

## **Week 38 A Kingdom Rebuilt**

### **Nehemiah 8-9**

#### **Summary & Goal:**

The book of Nehemiah describes the efforts of Nehemiah and Ezra to rebuild the city of Jerusalem after 70 years of exile. The city is devastated. At this point, Jerusalem is laid to waste. The city has no infrastructure, and no security. The book of Nehemiah is often portrayed as a picture of godly leadership in action. In this session, instead of focusing on Nehemiah's journey to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, we will look at how to rebuild our relationship with God through revelation, reverence, and remembrance.

#### **Main Passage:**

Nehemiah 8 & 9 (Chronological Bible pgs. 1246-1247)

#### **Session Outline:**

1. Rebuild with Revelation ( Neh 8:1-2 )
2. Rebuild with Reverence (Neh. 8:5-6)
3. Rebuild with Remembrance ( Neh 9: 6-7, 9, 13, & 22)

#### **Session in a Sentence:**

No matter where we are in life, we can begin rebuilding our relationship with God through the revelation of His Word, reverence to God's commands, and remembering the faithfulness of God in our lives.

#### **Kingdom Connection**

At the very heart of Nehemiah, we find a proclamation of God's Word. Ezra the Scribe is reading and explaining the Book of the Law to the people of God. As important as it is that cities experience social reform, physical renewal, and rebuilding, God's Kingdom is advanced when people are transformed internally by the Word of God. God's Kingdom cannot be advanced without a proclamation of who He is. God's people cannot be renewed without hearing the Word of God.

When I was young, a brand-new computer game came out called SimCity. All of my friends in middle school were talking about it and playing after school; right after we drank our Capri-Sun and watched *Full House* and *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. The whole premise of the game was to start from the ground up building your city. Along the way, people were introduced to the joys and frustrations of zoning, street grids, and infrastructure. You could spend hours deciding where buildings, neighborhoods, water towers, markets, and bus stops went. Quite honestly, I wasn't interested in that part of the game. I just wanted to build things so that Godzilla could come through and wreck it all!

In March of this year, the Los Angeles Times wrote an article titled "*How SimCity inspired a generation of city planners.*" In the article they interviewed over a dozen people who said playing the video game led them into their career of planning cities. In multiple interviews, the people who went from "SimCity" enthusiasts to professional planners talked about what they liked about the game; namely, the way you can visualize how a single change affects a whole city. They also mentioned the ability to see how transit, livability and the economy are all connected and the fact that no one likes to live near a landfill.

I know what you are thinking and the answer is yes, there is an app for that! The game has 6.1 million players with 200 million lifetime downloads. The truth of the matter is it's in our nature to build. Whether it's kids building with Legos, building a Bible Study class, building a home, or building your business; we all like to build.

Today as we look at the book of Nehemiah, God's people have returned from Captivity. This is the Return Era, a time of excitement, challenges, and opportunities to rebuild. We will see how God uses Ezra and Nehemiah to not only rebuild the city but to rebuild the hearts of the people.

### **Setting Up The Context:**

In the original Hebraic text, the books of Nehemiah and Ezra are one book. What we see in these books is the way that God uses His people to rebuild His city. These books are the fulfillment of God's prophecy given to us in the book of Jeremiah.

The Persian King Cyrus allows the exiled Jews to return to Israel. God uses Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah to begin the reconstruction process. As Zerubbabel and the first wave of exiles return to Jerusalem, they begin to restore God's Altar. Zerubbabel realized how important it was for God's people to be people who drew near to the altar

so that they could reinstate the sacrificial system, and so that Israel could have spiritual intimacy with God.

Zerubbabel's quest to build the altar is a reminder of the timeless principle that for us to be altered by God, we must go to the Altar of God.

Ezra was a scribe who had access to the myriad of administrative documents and biblical texts. Very few people would have been allowed to access the Persian archives, but Ezra was the exception (cf. Ezra 1:2-4; 4:9-22; 5:7-17) Ezra led the second wave of exiles back to Israel. His role as a Scribe amid the people of Israel was uniquely focused. "For Ezra prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel." (Ezra 7:10). Ezra was a co-laborer with Nehemiah. He was a strong and godly leader. Tradition says that he was the founder of the Great Synagogue, where the complete Old Testament canon was recognized. <sup>1</sup>

The third wave of exiles was led by Nehemiah. His specific job was to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The walls acted as a defense mechanism to help keep out from the city those who did not belong and to protect the city from outsiders who were trying to destroy it. Nehemiah showed great leadership by helping the people reestablish some sense of reform and to rebuild the city's infrastructure.

