

Dr. Tiberius Rata, Ezra-Nehemiah, Session 11, Nehemiah 11-13

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This is Dr. Tiberius Rata and his teaching on Ezra and Nehemiah. This is session 11, Nehemiah 11-13.

Okay, we come to the close of the study of Ezra and Nehemiah and we're going to deal with chapters 11, 12 and 13.

In chapter 11, we deal with the repopulation of Jerusalem and that's what chapter 11 does. It focuses on the fortification of Jerusalem's physical, human, and governmental strength. And it's interesting here, that Jerusalem is referred to as the holy city.

The first two verses of chapter 11.

1 Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, while nine out of ten^a remained in the other towns. **2** And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem.

Nobody wanted to live in Jerusalem. Again, it was very practical because they wanted to live in the towns outside where they could plant crops, plant fruit trees and live there. So, it seems that the leaders lived in Jerusalem and then for the rest, they had to cast lots to see who would live in the city.

Again, this was still a time where casting lots was seen as the divine will. We see in the New Testament after the giving of the Holy Spirit, casting lots is not a way anymore to find the will of God. How big was the city at this time? Yamauchi suggests that the population of Jerusalem during Nehemiah's time had contracted to 6,000 people.

Again, it sounds very logical. And then chapter 11 continues with this repopulation of Jerusalem. And here in chapter 11, we have a list of people who repopulated Jerusalem.

And again, verses 3 to 9 mention the leaders. Verses 10 to 14 list the priests. Verses 15 to 18 list the Levites.

And then verses 19 to 24, you have the different groups, the gatekeepers for example, in verse 19. Verse 21, the temple servants. Verse 22, the overseer of the Levites, and so forth and so on.

Again, this is just kind of an idea to see who repopulated Jerusalem. Verses 25 to 36 then deal with those who settled in Jerusalem. And again, if you look at the numbers in chapters 7 and 11, you see those who returned from captivity, a little bit over 30,000.

There were also those who settled in Jerusalem, some over 3,000. The Bible speaks about the route from Beersheba to the valley of Hinnom to delineate Judah's borders. And then, of course, the city of Jerusalem was within the city walls.

And then when we move to chapter 12, we have more of a list of priests and Levites who returned from exile. And you have the first nine verses listing the family names of priests and Levites who returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel. And then we continue in verses 10 and 11 with a list of priests.

Now this list has a span of about 100 years, from 538 to about 400 BC. So the list of priests here in verses 11 starts with Joshua. Then you have Joachim, Eliashib, all the way to Jonathan.

Basically, what the writer is doing here is connects the high priest from Joshua to Jonathan. Again, about 100 years. Now verses 12 through 21, this is the heads of the priestly houses.

And then verses 22 to 26, you have more Levites that are included here. Again, this list is not to be comprehensive, or it's not meant to be exhaustive. When we get to chapter 27, we get to the dedication of the city wall.

Starting in verse 27,

27 And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres. **28** And the sons of the singers gathered together from the district surrounding Jerusalem and from the villages of the Netophathites; **29** also from Beth-gilgal and from the region of Geba and Azmaveth, for the singers had built for themselves villages around Jerusalem. **30** And the priests and the Levites purified themselves, and they purified the people and the gates and the wall.

We are not told how much time has elapsed from the time that the wall was rebuilt until the wall was dedicated. But we know as they were looking to plan the service, the Levites were not around.

Where were they? Well, apparently they settled around the city of Jerusalem, not in Jerusalem. So, they had to come get them to celebrate, to plan this big celebration. The part of the celebration was also purification.

We are not told how they did it, but the priests and the Levites, the Bible says here, purified the people, the gates, and the walls. Again, we are not told how they did it. Verse 31, Then I brought the leaders of Judah up to the wall and appointed to great choirs and gave thanks.

The choir was not an unusual thing, it was not a new thing. David set up choirs in the service of the temple. But now you had two of them, so imagine the scene.

One went to the south on the wall to the dung gate, and after them went some people. And then you had them going with musical instruments of David and the man of God. And Ezra, the scribe, went before them.

