

Happy New Year!!
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10
Preached January 26, 2025

Where do I begin? The history is very interesting, so bear with me till I get to my point and there will be a point!. Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries. This scripture is from Nehemiah, but Ezra is the central figure. In the Old Testament, the books Ezra and Nehemiah are next to each other. Though the book of Ezra covers the fulltime of the captivity of Israel, 70 years, so obviously Ezra wasn't alive in the beginning of his book. Second Chronicles, the book before Ezra in the Old Testament, ends with a declaration by King Cyrus of Persia and Ezra begins with a declaration from Cyrus. I think that is why Ezra and Nehemiah are placed after Chronicles. If anyone asked me my opinion, I would have placed Ezra and Nehemiah after Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel. Isaiah and Jeremiah were the prophets warning about the possible, then eventual fall of Israel and how to deal with the captivity. Daniel was one of the leaders during the captivity, remembering the fiery furnace and the lion's den. Mishak, Shadrack and Abendigo. If you want to read the Bible chronologically, you need to do some jumping around, or buy a Chronological Bible. It is interesting, in my Chronological Bible, after Nehemiah, those scholars believe that Ezra was also a scribe and recorded the land history that is listed in First Chronicles. It goes to the passages where the descendants of Abraham are listed and the land that they were given. The very next scriptures are the New Testament gospels.

Now Ezra 7 to Nehemiah 13 covers the same time period 458 - 453 BC and are dealing with the same issues, rebuilding Jerusalem so that the Jews could safely return to their own country. My commentaries said that Nehemiah was the Governor and Ezra was the priest. That explains why Ezra is the lead speaker in this passage in Nehemiah. It also helps to clarify the overlapping stories.

Many chapters in the 2 books are about the rebuilding of the walls and the gates. Most cities of that time would have 1 main gate and several other minor gates. Jerusalem at that time had a Fish Gate, a Sheep Gate, Master Gate, and a Horse Gate to name a few. I tried finding out the significance of the Water Gate but I couldn't. I wonder if they were also named so that you could meet someone, and they would know which gate. Like the Dunkin Donuts, the 1 near Paisanos, CVS, or the Pride station. The Dung Gate was the gate nearest the trash pile, obviously. Jerusalem did have a problem with water. It was a dry land but there were springs. So they built tunnels or aqueducts to bring the water to the pools. These pools also served as cisterns to collect water. That is why in the New Testament they mention several healings done by Jesus at different pools, but all are in Jerusalem.

First the famous Water Gate. All the people met at the square there. It was near the Temple Mount. If they had met in the Temple court, only men could be there, here there were men, women, and all who could understand, which would mean older children. They wanted as many people there as possible for this rededication of the walls and of themselves. Understand or understanding is used 12 times in this chapter. God's Word must be understood before it can enter the heart and release its life changing power. I will say it again. God's Word must be understood before it can enter the heart and release its life changing power. The heart is where God's word should reside. You need to understand something to be able to act on it. I know that I need to understand the why of something before I act on it. There has to be a reason.

There is also some symbolism in water. Water for washing is a picture of the Word of God, drinking water is the Spirit of God, and water and the Word can be used to refresh our soul. How many times are we reading the Bible and something reaches out and grabs us, refreshes us, gives us direction.

So Ezra brings out the Book of the Law, which is most likely Deuteronomy, he opens the book and everyone stands. Ezra blesses the Lord before he reads and the people agree, Amen and Amen. Now it doesn't state whether they stayed standing during the 6 hours that Ezra read from the book. It does say that this was done for a week. They created a platform for Ezra to stand on. The 2 verses that I omitted are names of the Levites that stood with him and also went into the crowd to help teach.

Now why would people have to go into the crowds to teach? Many of the returning Jews spoke Aramaic, so they literally were having trouble understanding the Word. Also, language changes. He was reading from something written in Hebrew 1000 years before. Try reading a poem from 500 years ago in the original. Or just think of how words have changed in our lifetimes and what new words have developed. That is why people were helping them to understand what they were hearing and the commitment they were being asked to make.

This was a confusing time. Some people had been taken to Babylon, intermarried and were returning. Other people had been allowed to stay in Israel, and some of them had intermarried. Nehemiah as governor, and Ezra as priest had to get everyone on the same page, believing and committing to the same God. They did not want the people to make the same mistakes that had them sent into captivity. They had rebuilt the Temple for worship and to show that The Lord God Jehovah was the center of their worship and lives. The outside walls were rebuilt to provide security against attack.

Now what drew me to this passage from the choices in the Lexicon was the thought that these people were starting new. It was the beginning of the New Year for them and also a new city, a rebuilt Jerusalem. After the readings they had the Day of Atonement, where they confessed their sins, then the Feast of Tabernacles where they celebrated God's faithfulness.

Now to us. We are entering a New Year, an important year in the history of our church and town. 250 years. We have just hired a new pastor. Two weeks ago we reaffirmed our baptism/confirmation. We reaffirmed our commitment to God and indirectly to each other. New Year, New us. Some things have changed, Lay Sunday is now the 4th Sunday and At Table is the third Sunday.

We will be working with Pastor Rosemary to develop and complete our goals that are stated in our church profile. It will be our collective discussions, our questions, and our decisions that will help determine our future. From past discussions we know that there are heavy and difficult decisions to be made, and obviously not done in a year. To assist us in these decisions is God's Word abiding in our hearts. Remember as God forgave, directed and led the Israelites He will do that for us. We need to trust God, that He will guide us in the way that we should go.

This also pertains to us as individuals. God's Word abiding in our hearts will help us with any upcoming decisions that we may have to make. We are similar to the Israelites, they were also entering a New Year. Who knows what it will bring!!!

Let me finish with a summary of the themes in Nehemiah.

First and maybe most important is that the Lord hears our prayer. Not when He feels like it, but always, and it does not have to be a formal high Church prayer. Something as simple as God Help! Second, the Lord protects His people, and the Lord is merciful and faithful to His people despite their persistence in sin. We have forgiveness in Jesus. If we turn our concerns to God and listen for His answer, we will be alright. And third, worship is at the center of the life of God's people. Worship is not exclusive to meeting here on Sunday mornings, though I highly recommend it!! It can be anytime, anywhere. Rejoice in the Lord always!!

So, hopefully I have made a point through all my history. New Year, new us. Forget our bad habits, develop new good habits. Rely on God, and remember we are here for each other, to build each other up.

So Happy New Year, let us rejoice in it and be thankful for what it will bring, and the ability we have to worship our God. Amen

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