this.

opportunity came up and he grabbed it with both hands. Sometimes, the life of the Christian requires such holy boldness.

Building the Wall

Scattered throughout chapters 2 through 6 (excluding chapter 5) is the account of the actual building of the wall.

Tour of Inspection

The reader will pardon the commentary which follows. Your author was, for many years, a professional project manager. It is impossible for me to look at this without seeing the wisdom in project management which Nehemiah brings to the situation. It stands in stark contrast to the method usually found in the churches with which I am accustomed. Good project managers know that there are three things which are absolutely critical in understanding: what is the task, how long do you have to finish it and what is it going to cost. This triangle — task, time, cost — is the basis for understanding project management. Nehemiah already has a time constraint; he has an implicit cost constraint because he has only the people in Jerusalem to work with; and now he has to determine how big the task is.

So, just exactly what is the task? We know from archaeological records the size and width of the wall, and how it was constructed. Nehemiah's task is to build a wall approximately 8 meters high, approximately 23 feet wide at the base, whose edges are of laid stone carefully chinked, filled in the interior with rubble. This would be typical of the wall construction of the time for a city wall of minimal cost. There are other methods; if money was no object he would use large stone blocks. If time was no objection, he might've had people make large mud brick walls. In this instance he is short of time and has only the resources at hand — which determines how the wall is to be constructed.

There is a parallel to this in Christian life:

Luke 14:31-32 NASB "Or what king, when he sets out to meet another king in battle, will not first sit down and consider whether he is strong enough with ten thousand *men* to encounter the one coming against him with twenty thousand? (32) "Or else, while the other is still far away, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace.

We are encouraged to count the cost of the faith. Often enough, the preaching profession comes out with the idea that careful planning is antithetical to faith. If that is true, Nehemiah is an excellent example of doing it wrong — which does seem to be contrary to the point here.

You will please note that Nehemiah begins by providing encouragement to those will be the workers on the project. It's a common problem that people at the beginning of a project look at it and say, "it can't be done." Sometimes the project manager has to start by explaining that the way you eat an elephant is one bite at a time. If your project happens to be a Christian one, it's perfectly valid to say that if God wants it done it will happen — but he wants it done by you specifically, you're going to need some encouragement along the way. There is a difference between magic and faith.

Chapter 3 is one of those long lists of people and activities which would be quite at home in today's project planning world. Not only is this convincing evidence that we're reading a true account, it

is also evidence of careful planning on Nehemiah's part. The comparison with the common church method of, "God will provide somehow" is instructive.[6]

Opposition

One way to tell for certain that you're doing what God wants is that the people of evil will oppose you. Here's what Nehemiah had to face; the same sorts of things apply today.

- It's very frustrating, but your opponents will begin with mockery. Every important project gathers a collection of naysayers who know it can't be done. It's difficult to say what motivates them, but they appear in every significant project. If you are charged with doing something large for the kingdom of God, expect this.[7] Note that these people do not produce facts and figures; just laughter. Take the irritation to God, as Nehemiah did.
- You should also expect "fifth column" activities inside the church. There are plenty of people who have a better way to do the job, a better job to do, or other interests which conflict with what you're trying to do. Persistence is sovereign.
- Sometimes, in this passage is a good example, you'll actually face combat of some sort. Like Nehemiah, you should prepare for it. You should encourage those were going to have to perform the combat that they will be well taken care of, for this is God's work. Note that in this instance combat is a threat, not a reality. A good parallel example today would come from the ACLU, which regularly tells preachers they can't comment on politics. If they do, we'll sue.
- Always, always expect a personal attack on the leader of the project. In this instance it is done by someone who calls himself a prophet. If you are doing something important for God, your courage will be tested.

Character of a Christian Leader

Most of us will never be called upon to build a rock and rubble wall. But if you have a position of leadership in the church, no matter how minor, there are some lessons in this passage for you.