At the Fountain Gate they went up straight before them by the stairs of the city of David and the ascent wall above the house of David to the water gate to the east. So, imagine two processions. One was going to the south and one was going to the north toward the dung gate.

So, you had a choir, verse 31. You had trumpeteers, verse 35. You had an orchestra formed of different instruments, verse 36.

And the procession was led by Ezra. Again, both of them are present here. Both Ezra and Jeremiah are contemporaries.

And then starting in verse 38 we have the other choir. It says,

the other choir of those who gave thanks went to the north and followed them with the other half of the people. And the singers sang with Jezreel and their leader.

And they offered great sacrifices that they rejoiced. For God had made them rejoice with great joy. The women and children also rejoiced.

And I like the end of verse 43. "And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away." Again, these guys know how to party. They know how to celebrate. And again, remember, "the joy of the Lord is your strength." And now the joy of the Lord was evident as they were celebrating the dedication of the temple.

Because they realized and they knew that God helped them to rebuild. Starting in verse 4, by the way, here is a picture of Nehemiah's wall. Archaeologists recently have discovered.

This is the reconstructed part, but this is part of the original. Again, remember, if you compare Solomon's temple with these stones, you might say, well, this is not such a big deal. But we do have evidence of this wall being there.

It was about, generally speaking, about 8 feet wide. And the height differed depending where it was. But it went all the way up to 40 feet.

So, you had this wall was, again, the archaeologists assure us this is from the time of Nehemiah. And then you have, starting in verse 44, the offerings for the temple service.

On that day, men were appointed over the storerooms, the contributions, the first fruits, and the tithes to gather them into the portions required by the law for the priests and for the Levites according to the fields of the towns.

Remember, the Levites did not get a piece of land. They were supposed to live off of the offerings that were brought to the temple. Verse 45,

And they performed the service of their God and service of purification, as did the singers and the gatekeepers, according to the command of David and his son Solomon. 46 For long ago in the days of David, now we're getting a history lesson. Where does this tradition of singing go back? For long ago in the days of David and Asaph, there were directors of the singers, and there were songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. 47 And all of Israel in the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah gave the daily portions for the singers and the gatekeepers and they set apart that which was for the Levites, and the Levites set apart that which was for the sons of Aaron.

What we see here was a return to obedience to the law of God. And this was evident in the way they dealt with the offerings to the temple.

So, the celebration included music, and the celebration included purification. Indeed, I remember this was nothing new. David and Solomon had musicians and choirs in the temple.

First Chronicles 23:26 details the organization of the Levites, the priests, the gatekeepers, the musicians. But now the organization of the temple workers followed that model which David left for us and Solomon in 2 Chronicles 8. So, everything that Nehemiah did was patterned after the past.

And then in Chapter 13, you have a reformation.

And this reformation is done in many different ways. We will see that there is a reform through exclusion, expulsion, organization, Sabbath observation, and separation from sin. First of all, not very popular but very important reform through exclusion.

The first three verses of Chapter 13.

1 On that day they read from the Book of Moses in the hearing of the people, and it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, 2 For they did not meet the people of Israel with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them--yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. As soon as the people heard the law, they separated Israel from Israel, all those of foreign descent.

Again, we see this motive of exclusion. You might say, wait a second, God is exclusionary? The answer is yes. If you think about it, all religions are exclusionary. In this case, they understand from the word of God about exclusion from people who are not Yahweh worshippers.

Again, this is nothing new. This goes back to the time of Moses. Intermarriage with non-Israelites had been against God's law since the time of Moses as outlined in Deuteronomy chapter 23.

Not only do you have reform through exclusion, you have reform through expulsion. Listen to what happened in the temple. Eliashib the priest, who was appointed over the chambers of the house of our God and who was related to Tobiah, prepared for Tobiah a large chamber where they had previously put the grain offering, the frankincense, the vessels, and the tithes of the grain, wine, and oil, which was given by the commandment to the Levites, singers and gatekeepers, and the contributions for the priests.

While this was taking place, I was not in Jerusalem, for in the 32nd year of Artaxerxes, king of Babylon, the first king of Babylon, I went to the king. And after some time I asked leave of the king and came to Jerusalem. And I then discovered the evil that Eliashib had done for Tobiah, preparing for him a chamber in the courts of the house of God.

