

## Dr. Tiberius Rata, Ezra-Nehemiah, Session 9, Nehemiah 7-8

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This is Dr. Tiberius Rata and his teaching on Ezra and Nehemiah. This is session 9, Nehemiah 7-8.

It's open to Nehemiah 7. The first five verses show us again Nehemiah delegating work.

Starting in verse one,

**1** Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, **2** I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many. **3** And I said to them, "Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot. And while they are still standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors. Appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, some at their guard posts and some in front of their own homes." **4** The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.

**5** Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I found written in it:

So the wall is completed.

Now Nehemiah has to appoint gatekeepers. These are the ancient security guards. The singers and the Levites probably helped in this role, even though guarding the gates was not their primary responsibility.

So, we can think about these. These are kind of emergency arrangements only. This was not the actual day-to-day responsibility that will continue on.

But as a good leader, Nehemiah knew that he could not and he should not do the work alone. Therefore, he delegates some of the work to Hanani and Hananiah. Remember, Hanani is the brother of Nehemiah, a so-called brother, who first informed him of the tragic state of Jerusalem in Nehemiah chapter 1 verse 2. Now, twice he is called my brother, which leads some scholars to believe that he was actually his physical brother, a blood brother.

We don't know. It could be that he was just a compatriot. But Hananiah served as governor of the castle, so he was more qualified to supervise the guarding of the city.

This is, again, a very important role of a leader to understand the people he's working with and to delegate work to them. But his first five verses also tell us that Jerusalem was not yet repopulated fully and houses had not been rebuilt. I mean, think about when people come back.

We will see that at the end of the book. Where do people live? Do they want to live in the city of Jerusalem or do they want to live in the countryside? We will see most people want to live in the countryside where they can plant trees and crops and live off the land. Not many were hurrying to live in downtown Jerusalem.

And there is a problem of how you're going to repopulate Jerusalem. And we'll see at the end of the book how they will do that. And following this delegation, you have the genealogy that Nehemiah finds.

And what we have here in chapter seven from verse six to the end is a list of the people who returned. This list is almost identical to the list in Ezra chapter two. There are some insignificant divergences.

And in my commentary, I have a list of those divergences. And you can see the list of both lists side by side with the changes. So, remember, there were three waves of deportation. There were three waves of reconstruction and renewal.

Now the nation will be ready for the spiritual restoration that was needed. Both of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah have the physical restoration and the spiritual restoration.

And if until now we saw a sort of a physical restoration to the city, starting in chapter eight, we actually move to the spiritual restoration. But before I move on, I want to point out a very important archaeological discovery here from the time of Nehemiah. This mentions Temah, which is mentioned in chapter seven, verse 55 in the list of returnees.

And really, what you have here is two men with hands in worship in front of an altar and then the name of Temah at the bottom. What is interesting here is again, you have evidence of this seal with the name of a person from the list of returnees from the time of Nehemiah. Again, a lot of these seals were found in Jerusalem, and this is dated back to the time of Nehemiah.

So, it's a very interesting discovery. So, we move now to chapter eight, where we will see the start of the spiritual restoration of the people. And this restoration starts and ends with the word of God.

What has happened during the exilic period? They were gone in different parts. They didn't have the temple to go back to. Some scholars suggest that it was during this time the synagogue was born, and synagogues pop up all over the world when the Jews cannot go to the temple.

So, synagogues are being built all over the world. But this restoration starts with the reading of the word. Some, again, not everybody had their own Bibles, their own scrolls.

So now they are confronted with the word of God. Chapter eight, starting in verse one,

**1** And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. **2** So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. **3** And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. **4** And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uria, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. **5** And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. **6** And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, "Amen, Amen," lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

So, what we have here is an assembly of people who are confronted with the word of God. And we see here that they read it and they read it for a good period of time. And there seems to be a hunger for the word of God.

And again, what word of God? Again, it's the law of Moses. Again, is it just the book of Deuteronomy? Is it the first five books? We don't know. But again, the book of the law is in existence at this time.

And this is what he is, what Ezra is reading. If you notice, they're practicing something that some cultures still practice today. When they read the word of God, they stand up.

If you go into many countries today, they still practice that. And we have moved away from that practice in the American churches. But Ezra's blessing concluded the

reading of the word and was followed by the people's response, which was marked by three important characteristics.

Their response was vocal, it was humble, and it was worshipful. They responded by saying, Amen. You could see it; they raised their hands, and then, in their worship, they actually prostrated themselves to the ground.

In fact, the Hebrew word for to worship literally means that, to prostrate before someone. There is no other meaning to that word. So, in the Old Testament times, when you worshiped, you had to bow down before the one you worshiped.

But what do you do when you read the word, and you have people who hear it but they don't really know what's going on. Again, it's been a long time since they've heard it since they heard the word of God. Well, the Bible says that the faithful have to explain the word of God.