- First, remember that courage is the foundation of all other virtue. If you don't have the guts to do the job, it isn't going to get done by you. Expect that it will be challenged; pray that you will rise to that challenge.
- Next, be sure that you know what task you have been given. It is frequently found in the church that people are given something so vague and fuzzy that it would be impossible to determine whether or not they ever accomplished it. Some people are commissioned with, "go forth — and do good things." Do not accept this; at least at the first step outline what it is you think you need to do and see if that's reasonable as a statement of the work to be done. Planning ahead is not a demonstration of lack of faith. Once you have planned, then do not hesitate to implement. Get the job done.
- Expect opposition. Some of that opposition will be internal to the church; some of that opposition will be outside the church. You should not only expect it, you should expect it to be unscrupulous. The best defense against false accusation is the truth.

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[6] Your author's church recently went through a major building campaign. If you perceive that some of these comments came from the results of that campaign, you are correct.

[7] J. Lawrence Peter, the man who coined the "Peter principle", referred to these people as the "Abominable No-Man."

World of Finance - Nehemiah 5

As of the writing of this lesson the mortgage foreclosure crisis seems to be winding down in America. But for the last few years we have been treated to any number of news stories showing someone being thrown out of their home because they can't pay the mortgage. It is an interesting thought that Americans accept the stories as being sad instances of what must absolutely be done. Good liberals will ask what the government should do about this crisis; good conservatives will shrug their shoulders and say it's the individual's fault for purchasing a house he or she couldn't afford but no one seems to blame the bank. That's a change in American attitudes from the Great Depression. We'll take the history of that attitude back about 2500 years in today's lesson.

High Finance

We must begin with a review of how the ancient Law of Moses dealt with the concept of loans and mortgages.

Loan with Collateral

The process of obtaining a loan in the ancient Jewish world is rather different than it is today. The closest modern parallel would be taking something to a pawn shop. You bring something to the shop; they loan you the money and keep the item until you either redeem the loan or abandon it, in which case they sell the item. In those days you would bring forward a pledge. This is some item of value which acted as security to the one who is making you the loan. There were several regulations concerning what could be pledged and how it was pledged.

- One of the most common items to be pledged was a cloak. Practically everyone had one; it was probably the most valuable garment that the average poor man had. But the law is quite strict that this pledge had to be returned to the poor man every night — so he can roll himself in it like a blanket and not freeze in his sleep[8]. The lender was warned that God would hear the poor man's complaint if you did elsewise, "because I am gracious." It's a common theme in the Law of Moses; God is the one who cares for the poor, the widow and the orphan.
- Under no circumstances could you take a millstone in pledge[9]. You were taking the man's livelihood; it seems to make little sense unless you were taking vengeance. The Scripture says this would be like "taking a life in pledge."
- Nor could you take any garment which belongs to a widow[10]. Widows, orphans and the poor are under the special protection of God.

Perhaps most interesting of all is this: when you took a pledge, you were not allowed to go into the debtor's house to get it. You had to wait outside while he went in and got it and brought it out to you[11]. It seems that God was interested in the dignity of his people, so that the borrower would not feel ashamed or invaded.

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[8] Exodus 22:26-27
[9] Deuteronomy 24:6
[10] Deuteronomy 24:17
[11] Deuteronomy 24:10-11

Sold into Slavery

The reader must understand that slavery in ancient times was usually the result of one of two things: either you were captured in battle, or you became so indebted that you were sold to pay your debts. It was also very common for your children to be sold to pay your debts. So the racial aspect of slavery that we understand in American history played little part in their thinking; in this week's reading it plays not at all. Slavery was a financial condition.

Jewish law was particularly strict concerning someone who was Jewish and was enslaved. The law required that he be a slave for no more than six years, at the end of which time you released him. You didn't just send them away; you sent him away with great liberality. You provided him with animals from your flock, wine and grain so that he might be established and thus avoid becoming a slave again[12]. If the individual wanted to, he could become your slave permanently — but that was the slave's choice. This choice was often made because the slave may have acquired a wife while a slave and she might still be a slave. By the standards of the time, these rules were incredibly merciful.