I was very angry, and I threw all Tobiah's household furniture out of the chamber. Then I gave orders, and they cleansed the chambers. I brought back there the vessels of the house of God with the grain offering and the frankincense.

Remember the blueprint of the tabernacle. Obviously, you had the holy place and the holy of holies. Now, nobody could live there.

Again, only the priests could go there. So where would they prepare? Would Eliashib actually have a room for Tobiah? It seems, according to this, that probably in one of the storerooms that went around the temple. So, according to this text, there were storehouses, and storerooms to put grain, wine, oil, and other things like that.

And apparently, because these guys are related, Eliashib made a room for Tobiah in the very temple of God. Nehemiah says, this is wrong. This is not a place to house the homeless.

We don't know if he was homeless. But whatever happens here, you are doing something that is not clean. So, Nehemiah has to do what every leader sometimes has to do, is to do a reform through expulsion.

Just like there is a reform through exclusion, there is a reform through expulsion. And Nehemiah wanted that cleansed. There is also a reform through organization, starting in verse 10.

10 I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. **11** So I confronted the officials and said, "Why is the house of God forsaken?" And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. **12** Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses. **13** And I appointed as treasurers over the storehouses ... And then the names are given.

For they were considered reliable, and their duty was to distribute to their brothers.

So Nehemiah has to get organized and to set some things in place. And then in verse 14, he prays to God again.

Remember me, O God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God and for His service.

Why is the house of God forsaken? That was Nehemiah's question. It points to the neglect of the proper function of the temple.

We are reminded of the question of God through the prophet Haggai. Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your panel houses while this house lies in ruins? Haggai 1:4 While in Haggai the question focused on the physical aspect of the temple, in Nehemiah the cultic aspect was brought to the forefront. They had to return to the law of God.

The law, the Torah. So in God's economy, restoration is spelled R-E-S-T-O-R-A-T-I-O-N. Torah is in the middle of restoration.

Restoration. The Torah has to be central in this restoration. And that's what they're doing.

He prays, remember me. He prayed that before. Again, this is a figure of speech.

God doesn't forgive. God doesn't forget Nehemiah. God doesn't forget anyone.

But it is a figure of speech that compares God's memory with a slate on which one's good deeds are recorded. Nehemiah prays that God will not wipe clean the slate on which Nehemiah's good work for the temple and the cult was recorded. And then there is reform through Sabbath observation.

It seems that while they were in exile, the people of God did not really keep the Sabbath. And we know that we see this from their practices that they still continue in that. Starting in verse 15. And sold them on the Sabbath to the people of Judah and Jerusalem itself.

I commanded that the door should be shut and gave orders that they should not be open until after the Sabbath. And I stationed some of my servants at the gates that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day. 20 Then the merchants and the sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice. But I warned them and said to them, why do you lodge outside the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you. From that time on, they did not come on the Sabbath.

Then I commanded the Levites that they should purify themselves and come and guard the gates to keep the Sabbath day holy.

And then again, Nehemiah prays, 22 Remember this also in my favor. Oh, my God, and spare me according to the greatness of your steadfast love.

See, in the people's zeal to rebuild through commerce, they ignored God's law that said you should keep the Sabbath. Actually, when we read the Chronicles, we know that one of the reasons God took them into exile is because they did not keep. God says you did not keep my Sabbath.

And in this case, we see there is traffic through the fish gates where people were bringing in fish and other goods. But the Sabbath observation was there for a very important reason. Keep the Sabbath day to make it holy, God says on the fourth commandment.

The Sabbath day was for two purposes, for rest and for worship. A lot of people say, well, you know, I'm using the Sabbath day to sleep in. You have missed the point.

Well, you have missed half the point. It is for rest, but it's also for worship. Keep the Sabbath day to sanctify it, to keep it holy.

And in this case, they were not doing that. And Nehemiah needs to make a reform and needs to bring back to people that you need to observe the Sabbath but because that is God's law. Nehemiah takes command and things changed.