They don't just read the word, they also explain the word of God. And you had these people that are mentioned in verse eight, the Bible says, helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense so that people understood the reading.

A number of 13 Levites are given here. Their names are given, and they help the people understand what is being read. Indeed, Moses, before his death, blessed the Levites.

And Deuteronomy 33:10 tells that the Levites shall teach Jacob your rules, and Israel your law. So that was their God-given job, even back to Deuteronomy. If you read in Second Chronicles, during the time of Jehoshaphat, some Levites became itinerant teachers and went around through all the cities of Judah and taught among the people.

Second Chronicles 17:7-9. So, this talks about the importance of the ministry of teaching God's word, not just in large assembly, but in small groups. Both are important and necessary and vital to the life of the community of the faithful. So, the faithful read the word, the faithful explained the word, and then the faithful rejoiced in the word.

Starting in verse 9.

**9** And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep."

By the way, for the first time we see Ezra and Nehemiah together.

They are contemporaries, and here they are together in the worship service.

Do not mourn or weep, for all the people wept as they heard the words of the law. Then he said, Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine, and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready.

For this day is holy to the Lord, and do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength. So the Levites calmed all the saying, Be quiet, for this day is holy. Do not be grieved.

And all the people went their way to eat and drink, and to send portions, and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

For some people the words of the law produced new life. For some reminded them of their past.

Whatever happened here is the word cut deep like a sword. It could be that these tears were tears of repentance. We don't know.

It just says they mourned. It could be they were tears of repentance, as 2 Corinthians 7:10 says. But their tears were definitely not tears of joy, because Ezra and Nehemiah have to tell the people, Do not be grieved.

Ezra and Nehemiah were not trying to get in the way of their repentance, but the grief needs to be followed by rejoicing. There is a time to grieve, but there's also a time to rejoice. And that's what they're trying to emphasize here.

It is the joy of the Lord is your strength. The joy of the Lord, not the grieving of the Lord, is the strength of the people. One scholar affirms, and I quote, It is Yahweh's joy over his people that is the basis for the hope that they will be saved or protected from his anger.

Yahweh's joy is the basis of their protection from the consequences of their neglect of the law. So, what do they do when they rejoice? Well, they eat and they drink. And the eating and the drinking is the outward expression of the inward state.

And again, they say this is holy to the Lord. Holy to the Lord was actually a designation for the Sabbath in Exodus 31 and 35. Now Ezra and Nehemiah declare this day is holy to the Lord because the people acted in accordance to God's law.

I like how Warren Wiersbe summarizes what's happening in these verses. He says, There's conviction, there's cleansing, and there's celebration. The people are convicted of their sin, they are cleansed of their sin, but then they celebrate God's word.

And not only do they rejoice in the word, but the faithful then follow up and obey the word. Starting in verse 13,

**13** On the second day the heads of fathers' houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law. **14** And they found it written in the Law that the LORD had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths<sup>c</sup> during the feast of the seventh month, **15** and that they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, "Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written." **16** So the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. **17** And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing. **18** And day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.

So everything starts with an in-depth Bible study. The priests, the Levites, and the head of households come to Israel and say, hey, we want to continue studying this word of God.

And as they are reading, they're discovering this legislation about the feast of booths. Remember there was began in Tishri 15. Remember it was the primary festival of thanksgiving, showing gratitude for God's provision during the exodus event from Egypt.

You have that in Exodus 34. We have it in Leviticus 23. And this fall festival closed out the agricultural year and commemorated the Israelites wandering in the wilderness.

Why? Because they lived in tents. And now they were celebrating that. And actually, if you go to Israel today, they still, some Jews, Orthodox Jews, still celebrate this.

And they build booths and celebrate God's provision. It was to Sukkot that the Israelites first came after leaving Ramesses in Exodus chapter 12. The festival of booths was also observed during the monarchy period, 2 Chronicles 8. It was observed also in the post-exilic period.

We see that in Ezra 3, Zechariah 14. And even during the early church period, this is the only festival in which the Israelites were commanded to rejoice before the Lord. Again, the theme of joy here, there's grieving over your sin, but then you rejoice in the Lord.

The returnees were eager to obey God's word, which apparently was ignored. A lot of them did not know it. They were ignorant of the word.

Now they hear it. And the word of God is indeed like a sword that cuts, but it's living and active in their lives. And the result of obedience was more rejoicing.

I like Warren Wiersbe's insight, and I quote, God doesn't give us joy instead of sorrow, or joy in spite of sorrow, but joy in the midst of sorrow. It is not substitution, but transformation. The law, people kept, because of the law, the people kept the feast.

And the book of the law, again, played a central role. The Israelites were meant to be people of the book. And we are the same.

We are people of the book. We need to love the book, the word of God, and we need to love the God of the word. And we are grateful for his word, and we need to read it and then obey it, just like I have done.

And the answer, the end result was obedience to the word and rejoicing in the word. Remember the joy of the Lord is your strength. You

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