The section of scripture we will look at today in the book of Nehemiah is not necessarily about rebuilding the walls, the temple, the altar or the city's infrastructure. The portion we are going to look at is about rebuilding our relationship with God. We are going to look at four principles that we can apply to our lives today that will help us rebuild our relationship with God.

## 1. Rebuild with Revelation

**Nehemiah 8: 1** *Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. <sup>2</sup> So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. <sup>3</sup> Then he read from it in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. (Chronological Bible pg. 1246)*

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<sup>1</sup> The MacArthur Study Bible pg. 638-639;656-657

When our relationship with God is broken and needs to be rebuilt, we must start by regaining our understanding of who God is. Ezra begins reading the book of the Law to the people. In Ezra's day, they did not have pages bound together in book form. The mode of writings was in scrolls. Ezra unrolled the scroll of the Law (it could be the first five books of the Bible or just the book of Deuteronomy). The Mosaic Law specified that once every seven years the people of Israel were to assemble and listen to the reading of the Law. (Deut. 31:10-13) Ezra continues to read from it for an extended period.

Before revival can occur in our lives we need revelation.

Note that Ezra is not reading to the people an article of hope from a contemporary magazine or newspaper. He does not read to them a piece of literature from Babylon. He does not just say kind words or share a story of personal experience. He does not even give his opinion of who God is. Ezra gives the people the *only* remedy they need for their souls to experience healing: a revelation of God from His Word.

When you and I need our relationship with God to be rebuilt we need to look no further than the Word of God. Reading the scriptures has the distinct ability to blow on the smoldering ashes of a dead, dry heart and to turn them into a white-hot flame that burns for God.

Hundreds of years before Ezra preached to the people - King David knew the value of the Word of God. In Psalm 19 he writes:

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;  
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;  
The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;  
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;  
The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;  
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.  
More to be desired are they than gold,  
Yea, than much fine gold; - Psalm 19:7-10 (Chronological Bible pg. 510)*

The Bible helps to rebuild our relationship with God because it tells us who God is. The Bible helps to rebuild our relationship with God because it exposes us for who we truly are. Moreover, the Bible helps to rebuild our relationship with God because it explains the love that God has for us despite our imperfections and brokenness.

As John Wesley was experiencing a crisis of faith in his life, he sat under the preaching of God's Word on May 24<sup>th</sup>, 1738. He wrote in his journal that evening, "while he was

describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.” From that moment Wesley was used mightily in the hand of God. He traveled over 20,000 miles a year on horseback preaching the Gospel as one of the greatest Evangelists who has ever lived. The Word of God burned in his heart so hot, all those who stood next to him were set ablaze as well.<sup>2</sup>

If we want to rebuild our relationship with God it starts with revelation.

## 2. Rebuild with Reverence

**Nehemiah 8: 5** *And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. <sup>6</sup> And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God. (Chronological Bible pg. 1246)*

It is customary to stand for those we respect. When we meet a new business associate, we stand up from where we are sitting to shake hands. When a lady leaves the table and comes back to the table it is customary to stand up out of respect. When the Chapel doors open and the bride walks down the aisle it is customary for people to stand up from where they are sitting to pay homage to her as a sign of respect. When the Judge enters the courtroom, all those who are in the court stand as a sign of respect.

When Ezra opened the scroll the people of Israel stood because they knew they were in the presence of the who One who is more Honorable than any Judge, more beautiful than any Bride, and more important than any business associate. They were in the presence of God's Word. This was very important to the Jewish people because they realized that God's Word revealed God's character.

In Psalm 138:2 David writes:

**Psalm 138: 2** *I will worship toward your holy temple, and praise Your name For your lovingkindness and your truth; For you have magnified **your word above all Your name.** (Chronological Bible pg. 549)*

Scripture is clear that God's Word is to be revered as it reveals God's character.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.christianity.com/church/church-history/timeline/1701-1800/john-wesleys-heart-strangely-warmed-11630227.html>

Ezra stood before all the people and he opened the scroll containing the Word of God. As the people saw the scroll open, they stood up as an act of reverence for the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>

You and I can practice reverence for God's Word in three ways:

- **We acknowledge it's worth.**

If we are going to have reverence for God's Word then we need to acknowledge it's worth. The Bible tells us that God's Word is "living and active sharper than any two-edged sword." When we interact with the scriptures they interact with us. We read the Bible, but the Bible also reads us. It is the only book whose Author is available to speak to us and to transform us at all times. The Word of God is also able to save us from trouble. James 1:21 tells us, "put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." (*Chron. Bible pg.1542*)