Nor were you allowed to treat your slave like you would a slave from another community (non-Jewish). A Jewish slave was to be treated as if he were a hired hand[13]. The argument in all of this was that the Jews were slaves in Egypt; they are to remember what a lousy deal it was. Therefore, why would you inflict it on your fellow Jew?

Interest and Usury

We may begin with a note concerning the English language. "Usury" in the King James Version is what we today would call "interest." The idea that it is excessive interest is a change in the language. One of the stereotypes that is common in the English language is that of the Jewish moneylender; Shakespeare established this well in the character of Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice.* It is therefore interesting to find that the collection of interest by one Jew from another was forbidden by the Law of Moses[14]. A Jew was allowed to charge interest to a foreigner, however[15].

The most common interest rate found in antiquity is 1% — per month. It is not entirely clear that this is what's going on in today's readings, but it is most likely the case. This was a standard during the Roman Empire which defined excessive interest is being greater than that. But for the Jew lending to the Jew, interest was not only forbidden but carried with it the reprobation of God:

Proverbs 28:8 NASB He who increases his wealth by interest and usury Gathers it for him who is gracious to the poor.

The reader will note the repetition "interest and usury"; the distinction in the original is whether you take it in money or in kind.

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[12] Deuteronomy 15:12-18
[13] Leviticus 25:39-43
[14] Exodus 22:25
[15] Deuteronomy 23:20

Despite all the warnings, by the time of Christ the taking of interest was a commonplace in Jewish society. Readers will of course remember the parable of the talents in which the returning master demanded that at least he should have his money back with interest[16]. Apparently, the temptation to make a buck has been around for quite some time.

It is also evident from the Law of Moses that the purpose of a loan from one Jew to another was not to make money, but to assist your Jewish brother in getting back on his feet. That's a very different view than we take today. Interestingly, the modern socialist view is that the money cannot be loaned but only given. We may wonder aloud what effect this has on the psychology of the recipient.

Example of Nehemiah

Nehemiah 5:1-19 NASB Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers. (2) For there were those who said, "We, our sons and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live." (3) There were others who said, "We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine." (4) Also there were those who said, "We have borrowed money for the king's tax *on* our fields and our vineyards. (5) "Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage *already,* and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others." (6) Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words. (7) I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, "You are exacting usury, each from his brother!" Therefore, I held a great assembly against them. (8) I said to them, "We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?" Then they were silent and could not find a word *to say.* (9) Again I said, "The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies? (10) "And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury. (11) "Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, also the hundredth *part* of the money and of the grain, the new wine and the oil that you are exacting from them." (12) Then they said, "We will give *it* back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say." So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise. (13) I also shook out the front of my garment and said, "Thus may God shake out every man from his house and from his possessions who does not fulfill this promise; even thus may he be shaken out and emptied." And all the assembly said, "Amen!" And they praised the LORD. Then the people did according to this promise. (14) Moreover, from the day that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year to the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, *for* twelve years, neither I nor my kinsmen have eaten the governor's food *allowance.* (15) But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people and took from them bread and wine besides forty shekels of silver; even their servants domineered the people. But I did not do so because of the fear of God. (16) I also applied myself to the work on this wall; we did not buy any land, and all my servants were gathered there for the work. (17) Moreover, *there were* at my table one hundred and fifty Jews and officials, besides those who came to us from the nations that were around us. (18) Now that which was prepared for each day was one ox *and* six choice sheep, also birds were prepared for me; and once in ten days all sorts of wine *were furnished* in abundance. Yet for all this I did not

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[16] Matthew 25:27

demand the governor's food *allowance,* because the servitude was heavy on this people. (19) Remember me, O my God, for good, *according to* all that I have done for this people.

