

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

The Exile & Return: Ezra; Nehemiah and Esther. This class is the current installment of the Bible track and explores the world immediately following the return of God's OT people from Babylonian exile. We will learn of God's faithfulness to His covenant people in the story of Esther; how God saved them from satanic inspired annihilation. In Ezra and Nehemiah, we will witness God's promise fulfilled through the mouth of Jeremiah: God indeed brought His people back into the land during a time of both conflict, and unprecedented spiritual renewal.

The objective of this class is to develop a thorough understanding of God's redemptive plan among the community of post-exilic Jews who returned to the land of their forefathers to rebuild the city of Jerusalem as well as those Jews who chose to remain in exile. The continuation of God's historical purposes is expressed in the pages of these three books (Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther) in a manner unique in the OT canon of scripture.

Introduction: Last week we explored the first step in a national revival that swept through the people of God during the days of Ezra and Nehemiah. We noted that the first step was a willingness to assemble and hear the Word of God read as well as understand its contents. This resulted in nation-wide repentance in which God's people acknowledged their infidelity to the covenantal commitments as well as the mercy and grace of God in redeeming them from Babylonian exile and all former chastisement. This week, we examine the commitment made to covenant renewal. For the sake of understanding this chapter (Chapter 10), we will look at: 1) The Travail of the People of God; 2) Maledictory Nature of Covenantal renewal; and 3) Commitments to Refrain and Maintain. The subtitle of the day's lesson is, *The Covenant*.

Part One: *The Travail of the People of God* – There is no way to comprehend the relationship between God and His people apart from covenant. Whenever we explore the history of OT Israel, as outlined in the prayer contained in the previous chapter, the heart and soul of the divine interaction between God and His people is disclosed in the covenant. Covenants in the ancient near east were seldom if ever unilateral. Even the Covenant of Grace in all its administrations throughout the Word of God, entails expectations and commands that are conditions for relationship and protection. This remains true in NT times as well. The ultimate reconciliation between God and man is made possible through the sacrificial atonement of Christ. As Paul reminds us, "*For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God*" (2 Corinthians 5:21). In other words, there has always been a curse associated with covenantal infidelity, a curse that someone would have to bear in order for justice to prevail. This theological presupposition is essential to understanding the doctrine of justification – the act whereby we are declared righteous before God. What is the means of this declaration? Is it our faith? Faith is not the means of our justification, else faith itself would be salvific. Rather, faith is the means that provides access to the means of our justification: the perfect obedience of Christ. In other words, there is one man who did not deserve the legal curse of infidelity to the covenant of God because He remained faithful to the covenant: Jesus Christ our Lord. However, he was made sin for us, so that we might become the righteousness of God. This means, that the covenant infidelity of the people of God was imputed (assigned) to Him, and the covenantal fidelity (obedience) of Christ, was imputed (assigned) to those for whom He died.

However, at the point of our story, redemptive history had yet to unfurl to the extent that this truth could be understood. Instead, the people of God stand before Him in great travail, acknowledging that all there suffering from the first day to the last, was insufficient for satisfying the demands of the curse

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

of the law. Indeed, the curse of breaking covenant was the reason for the exile, and even the reason they were, “slaves in the land of promise”, but the extent of their sufferings was not enough to atone for their crime. They attributed their presence in the land to God’s covenantal love or *hesed* as we saw last week (9:32). The question then becomes, ‘If the travail of the people of God was not redemptive in the sense that it atones for their sin and rebellion, what did, and what role did their travail play in the life of God’s people?’

To answer this question, we will examine a text from the previous chapter. In 9:32 we read, “*Now, therefore, our God, the great, the mighty, and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love, let not all the hardship seem little to you that has come upon us, upon our kings, our princes, our priests, our prophets, our fathers, and all your people.*” Judgement is not here the focus, because even the prophets are mentioned as having suffered hardship. The focus is the blatant realization on the part of the people of God that the blessings of the covenant as promised in the Mosaic Law, had not been realized even for those who remained faithful to the covenant. There is a realization on the part of the people, having just heard the words of the Law, that the sovereign rule of God on earth through His people had been inhibited by their sin. The blessings of the covenant cannot be experienced so long as God’s people remain unfaithful. This realization, fortunately, remains consistent throughout the intertestamental period culminating in the coming of Christ. It is this longing, this travail in the hearts of the people of God, to which the disciples are referring in Acts 1:6 when they asked the recently risen Lord, “*Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?*”

To think that the ones submitting the prayer in Nehemiah chapter nine were not remembering Exodus 2:22-25 when they were asking God to “*...let not all the hardship seem little...*” seems unlikely. Effort has been made to demonstrate how the authors of Ezra and Nehemiah were endeavoring to draw subtle parallels between the generation of exodus and their own. So, it is reasonable that they were thinking of the travail of their forefathers while slaves in Egypt on the Eve of redemption. Redemption, not simply a return to the land, but a realization of the full blessings of God’s kingdom, is desired.

Point Two: Maledictory Nature of Covenant Renewal – Chapter 10 verse 28-29 states, “*The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord, and his rules and his statutes.*” The reference here to the curse and oath into which the people entered is a reaffirmation of the Covenant of Grace between God & Abraham as well as Moses.