And then there is the last reform. Reform through the separation from sin. Again, the issue of intermarriage comes into play.

Starting in verse 23. Now I want to make a reference here. This is not a text where you say, wow, Nehemiah was a great leader. I'm going to do the same. No, no, no. This text is not prescriptive.

It is descriptive. If you think about it, remember how Ezra dealt with this? Ezra wept and he cried and he got on his knees and he wept to the people. It looks like Nehemiah's style of leadership is different and it is not for us to follow.

Nehemiah confronted them, cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take a note in the name of God saying, You shall not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves. Nehemiah's harsh description, though, should teach us that we should take God seriously.

That should be the lesson for us. But remember, his approach is different than Ezra's approach. And we are not to follow this to the letter of the law.

Verses 26 to 27, he refers to a lesson in history. And he uses Solomon. Did not Solomon, king of Israel, sin on account of such women? Among the many nations, there was no king like him.

And he was beloved by God. And God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless, foreign women made him sin.

Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women? To bolster his point, Nehemiah uses an illustration from history. From a history that they knew. And they knew about Solomon.

And indeed, Solomon was loved by God. The Bible even says he was named Jedediah. Beloved of the Lord.

If you read 1 Kings, he was the greatest, the wisest man. But the Bible also says that his wives turned away his heart after other gods. 1 Kings 11 verse 4, And his heart was not holy to the Lord his God.

The act of intermarrying pagan women was described as evil and treacherous. And this sin is not against one's culture, against one's ancestors. This sin was against God himself.

Verse 28, And one of the sons of Jehoiada, the son of Eliashib the high priest, was the son-in-law of Sanballat the Horonite. Therefore I chased him from me. Even though Nehemiah seems to have worked closely with Eliashib the high priest.

Eliashib apparently associated himself with Tobiah. According to Nehemiah 13:4. But Eliashib's grandson had married a pagan woman. What made the situation worse for this one was the daughter of Sanballat the Horonite.

Remember one of Nehemiah's greatest enemies. Nehemiah expelled this law-breaking grandson of Eliashib from the Jewish community. How does the book end? The book ends again with a remember me prayer.

In Nehemiah you have four times where Nehemiah says, Remember me. Remember me. And the last one is here at the end of chapter 13.

Before he says remember me, he says remember them. Remember them, O my God, because they have desecrated the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites. Thus, I cleansed them from everything foreign.

I established the duties of the priests and the Levites, each his work. And I provided for the wood offering at the appointed times and for the firstfruits. Remember me, O my God, for good.

You see here a contrast between Nehemiah and these people who desecrate the priesthood. Nehemiah wants to stay pure to the law of God. And that's why Nehemiah if you look at Nehemiah, begins with prayer.

Nehemiah ends with prayer. Remember me. He says remember them.

Then he says remember me. Fensham concludes his commentary when he writes, A new era of Jewish worship has started. Worship according to prescribed legal principles.

It was only with the coming of Christ and the interpretation of His coming by Paul that another era was commenced in which the legal burden was removed from the shoulders of mankind and the center of religion placed in His vicarious suffering on the cross. It is the new era of faith and love in Jesus Christ. So as a matter of application, it is important to look at the books of Ezra and Nehemiah and understand which parts are descriptive and which parts are prescriptive.

I had a pastor one time who told me, Well, I took Nehemiah 8 and I used that for our service as a blueprint. That's great, but I'm not sure that was the intent of that passage. Remember, Nehemiah was harsh in the way he treated the people.

Today's pastor cannot beat the congregants, pull out their hair because they have sinned no matter what sin that is. But we should look at the principles that we have here. The principles are clear.

God desires His people to be set apart and to live holy lives. God's leaders need to make sure that God's word has preeminence and it is God's word that is the practice of the believer for faith and for practice. But ultimately, Ezra and Nehemiah point forward to the coming of the true leader, the person of Jesus Christ who died for our sins and set an example for us that we should follow Him.

That was the call of Jesus. Follow me. And in the Gospels it is clear that a disciple of Jesus Christ is one who follows Jesus on the way.

And we are called to follow Him. And we are called to be faithful to His words like Ezra and Nehemiah were.

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