Plight of the People

We can see at once that the loans being made are not the kind of business transaction that would be expected today. In fact, the average bank's view these people as a very poor risk. We may look at their complaint:

- The first complaint is that they are starving. They ran out of money and they can't afford to buy food; the farm has been mortgaged to somebody else so they can't grow it. Their next step is to sell their children into slavery.
- The second complaint is one that's familiar to us: taxes. Most kingdoms had some variation of what we would call property tax. People in California who experienced this one passed proposition 13; the real estate value of their homes went up so fast that their income could not possibly keep pace with it. When the tax collector throws you out of your home for nonpayment, things are bad.

These people have done what they can; they borrowed money, they mortgaged the house and the fields and eventually sold their sons and daughters as slaves. Now they're broke, starving and still in debt. One wonders how much sympathy and practical help they would get from social conservatives today.

Correction

There are four things I would point out to you about Nehemiah's response to this situation.

- The first is that he rightly accuses the richer part of the population of exacting interest, which is forbidden by the Law of Moses. In this place and time, that makes it not only a sin but a crime. This is plain and simple, dead to rights.
- He then points out that he and his fellow workers have industriously been buying Jewish people out of slavery, presumably enslaved to the surrounding population, only to find that his fellow Jews are creating more Jewish slaves for him to buy. He is righteously outraged.
- He then does something which strikes the modern mind as extremely strange: he tells them to give back (note the verb) what they have taken as pledge. To understand this we shall have to dig a little deeper.
- Finally, he admits he is embarrassed by their conduct. He is ashamed to be their governor.

To understand this, we must recall that the Jew regarded the land as something which was given to his family when the nation of Israel came out of slavery in Egypt. He was not permitted to transfer it from one tribe to another, and at the year of Jubilee the land reverted to its original owners. This is very different in our use of land, which makes it practically a commodity. So they would not have seen Nehemiah's orders in quite the same light that we might.

There is more to it. We look at a loan as being something which enables the recipient to buy something, paying over time — and also makes money for the person making the loan. Nehemiah would've viewed a loan as a way of getting your brother Jew back on his feet. Understanding the financial transaction that way shows us the different light they had on it.

Nehemiah's Example

There is no sense in trying to straighten people out morally if your own life is crooked. We need to look at Nehemiah's example as well.

- As we mentioned above, he's been in the business of buying back Jewish slaves. He's trying to reestablish the nation of Israel in the land which it was given, and one of the things he's doing is returning a Jewish slave to the Jewish land by buying him back from a non-Jewish owner.
- His conduct as governor is also exemplary. He doesn't live it up; he doesn't lord it over the Jews but rather acts in a modest fashion.
- As we saw last week, he has been the man in charge of building the wall. That has great advantages to a city in this time; Nehemiah is a public benefactor.
- On top of all that, he fed hundred and fifty people a day at his table. This is a practical example of both politics and charity.

With this kind of conduct, he has the moral authority to upbraid the Jews for their charging of interest in selling people into slavery. If the top man in the country, the governor, does it this way then why can't you?

Social Justice

We might ask how we ever got so far away from this conception.

Modern Influences

A complete discussion of this issue would take several volumes. But I will submit to the reader that there are three major influences which have completely altered our point of view.

- The first is Marxism. The thought that "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" dominates the modern philosophy of dealing with poverty. There is now an implied guilt in being rich, no matter how you got the money. Therefore, we take from the rich as much as possible. Since this is an act of taxation, not charity, the rich resist this. Since this is given to the poor, we remove their motivation to make the kind of loan that allows their fellow man to become like them. The money is going to come from the rich; the question is whether or not they get the privilege of charity. The money is going to go to the poor; the question is whether or not it is a loan (which impels responsibility) or a gift (which implies consumption.)
- The second is the rise of the corporation. Liberal thought regards the corporation somewhat like the goose that lays the golden egg. It produces the money but we have a strong urge to open the bird up and see how that works; surely we can make it work better. But the corporation cannot, as a rule, make its prime purpose charity. Banks are corporations. They're in it for the money.
- The third is the rise of the state, particularly as enabled by our technology. When I was a child, people would often say, "Somebody ought to do something about that." Now people often say, "The government ought to do something about that." The power of the computer allows the government to perform things in detail which would be the envy of a Roman Emperor.

