

A New and Glorious Morn

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

1st in a four-week series

November 28, 2021

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Ezra 3:10–13 (NIV)

¹⁰ When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the LORD, as prescribed by David king of Israel. ¹¹ With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the LORD:

“He is good;
his love toward Israel endures forever.”

And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid. ¹² But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy. ¹³ No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping, because the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.

Nehemiah 2:17–20 (NIV)

¹⁷ Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” ¹⁸ I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, “Let us start rebuilding.” So they began this good work.

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. “What is this you are doing?” they asked. “Are you rebelling against the king?”

²⁰ I answered them by saying, “The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.”

Nehemiah 4:15–23 (NIV)

¹⁵ When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work.

¹⁶ From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah ¹⁷ who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, ¹⁸ and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me.

¹⁹ Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, “The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. ²⁰ Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!”

²¹ So we continued the work with half the men holding spears, from the first light of dawn till the stars came out. ²² At that time I also said to the people, “Have every man and his helper stay inside Jerusalem at night, so they can serve us as guards by night and as workers by day.”

²³ Neither I nor my brothers nor my men nor the guards with me took off our clothes; each had his weapon, even when he went for water.

Nehemiah 7:73b–8:12 (NIV)

When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

The true story

As God had promised, Many Jews began to return from exile in Babylon. Cyrus, king of Persia, pushed aside the Babylonians and began allowing the return of the Israelites in 538 BC. Many went. Many did not. The book of Esther is the story of Jews who remained in Persia. What awaited the returnees was a burned-out city -- no walls, no temple, and a bunch of hostile neighbors. But they settled in the area around the ruins of Jerusalem and began to rebuild. This story is told in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Beginning in 538BC, the returning Jews set about the rebuilding of Jerusalem and of the temple. It would take many decades. Led by Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and others, the city walls were rebuilt and a temple was constructed. There was little available wealth for this rebuilding, so the temple was a shadow of the temple built by Solomon, but, nonetheless, the people of God again had a place upon which to center their religious rituals.

Nonetheless, they built. First a temple and then the city walls. Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the initial group of returnees attended first to the worship of God. They built an altar and a temple. But the city had no walls, no protection from the hostile neighbors. A second large group returned with Ezra, a scribe, learned in the Law. But the walls remained in ruins. And cities or towns had to have walls for protection. In 445BC, Nehemiah came to Jerusalem with the Emperor's permission to rebuild the walls. The Persian king even promised materials and support to Nehemiah and his fellow Jews.

Nehemiah's story

There was a show on television about bad jobs. Week after week the host took on one nasty task after another. There was even a British version of the show that looked at the worst jobs in history. Nehemiah has one of those jobs. He is the Persian king's cupbearer. Yes . . . Nehemiah's job is to taste the drink before giving it to the king in order to make sure the king isn't poisoned. On the one hand, Nehemiah is clearly expendable. It makes one wonder how quickly Artaxerxes (see the page four text box) ran through cupbearers. But on the other hand, Nehemiah must have been highly trusted by the king. Nehemiah relies on the king's trust to move forward with God's plans for Jerusalem.

Nehemiah has learned that Jerusalem is still in a terrible state, even decades after exiles began returning to the city. Though cupbearers are to always come before the king with a smile on their face, Nehemiah is unable to hide his sadness. When the king asks him what is wrong, Nehemiah describes his deep concern for "the city of his fathers" and asks permission to go to Jerusalem to oversee the rebuilding. Nehemiah had prayed to God about this and his prayers were answered. Artaxerxes grants permission and even helps Nehemiah in his mission, providing safe passage and building materials.

"Put into my heart"

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he doesn't tell anyone about his mission. But he's got one and he's confident that God is behind it: "I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem" (Nehemiah 2:12).