When God instructed Abraham to leave the land of his nativity, and sojourn in a land that He would reveal to him, a land flowing with milk and honey that God would later give him (Genesis 12:1), the covenant between God and Abraham was sealed through a self-maledictory oath pronounced by God Himself. The events are described in Genesis chapter fifteen and entail a caricature of God in the form of a burning fiery furnace passing between the split pieces of animals slayed for such an occasion. This symbolic gesture was a means of communicating that if God failed in His commitment to the covenant, He would have the right to be split in two. In other words, God was promising Abraham by virtue of His own character and unity, that He would bring about that which He promised. Although, God was the only member of the party to walk between the two pieces, it was understood that Abraham had

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

obligations as well. He was to instruct his children after him to fear the Lord, and walk in His ways. Bear in mind that God's *blessing* for covenantal obedience was conditional (conditioned on obeying the covenant); however, His *election* of a covenant people was not.

Moses was the mediator of the Mosaic covenant, and through his mediatorial role, God disclosed His merciful and gracious character to a redeemed people atop Mt. Sinai. Here God instructed them that if they failed to keep the covenant, a myriad of curses would come upon them. To this condition, they responded, "*All the people answered together and said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do."* And Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD" (Ex. 19:8). God assured them that if they obeyed He would bless them, but if they did not, they would be cursed. In the text at hand, we witness the people of God binding themselves under an oath and a curse. What would inspire them to do so? After having experienced such "travail" as is mentioned in the previous chapter, why would they enter into an agreement where their failure to keep covenant would generate more? The answer is found in the essence of the covenant itself.

If one were to read Deuteronomy 27:9-26 and 28:15-68 and observe carefully the list of curses that are associated with infidelity to the covenant, the severity of the curses is accentuated by their pervasiveness. The curses touch all of life because God's Law touches all of life. To live in a manner contrary to the Law of God is to live in denial of man's created purpose. Disobedience to the Law of God is a curse in itself. Therefore, covenantal infidelity is the curse that engenders a curse: the misappropriation of God's good creation is rightfully treated as treachery against the King.

Part Three: Commitments to Refrain and Maintain – So, what was the essence of the covenant renewal? To what were the people of God agreeing, and why? In general, the people of God were renewing their commitment to obey the entirety of the Law of God that was given through Moses. We read, "*... to walk in God's Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the Lord our Lord and his rules and his statutes.*" They were not agreeing to anything new, but they applied God's Law in a manner which elucidated the specific challenges unique to their generation. These challenges can be summarized under two headings: a commitment to refrain, and a commitment to maintain.

First, we will consider their commitments to refrain. They vowed, "*We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day. And we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt*" (10:30-31). Here they essentially agree to refrain from three things: 1) intermarriage with the "peoples of the land"; 2) buying things on the Sabbath; and 3) harvesting the crops on the seventh year, and exacting debts. Refraining from intermarriage with the "peoples of the land", or עַמֵּי הָאֲרָץ as the original Hebrew states, ensured that the purity of Israelite religion would not be tainted by the synthesized idolatry of the Samaritans.

They also vowed to observe the Sabbath by refraining from purchasing goods and grain from merchants. This willingness to observe the Sabbath as well as their interest in observing the *shmita* is indicative of an appreciation for one of the sins, albeit trivialized somewhat by succeeding generations, which contributed to their exile (2 Chronicles 36:21). All three categories of refrain address the three-fold blessing of the covenant: the land, the seed, and the promise of blessing. Intermarriage addressed the need for the seed to be pure – for both parents to be ardent members of the covenant community and faithfully endeavoring to raise their children in the Law of the Lord. A similar desire is expressed by the

Exile & Return: Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther

apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 6:14, *“Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness?”* Observing the shmita allowed the land to remain fallow and untilled for an entire year, stewarding the land, a characteristic of the Abrahamic covenant. The third and final refrain addressed Sabbath observance, which is both a creation ordinance as well as a mystical symbol for the fullness of the blessing promised to Abraham. We read this in the book of Hebrews, *“For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God, for whoever has entered God's rest has also rested from his works as God did from his. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience”* (Hebrews 4:8-11).

The second category was a commitment to maintain. They vowed, *“We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: for the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God. We, the priests, the Levites, and the people, have likewise cast lots for the wood offering, to bring it into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at times appointed, year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God, as it is written in the Law. We obligate ourselves to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of every tree, year by year, to the house of the LORD; also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the firstborn of our sons and of our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and of our flocks; and to bring the first of our dough, and our contributions, the fruit of every tree, the wine and the oil, to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God; and to bring to the Levites the tithes from our ground, for it is the Levites who collect the tithes in all our towns where we labor. And the priest, the son of Aaron, shall be with the Levites when the Levites receive the tithes. And the Levites shall bring up the tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the storehouse. For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers, where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God.”* Here, the people of God were agreeing to go a step beyond the Law of God in the maintenance of the temple and the temple's priests. Reference is not only made to the obligatory tithe and the price of redemption for their first-born sons, but also to the delivery of wood for the offerings of God and support of the gatekeepers and singers, offices which were assigned by Nehemiah and David, and not mandated by the Law of the Lord.

Reflecting on the commitment to maintain, we note that they obligated themselves to do what had heretofore be done by a foreign king(s), thus making foreign support no longer necessary for the maintenance of temple service. They understood the obligation that was placed upon them and their children and willingly gave themselves to it, for a time. As mentioned last week, one would expect an appearance of the Shekinah after such a display of covenant renewal, but no such manifestation occurred.

Conclusion: As we conclude the lesson this morning, think of ways that God calls His children to revival throughout history, and what are the manifest fruits of such spiritual renewal? If you were to identify three hallmarks of national revival/renewal during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, what would they be? Should we expect the same response today?