Christian Thought

Nehemiah lived about 500 years before the time of Christ. The church in the intervening years has developed two schools of thought on the subject of how we should handle poverty.

The first is the Roman Catholic view. It was first clearly enunciated by Saint Augustine, and remains the view of the Catholic Church today.

- We begin with the idea that the state is the "handmaiden of the church." In other words, the state should take moral direction from the church and act accordingly. This includes not only welfare to deal with poverty, but also enforcing various forms of morality.
- One such form of morality to be enforced is this: if you are rich but not charitable you are morally in the wrong. You are greedy. Therefore, it is reasonable for the state to take away your money and give it to those who are poor — since you won't perform the charity yourself.
- The state, therefore, should take responsibility for dealing with poverty — since they have both the means and the moral imperative. This is referred to as "social justice."

This view has been greatly influenced by Marxist "liberation theology." But it dates well before Karl Marx and represents a view which most Americans find somewhat strange.

The second is the Protestant point of view, particularly in the United States. This view is based on the idea that government should be limited and restrained.

- The primary restraint on government is that it should be separate from the church. The separation of church and state is a cherished American principle. It is logical to conclude from this, therefore, that the government has no business doing what the church should do. One of the things the church should do is provide charitable relief to poverty — and therefore the government should not. The sounds very appealing; but remember that the government does in fact legislate morality (for example, laws about bank robbery.)
- The Protestant view of poverty is rather different also. In the Catholic view, poverty is something which is just given to you. It's your lot in life. In the Protestant view, it's usually because you failed to work hard; it's a moral failure. Welfare, therefore, is rewarding moral failure. It is not charity but counterproductive.
- It is therefore obvious that sympathy (and thus charity) are reserved for the truly deserving. This of course imposes on the Protestant the task of deciding who are the truly deserving. This is not always as easy as it appears.

As a practical matter of fact, our current legal system is a hybrid of these two points of view as modified by the practical realities of politics. Anyone expecting it to make logical sense is going to be disappointed.

An Unresolved Problem

We might bring up two aspects of Nehemiah's example which are challenge to those of us who live in the twenty-first century.

- What is the purpose of lending? Is there such a thing as charitable lending? We seem to have divided provision for the poor into outright gifts (or welfare) and loans strictly for the purpose of making money. Nehemiah suggests that there may be a middle ground.
- Our emphasis on making sure that corporations maintain our privacy may have in fact interfered with our ability to be our "brother's keeper." It is common in the church today that we have people in need who are embarrassed to ask for help. It may well be worth asking what we're doing wrong that such a situation should occur.

Anatomy of a Revival - Nehemiah 8-10

Reading the Law

To avoid copyright complications, we will ask that you read Nehemiah 8 at this point.

Revival — Concept

One of the great difficulties that the typical board of elders has is the measurement of a pastor's performance. The church which your author attends makes this relatively simple. There are three criteria; if all three are increasing, the pastor is doing a great job. Those three criteria are offerings, attendance and baptisms.

You will note that all three of these criteria are easy to measure. They are simply a matter of counting things. But one must ask whether or not they are an accurate measure of success. The difficulty with these measurements is that they are easy to use. They are easy to understand, they are also easy to obtain. The growth of a Christian congregation, however, is a much more complex thing. Teachers will be familiar with the problem of "teaching to the test." If you tell a teacher that their performance appraisal depends upon the ability of their students to pass a standardized test, the teacher has the temptation of teaching exactly what's on the test — which might not be what you really want the students to learn. Most of us have been through classes where we memorized enough information to pass the course — and promptly forgot the material after the exam was over. True learning does not occur using this model. Similarly, the true growth of a Christian congregation is not just a matter of offerings, attendance and baptisms. Those are indicators of the growth of the congregation, but not true measures. The problem, of course, is that you are trying to measure the impact of the Holy Spirit on the congregation; that's a very difficult thing. It's easy to slip into the logical fallacy that the indicators are in fact the objectives.