When I read the stories of the Old Testament prophets, I'm sometimes a bit envious. They have such a strong sense of purpose. Their dreams and visions fuel them and the work they do. I wonder what the visions were really like. What did Isaiah and the rest see? What would I have seen had I been there with them? And the visions of the prophets provided vision for the people. The prophets brought the people purpose and direction from God. Their prophetic vision kept the people from wandering aimlessly in life, from casting aside all restraint and living only in the moment. The prophets called the people back to God, back to God's way and the joy of a life lived before God.

Nehemiah was not a prophet. His mission to Jerusalem was not born in a vision. He prayed and, in his own words, God put it on his heart. Nehemiah was sure what God wanted from him and seemed sure of the best way to go about it. Whatever Nehemiah felt in his heart, it emboldened him to ask a lot of the Persian king.

What I like about this story is that, frankly, I can identify with Nehemiah more than I can with the visions of the Old Testament prophets, such as Isaiah's commissioning in Isaiah 6. I've never had a vision or a dream remotely like Isaiah describes. But God has placed purpose and direction into my heart as God placed it into Nehemiah's heart. And I'm sure that God will speak to you in this way if you will come to him in genuine and honest prayer.

A personal vision

Nehemiah's story reminds us that God speaks to different people in different ways. Some of us might have a "spectacular" experience of our own. For others, like me, God's speaking is quieter, forcing me to shut up long enough to hear. Most often, God speaks to me through the pages of Scripture. It is in these stories and letters that God punches through my busyness and distraction.

Even when we think God is ignoring us (which he isn't!), we still have God's Word. There are many Christians who believe that God doesn't speak to anyone anymore the way that God spoke to Isaiah, that with the coming of Jesus Christ, there is simply no need for it. We have Scripture and a Spirit-filled community in which to read and interpret it.

This is why it is so important that we not come to the Bible seeking merely a set of principles about how we ought to live or even a systematic presentation of our beliefs.

Rather, we step into Scripture so that we can hear God's voice for ourselves, so we can come to understand who we really are and what God has in mind for us. We come to seeking to know and to love the One who knows and loves us.

Just as God provided focus and direction for Nehemiah, God provides it for us as well. But it doesn't happen by magic. There's no fortune cookie to crack and no crystal ball

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

In our Bibles, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are placed right after 1 and 2 Chronicles, for all four books tell one long story: the story of Israel, from Adam (the first person in the lengthy genealogies that begin Chronicles) to the exiles' return from Babylon and the rebuilding of their covenantal life in Israel. The books end the story in about 430BC.

But the four books are not really four books at all. 1 and 2 Chronicles are merely two halves of a single book, Chronicles. Similarly, Ezra and Nehemiah are two halves of a single work. And it's likely that all of it was compiled and written by a single author or a single writing team. The author pulled together a variety of materials in compiling the work: royal decrees, various lists, letters, and first-person narratives from Ezra and Nehemiah themselves. For example, most of Ezra-Nehemiah is written in Hebrew, but some is in Aramaic, the diplomatic language of the day, as the book's author simply copied in some official Aramaic documents.

Not only does Ezra-Nehemiah preserve important history from the century after the return from exile began in 539BC, the books teach that the return was God's doing. God moved Cyrus to order the Jews return to Jerusalem. God used Darius the Great to order the rebuilding of the temple. And God used Artaxerxes to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. A good question to consider is whether and how God uses world powers today to further his purposes. It is always tempting to see much of the Old Testament as completely foreign to our own experiences and even to the way God works in the world. But perhaps, we need to learn to see that God still works in surprising ways today.

we'll gaze into. Nehemiah prayed and we are to pray. Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem and became part of the community there. And the walls were rebuilt.

So, with a temple and walls, Jerusalem has been restored to life. And Ezra gathers the people to hear God's word.

Celebrating God's Gift of the Law

The celebration of this reconstructed community lasted several weeks, the longest such celebration in the Bible. And it began with the reading of Scripture. Everyone gathered at one of the city gates, the Water Gate, and Ezra rose in the early morning to read the book of the Law of Moses (i.e., the Torah). He read until mid-day and all the ears of the people were "attentive" as they stood to hear the Word read. (I can't help but wonder how well we'd do with this.) The reading of Scripture is an act of celebratory worship for all the people gathered.