- **We meditate on God's Word**

In His book *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald Whitney compares meditating on God's Word to making a hot cup of tea. Whitney says:

*In this analogy, your mind is the cup of hot water and the tea bag represents your intake of scripture. Hearing God's Word is like one dip of the tea bag into the cup. Some of the tea's flavor is absorbed by the water, but not as much as would occur with a more thorough soaking of the bag. Reading, studying, and memorizing God's Word are like additional plunges of the tea bag into the cup. The more frequently the tea enters the water, the more permeating its effect. Meditation, however, is like immersing the bag completely and letting it steep until all the rich tea flavor has been extracted and the hot water is thoroughly tintured reddish brown. Meditation on scripture is letting the Bible brew in the brain. Thus we might say that as the tea colors the water, meditation likewise "colors" our thinking. When we meditate on scripture it colors our thinking about God, about God's ways and His world, and about ourselves.<sup>4</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> For a great illustration of revering the Word of God visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ag2AzWgRKAK>. This video clip shows the Kimyal Tribe receiving the Word of God for the first time.

<sup>4</sup> Whitney, Donald S. *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2014.

## - We obey God's Word

What we see in Nehemiah is not just an intellectual exercise. The people did not *just* acknowledge and meditate on God's Word. They were moved into action by the Word of God. As Ezra read the Book of the Law, the people realized that they had not obeyed God's Word, and they decided that needed to change.

*And they found written in the Law, which the LORD had commanded by Moses, that the children of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month... Then the people went out and brought them and made themselves booths, each one on the roof of his house, or in their courtyards or the courts of the house of God, and in the open square of the Water Gate and in the open square of the Gate of Ephraim. So the whole assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths. **Nehemiah 8: 14-17a**  
(Chronological Bible pg.1246)*

The people you revere, listen to and obey, in any realm of life capture your attention. If you revere somebody's uncanny knack for business, you are going to listen to them. If you revere your mechanic's opinion about the maintenance needed for your car, you are going to listen to them and heed their wisdom. In the same way, the most respectful thing we can do in our relationship with God is to obey God's instructions for our lives; let the Word of God capture our heart.

If we want to rebuild our relationship with God, then we must have reverence for what God says about Himself, and what He calls us to do.

### 3. Rebuild with Remembrance

One of the best ways to rebuild any relationship is to remember the history of that relationship. There is something about looking back on all that you and your friend/spouse/business partner have been through that helps you to move forward with a renewed sense of faith in each other. Throughout the Old Testament, we see God's people doing the same thing. They constantly retell the story of God working in their history. If you recall, in the book of Joshua, after the people of Israel crossed over the Jordan river on dry ground they built stones of remembrance. Those stones would be a sign to the people for generations to come to remember the faithfulness of God in their life. (See Joshua 4)

In Nehemiah chapter nine, we see the people of Israel remembering who God is and what He has done in their lives.

*"You alone are the LORD; You have made heaven... the earth and everything in it... v.6*

*You are the Lord God, who chose Abram and brought him out of Ur of the Chaldeans... v. 7*

*You saw the affliction of our fathers in Egypt and heard their cry by the Red Sea... v. 9*

*You came down also on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven... v. 13*

*Moreover, You gave them kingdoms and nations..." v. 22 (Chron. Bible pg. 1247)*

When it comes to our relationship with God, sometimes the best way to move forward is to look backward. To remember *your* story of deliverance. When we look back at all that God has rescued us from we can walk confidently with God in the present and in the days to come.

### **Conclusion**

In 1994 Disney released, in my opinion, their best movie, the LION KING. There is a scene in the movie where Simba is experiencing inner turmoil and wrestling with his identity. He is led to a small pond by a crazy baboon, Rafiki. His deceased father, Mufasa, appears to him in the sky. Simba, yells out to Mufasa, "How can I go back, I am not who I used to be!" Mufasa gives his son a great nugget of wisdom and says, "Remember who you are! You are my Son! Remember who you are."

The greatest testament of God's faithfulness is the cross. We look back to the cross, and we remember all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ. We remember that he has purchased us with His blood. We remember that the Son died for us so that we could become children of God. We remember that Jesus laid down His life in obedience so that we can lay down our lives. We can look back at the cross and remember who He is, who we are and remember all that God has called us to be. Jesus was and is our cornerstone on which we build our faith as Christ Followers. We can rebuild our relationship with God by remembrance.

**God Speaks** through leaders whom He raises up, such as Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

**God Acts** through leading His people back to Himself and through rebuilding a relationship, even after a time of exile.

**God Reveals** the power of His Word in bringing us to the point of conviction, repentance, action, and relationship.