It's fairly easy to see how these criteria can go astray. Let's take attendance, for example. You can increase attendance by turning your worship service into a dazzling show. People like to be entertained, especially when the admission is free. A little hype and some implied shame will increase your offerings. You can increase baptisms by offering what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace — the grace of God given without the repentance of man. Almost any system of measurement can be deceived. So how do we know, then, when our church is experiencing a true revival? It's a difficult question; but I submit that in these passages of the Scripture we have an example of how it's done. So let's see what they did, and then we can compare it to what we are doing today.

Step One — the Scriptures

You will notice that the starting point of this revival is the reading of the Scriptures. The greatest example of the power of reading the Scriptures comes from the Protestant Reformation. The concept of Sola Scriptura is indeed a very powerful one. But it is not sufficient just to tell people to read the Bible. In this time the Scripture would have been read aloud to the people; remember, this is well before the advent of the printing press. So let's see how it was read.

It was read with respect. It is obvious and plain to all of the people standing around listening to this that their leaders consider that the reading of the Law of Moses is of primary importance. It is the

most important spiritual thing that they can do. This sense of respect has declined greatly in recent years in our congregation; indeed, there is a great difference in the respect for the Scriptures held by those of the older generations as opposed to those who are younger. That's not a question of youthful stupidity; it's just that they have never had put to them the concept of respect for the Scriptures.

To do this, you will see three aspects of their view of the Scriptures:

- First, the Scriptures are read with a sense of awe. It's the kind of thing that when you hear it your eyes tend cloud with tears, because you know you are dealing with something of ultimate importance.
- Second, the Scriptures are treated as being sacred. They are not "just like any other book." These are the very words of God, set apart and delivered to man. Considering that we're talking about the Law of Moses, delivered amidst thunder and lightning on Mount Sinai, this is not an unreasonable reaction.
- Finally, the Scriptures are treated as being of full authority. The idea is that God commanded it, and therefore it should be done — no excuses accepted.

It's interesting to note that as Ezra reads, there are various teachers (who are now nothing but names in the list to us) who are explaining what is being read. We may take from this the idea that it is not necessarily obvious to everyone just how to interpret what the Scripture say. The church must provide teachers who are acquainted with sound doctrine and who can explain what the Scriptures mean. Those teachers are honored not for their own brilliance but for how faithfully they interpret what God said.

As a side note, you will notice that the Scriptures are being translated as Ezra reads. When not entirely certain what language or languages the people spoke, but this would seem to imply that Hebrew was no longer their first language. We can draw a parallel from immigrants to the United States today. Your author lives in the community where there are a large number of Korean immigrants. The grandparents tend to speak nothing but Korean; the parents speak Korean as a first language and English as a second; the kids speak, well, whatever it is that kids speak that passes for English. Something similar probably happen to these exiles as well. Note that Hebrew is not treated here as something special. A parallel may be drawn to the King James Version of the Bible; for many years the English of that version was considered somehow sacred. As one author put it, "if the King James Version was good enough for St. Paul, it's good enough for me." That's not what's happening here. But also note that the translation carries with it no loss of authority. The Scriptures are meant to be used and implemented by man, not kept on a special shelf on display.

Revival — a Joy

You can understand the first reaction of the people. They probably had a firm suspicion that they and their ancestors had not behaved properly in God's eyes, but when the full measure of their sins is laid out before them in the reading of the law they react with tears. They wept for their sins. These people exhibited what St. Paul once called "godly sorrow." It is the sign of repentance which should precede baptism.

The temptation for the preacher at this point is to lay it on thick and make sure everybody understands what miserable sinners we all are. But that's not what they do here. God tells them that

they have arrived at a time of the year in which they are to celebrate; they are to be joyous. Why? The time of year is that of the Feast of Tabernacles — a memorial to the first Exodus. It is a celebration of God's deliverance. To put it in modern terms, they are to react to this revival with joy because it gives them the grace of God. Grace abounds — let man celebrate!