Open your Bible to Nehemiah 8 and notice all the names we are given. These are real people with real names; there is no abstraction or vague remembering. Notice also that these named teachers helped the people to understand what they were hearing read aloud. The teachers read from the book "with interpretation," giving "the sense so that the people understood the reading" (v. 8). Then, as now, there is better and poorer interpretation of Scripture.

Finally (reading on past verse 8), the reading and interpreting of Scripture had a powerful effect on the people, moving many to weep, as they were either overwhelmed by the moment or reminded how far some had wandered from God and God's ways. Scripture, when thoughtfully read within the believing community, will always affect the reader. Too often, we give the Bible only a small portion of ourselves and then are surprised when it seems so benign. Better that we emulate the people gathered at the Water Gate in Jerusalem many centuries ago.

Persian Kings, the 300, Esther, and Nehemiah

Given the popularity of the recent movie, "300," about the battle of Thermopylae, it is a good time to review the Persian kings and their ties to the Bible.

Cyrus was the Persian king who conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Jews exiled in Babylon to begin returning to Jerusalem in 539BC. He died about 10 years later and was succeeded by a son. When that son died, the throne was seized by Darius the Great (522-486BC). Darius led the Persians in a campaign against the Greek city states, but was routed at the Battle of Marathon (from which we get the 26 mile race.)

Darius was succeeded by his son, Xerxes (485-465BC). This is the Xerxes of the "300" and the book of Esther. His depiction as some sort of weird, Mr. Clean, body-pierced giant is mythological, not historical. But Xerxes did lead the Persians into Greece and was met by King Leonidas and a small force of Spartan warriors at Thermopylae in 480BC. After suffering a naval defeat at Salamis, Xerxes was defeated at Plataea and took what was left of his army back to Persia.

Xerxes is called Ahasuerus in the book of Esther, but it is the same guy. Xerxes is Vashti's husband. Xerxes falls in love with young Esther. The events as described in the book of Esther match up pretty well with the chronology of Xerxes' reign and his military campaigns.

When Xerxes dies, he is succeeded by a son, Artaxerxes (464-424BC). Nehemiah is cupbearer to Artaxerxes. It is Artaxerxes who allows Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its walls.

Sometimes God uses the most surprising people. Cyrus allows the exiles to return. Xerxes' love for Esther saves the Jews in Persia. Artaxerxes is instrumental in the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

And so, the story of the Old Testament closes there. Malachi lies ahead, but the biblical story of God's rescue project won't be picked up until we come to the birth of a child to a young Galilean woman, for the great Day of the Lord still lies ahead.

Looking ahead

Yes, a temple, walls, and the Law. But . . . Judah was no more a tiny province in the vast Persian Empire. Judah was not independent; they had no king. Before the exile, Ezekiel had seen a vision of God's glory departing from the temple (Chapter 10). There was no sign that God's glory had returned to his people. Yes, the Jews were back on the land, but had the exile really ended? If the Jews had been exiled because of their sins, wouldn't the return from exile mean that their sins had been forgiven? If their sins had been forgiven, why weren't all the nations streaming to Mt. Zion (Micah 4)?

It just didn't seem that this new life, though back on the land, could really be the fulfillment of all the hopes spoken to them by God's prophets. Yes, it was a life after death, but was it really the end of the story? As the decades and centuries wore on, with one oppressor after another in control, it became increasingly clear that the exile was not really over, that God's kingdom was still to come. The later prophets, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi painted pictures of this kingdom, a kingdom that would be ushered in by Jesus Christ almost five centuries after the time of Nehemiah.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Paul's Letters to the Next Generation: 1 & Timothy and Titus.*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Current study: *John's Gospel*

Meeting on-line at 12:00 noon Tuesday on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

This week: We are on a journey through the biblical story, *God-Is*. Each week, we will follow the sermon at 9:30 and dig a little deeper into the Scriptures for that week.

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.