

October 29, 2017

Lesson 9: God's Covenant with the Returned Exiles

Scripture: Nehemiah 9 -10

Context:

This week we dive into the words of the minor prophet Nehemiah. Nehemiah's writings take place in Judah during the fifth century BCE.¹ This was a time of rebuilding in Jerusalem and many of the writings follow that process in detail through the lens of the prophet who called upon the people to look forward to have hope for the distant future. Ezra and Nehemiah were two of those prophets and overlapped in terms of the time that they were with the Israelites in the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah was originally a cupbearer for the Persian King Artaxerxes who requests to return home to be among those still left there and to help rebuild the temple and fortify the city.² When Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem as an appointed governor by the king, he finds the city still ravaged by war and mourning the days of old. As he begins to reconstruct the walls of the city, he immediately faces opposition. However, the suspects are not just those who live in regions neighboring the regions such as leaders like Tobiah the Ammonite, Geshem the Arab, and Sanballat the Horonite. As they send spies and armies to dissuade him, Nehemiah also faces internal division. People within the province of Judah and city of Jerusalem, including prophets, criticize and deride him for leading the campaign.

Some scholars believe that some of this opposition came from a resentment of the imported authority of Nehemiah, an exile who was now back home.³ Nevertheless, Nehemiah persisted and was able to refortify the walls of Jerusalem and restore the temple. During the time there were also religious reforms made in the province that were meant to remind people of the Mosaic covenant that had been established. Our scripture passage comes when all the people have gathered to hear what that will entail. Today that festival is known as the Festival of Booths or Yom Kippur in the Jewish tradition.

What follows is what we might call a prayer of confession where Nehemiah and the people acknowledge their own sinfulness and how they have strayed from the covenant while God continues to uphold the covenant by forgiving and receiving the people with love. The act of repentance is the making of a pledge to renew the covenant on their end by observing the commandments, judgments, and statutes of the Lord God.

The prayer and words are solemn, but the author shows that the people are trying to figure out their history and how they had lost their way. More importantly, they sought to discern where God was in the midst of all those things and how they might move forward to a renewed future where they would receive a second chance. That was the task in front of Nehemiah and the province of Judah as they sought to be a renewed people even when they were so broken and even divided. God was with them, but how would they respond to the covenant after they had continued to violate it time and time again,

¹ Michael D. Coogan, *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 425.

² See Nehemiah chapter 2.

³ Coogan, *The Old Testament*, 428

even clinging to the ways of the past.

Application:

I think the passage speaks to many places that we find ourselves in today as a church, both individually and corporately. In our individual churches, I have come to find that similar challenges face churches indiscriminately whether it's small membership or large membership, and all those in between. For example, many churches find themselves in that season we called "Stewardship" season. It is a time to look at plans for the next year and how we are giving to God with our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. Preachers and worship leaders strive to find ways to inspire congregations to remember all of these vows. Yet, whether they are members of large or small churches, I hear complaints about having to fill out a commitment card. "It's between me and God. And my 10% can go somewhere else." Yet you wonder, do they really give to those other places? Or some think that a check can cover the fifty other Sundays they aren't there as they miss out on opportunities to serve in the church and to grow in relationship with others. Like the people of Judah, we miss the mark and get complacent in our discipleship and the vows that we made when we joined the church. And yet, God continues to bless us with abundance and stay with us.

The same goes for our corporate church. We fight among ourselves over a variety of things whether it's the interpretation of scripture or who belongs to what denomination. We bunker down in our respective niches and at times lose sight that we are all disciples in one Lord who unites and has called us to love one another.

As we continue to mess up, the words in Nehemiah remind us that God is faithful. Even when we rebel against God's love and focus on ourselves or bicker with one another, God is still there for us and always will be. As we remember that fact, may it remind us of the power of recommitment and remembering those vows even if we gotten off track. The good news is that we don't have to do anything to earn God's love, but we can be repentant and see the new ways that God is at work. Like the Judeans, we can let go of the past learning from our mistakes and seeing that God is in our future too. God will renew us, restore us, and lead us to new places.

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