As a side note, we might take a look at what the feast is all about. Here is one author (Easton) explaining it:

The third of the great annual festivals of the Jews (Lev_23:33-43). It is also called the "feast of ingathering" (Exo_23:16; Deu_16:13). It was celebrated immediately after the harvest, in the month Tisri, and the celebration lasted for eight days (Lev_23:33-43). During that period the people left their homes and lived in booths formed of the branches of trees. The sacrifices offered at this time are mentioned in Num. 29:13-38. It was at the time of this feast that Solomon's temple was dedicated (1Ki_8:2). Mention is made of it after the return from the Captivity. This feast was designed

(1.) to be a memorial of the wilderness wanderings, when the people dwelt in booths (Lev_23:43), and

(2.) to be a harvest thanksgiving (Neh_8:9-18). The Jews, at a later time, introduced two appendages to the original festival, viz., (1.) that of drawing water from the Pool of Siloam, and pouring it upon the altar (Joh_7:2, Joh_7:37), as a memorial of the water from the rock in Horeb; and (2.) of lighting the lamps at night, a memorial of the pillar of fire by night during their wanderings.

"The feast of Tabernacles, the harvest festival of the Jewish Church, was the most popular and important festival after the Captivity. At Jerusalem it was a gala day. It was to the autumn pilgrims, who arrived on the 14th (of the month Tisri, the feast beginning on the 15th) day, like entrance into a silvan city. Roofs and courtyards, streets and squares, roads and gardens, were green with boughs of citron and myrtle, palm and willow. The booths recalled the pilgrimage through the wilderness. The ingathering of fruits prophesied of the spiritual harvest."

We do not know whether or not Nehemiah planned the timing of this event to correspond with the feast, or whether it just "happened." Either way, the symbolism is very significant.

How to Run a Revival

(This section is based on Nehemiah 9).

Preparation

Nehemiah 9:1-3 NASB Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the sons of Israel assembled with fasting, in sackcloth and with dirt upon them. (2) The descendants of Israel separated themselves from all foreigners, and stood and confessed their sins and the iniquities of their fathers. (3) While they stood in their place, they read from the book of the law of the LORD their God for a fourth of the day; and for *another* fourth they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God.

There have been many books written on the subject of conducting a revival. Most of them do so from the point of view of the speaker who will conduct the revival meetings. I am not particularly aware of any which address what the congregation should be doing to prepare for a revival. We may take the example of these people. Here's what they did:

- Separation. Despite the modern tendency to hold that Christians are no different than anybody else, it is clearly taught in the Scripture that the people of God are to separate themselves from the people the world. We are in the world, but not of the world. The first thing these people did was to implement that principle.
- Confession. If there is no sin in your congregation's life, why would you need a revival? If you need revival, therefore, then there must be sin in the congregation's life. The first thing you need to do about sin is to confess it. And that's what they did.
- Reading the book. Again, the central nature of the Scriptures to the godly life is here proclaimed. If the word of God is not exalted, how then can anyone know that they are indeed a sinner? And what to do about it?
- Worship. It is not sufficient to let God know that you know you're a sinner. You also have to let him know that you know who he is, acknowledging his true nature.

Acknowledgment of God

It is extremely important that you acknowledge who God is. It is very tempting to talk to the God who is in your head — a nice guy, who would never hurt a fly, has no intention of disciplining you and otherwise resembles Santa Claus. Like Santa Claus, that God doesn't exist. So just exactly which God are they talking to?

They first acknowledge the greatness of God:

- They begin by acknowledging him as the creator. It is the first thing we know about God from the opening passages of Genesis. It sets the stage for everything else to come — and it proclaims the uniqueness of God.
- They then acknowledge him as the life giver. There is no particular formula applied as to how God did this, but they acknowledge the fact that without God there would be no life. And that includes ours.
- Then they acknowledge him as the Lord of hosts – the sovereign God, ruler over all creation.

They amplify this by reciting the most important points of their history with God. They are not searching for the historical God; they know him.

