

“A New and Glorious Morn”

Ezra 3:10–13; Nehemiah 2:17–20; Nehemiah 4:15–23; Nehemiah 7:73b–8:12

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 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 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.

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.

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