- They know him as the God of Abraham. This calls back to mind all the promises made to Abraham concerning the creation of the Jewish people and the Messiah to come.
- They know him as the God of Moses, the God of the Exodus. This is the God whose mighty hand led them out of slavery and into the Promised Land. The parallel to the Christian is very clear; this is the God who leads you out of sin and into salvation.
- They know him as the God who is compassionate to Israel, despite all of the sins, the idolatry and the wickedness that they have displayed. He is God the merciful.

Who We Are

If you're going to acknowledge who God is, the obvious next step is to acknowledge who you are. What is unusual about this passage in that regard is that they acknowledge the concept of national sin. Understanding that they are ruled over by Kings and princes, you might think that they have an excuse to say that they are not responsible for what's going on in their society. But they clearly understood that they did. And if people who are members of a hierarchical society understand that, how much more should we in a democratic society understand that? Here's what they confessed to:

- First, they admitted to being idolaters. The nation of Israel has chased after every little God of wood, stone and silver and gold. Today we might pull the mantle of tolerance over this, but I would submit to you that it was fairly obvious to them that something was wrong. Some of these gods required you sacrifice your children by burning them in a fire. This is not trivial.
- They admitted to being rebels against the law — which is practically the definition of sin — to the point that the nation of Israel had murdered the prophets that God had sent to her. Where we would excuse ourselves, they accused themselves.
- Then they admit that they have been justly punished for it. The reason they are slaves in the land that God gave them, the reason they are slaves to a King who is not one of themselves, is that God has risen up in wrath and punish them for their sins. They acknowledge that they earned it, and that God was just and righteous in doing it.

In short, God is good, just and righteous — and we are sinners. We have no merit except that we are sinners coming home. As they say in the military, "no excuse, Sir."

Do Something!

The human species has a very distinct tendency when put under pressure: we want to do something. If we feel guilty, we really would prefer to do something rather vague than something specific. After all, specific might include confession of one's sins. Doing something vague feels good; but doing something specific means that you really intended to do something, not just talk about it.

It appears that the way human beings start to do something specific is to put things down in writing. As Samuel Goldman once said, "a verbal contract is not worth the paper it's printed on." Winston Churchill put it this way:

Let it be very clearly understood that all directions emanating from me are made in writing, or should be immediately afterwards confirmed in writing, and that I do not accept any responsibility for matters relating to national defense on which I am alleged to have given decisions, unless they are recorded in writing.[17]

That was the first directive he put out after becoming Prime Minister in 1940.

Specifically Pledged

So, just what that these people pledged to do?

- They pledged to stay separate from the people around them. This is an example to the Christian of being in the world but not of the world. It's not something that happens automatically, or easily. You have to work at it; you have to plan to work at it.
- They pledged to obey the commandments. For the Jew of this time, this would've been the Mosaic Law. For us, we would begin with the New Testament.
- They promise to bring their tithes and offerings, as specified in the Law.

Separation, obedience and putting your money where your mouth is — that sums it up. But what about the Christian today?

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[17] Churchill, Winston. *Their Finest Hour*. 1st edition. 2. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1949.

Parallel for Christians Today

The Christian today has a similar set of duties, for which we can take this pledge as an example.

- The Christian is to be in the world, but not of the world. Your conduct and your speech should reflect the fact that you are not ordinary. You are bought with a price; you belong to Christ. Do your words and actions show this?
- Do you obey the command of Christ? In its simplest form, this is simply “love one another.” Is your conduct distinguished by the fact that you love your Christian brethren? Indeed, is that you’re feeling and attitude towards the rest of the world? Hate the sin and love the sinner sounds difficult to do — until you realize you been doing it to yourself for quite some time.
- They promise to bring in tithes and offerings; you still need to put your money where your mouth is.

Revival, it seems, is a serious business. If America is to experience a revival, the church must experience it first. If the church is to experience a revival, it must start in the pews, not in the pulpit. The role of leadership is very important, but if the people in the pews are not willing than there will be no revival.