

Confession and Correction

Today In Your Reading...

One of the benefits of reading the Bible chronologically is that we get to see stories intertwined, as they were, in real time. For example, we read accounts from both *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*. Typically, because of the way the Bible is set up, we would read these two books separately, having no idea how their stories intersect. However, today we watched two events, one in Jerusalem (with Ezra) and the other in Susa (Nehemiah), and both dealt with the status of God's people spiritually (Ezra) and physically (Nehemiah); and, both dealt with sin and confession.

Ezra was approached by some of the Jewish leaders with a serious problem. It was discovered that many of the returning exiles, including some of the Levites and priests, had taken wives from the Gentile people of the land. They were following in the footsteps of the Samaritans and, therefore, polluted their bloodlines. Intermarriage was a serious offense and a direct defiance of God's commands (*Deuteronomy 7:2, 3*).

Through intermarriage, His people would be tempted to worship idols and false gods.

As a priest and spiritual leader of his people, Ezra had to do something to correct this terrible pattern. **He began with confession** of this sin. He wept and fasted, tore his clothes, ripped out his beard, even sat and wailed at the Temple. He prayed to God for forgiveness and for wisdom concerning what to do. How could God's people produce a Messiah in their disobedience, with the corruption of their bloodlines? Then, **Ezra took action** to lead the people to separate from their sin and make things right. He called the guilty men to account, challenged them to repent and do the right thing, which, in turn, led them to annul their marriages to foreign women.

Of course, these divorces had a negative impact on these families, which included children, but

all sin is accompanied with consequences.

Though we are not told, I'm sure that the needs of the women and children were met somehow.

Hundreds of miles away in Susa, Nehemiah was made aware of another disgrace. He heard the news of Jerusalem's crumbling state, that the walls and gates were still lying where they were when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed the city decades before. Nehemiah responded similarly to Ezra; he wept and fasted and prayed to God, confessing the sins of the people. Then, **he took action to make things right**. He arranged to be sent to Jerusalem, with the king's authority, to rebuild the walls.

Daily Reflection

Two leaders dealing with two problems, both responding similarly, **with confession and correction**. It is interesting that as the people were recommitting to obedience and righteousness, the walls of the city were being rebuilt. It is a fantastic visual for what takes place in our lives when we repent and separate from our sin.

What's the connection? How do the broken down walls picture a life with unrepentant sin?

How does the reconstruction of the walls relate to a life of repentance and separation from sin?

What is the status of your walls? Are they broken down because of unrepentant sin? **Confess** them to God and then take action. **Correct** what's wrong by **constructing** what's right.

Victory by Vigilance

Today In Your Reading...

Nehemiah demonstrated outstanding leadership by rallying the people of Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls, by keeping the people encouraged in the midst of opposition, and by confronting the oppressive practice of usury or loan abuse. Of course, all of these things were accomplished with the help of the Lord (4:14; 6:9, 16). Let's consider each of these situations and apply them to God's people today.

When reading *Nehemiah 3*, we are often tempted to skip over the long list of names and locations; however, this chapter is absolutely essential to understanding the work on the wall. Not only did Nehemiah take time to recognize everyone involved in the restoration of the city, but he noted exactly where they worked. **The City of God was built by many people working in cooperation in many places.** As each person and family did their part, the great work was accomplished.

Next, as God's people were faithfully attending to the work on the wall, their enemies organized an effort to stop them. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem were leaders of the surrounding tribes and they did not want to see Jerusalem or the Jews rise to their former status of power in the area. Therefore, they did what they could to discourage or derail the project. **Nehemiah was neither intimidated nor deterred.** Instead, he reminded the people that God was on their side and encouraged them to wield their weapons and be wary of attack (4:13-23; 7:3).

Finally, after Nehemiah was made aware of an immoral practice that had huge economic ramifications, he nipped it in the bud. Those with money were loaning it to fellow Jews at excessive interest rates, a practice condemned by God (*Lev. 25:36, 37; Deut. 23:19, 20*). **God's people were hindering their own success.**

Daily Reflection

The work of the Church today in building the Kingdom of God requires each Christian to do his or her part "on the wall." It is a massive effort that demands diligence and cooperation. To what part of the wall has the Lord assigned you? What are you doing to advance His agenda?

God's work is not easy nor does it come without opposition. *Our enemy is just as diligent as we are, if not more, to hinder our efforts.* That opposition comes from both outside and inside the Church. What are some ways that the enemy tries to discourage or derail the work of God from outside the Church?

What are some ways that the enemy uses people inside the Church to hinder God's work?

We must respond to opposition as did Nehemiah and the Jews, with **vigilance**. Vigilance is "forbearance of sleep, a state of being awake, watchfulness, or to be on guard." With God's help, **we must remain vigilant to all forms of opposition** to His work on earth.

Line by Line

Today In Your Reading...

Moses wrote the first five books of the Old Testament, which included both the covenant and the laws that God had given to the nation of Israel. These books are sometimes referred to as the *Pentateuch* today, which means “five tools or books,” or *the Torah*, meaning “the law or instruction.” When Moses gave his book to the priests, it came with these instructions, “At the end of every seventh year, the Year of Release, during the Festival of Shelters, you must read this law to all the people of Israel when they assemble before the Lord... Call them all together so that they may listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and carefully obey the terms of this law. Do this so that your children, who have not known these laws, will hear them and will learn to fear God. Do this as long as you live in the land...” (*Deuteronomy 31:10-13*).

In our passage today, the people of Jerusalem were celebrating the Feast of Trumpets and the Feast of Shelters. When the trumpets were sounded, the people were to gather with their families in the city for a solemn assembly. The Feast of Shelters (sometimes called Feast of Booths or Tents) was a celebration of their freedom from slavery in Egypt. The name was derived from the tents they used in the desert during the exodus, on their way to Canaan, the Promised Land.

In accordance with the command of Moses, “the people asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel to obey... Ezra stood on a platform in full view of the people. When they saw him open the book, they rose to their feet,” out of respect for the words of God (*8:1, 5*). “From early morning until noon, Ezra read aloud to everyone who could understand.” While he read, “the Levites instructed the people, clearly explaining the meaning of what was being read,

helping them to understand each passage” (*8:3, 7, 8*). The people wept when they heard the words of God and recognized their disobedience to His laws.

Daily Reflection

What similarities do you see between this ceremony and our church services today?

I liked that the ceremony ended at noon! Perhaps this is where we get our modern aversion to any preacher that goes past lunch time! We can't seem to focus on an empty stomach!

I found it interesting that while Ezra read the scriptures line by line, word for word, they were explained to the people. He is the first recorded person to practice **exegesis or expository preaching**, that of analyzing the Word of God, breaking it down verse by verse, and carefully teaching it so that people could comprehend and apply it. While this practice is not the most popular in churches today, **it is the most effective means of helping Christians mature in their understanding of the Bible.**

While there is nothing wrong with the occasional topical study of the Bible, what do you see are the benefits of teaching the Bible like Ezra?

Are you seeking to understand God's Word in this way? Are you exposing yourself to expository preaching? **Be a student. Go deeper!**

Because We Love Him

September 20 — *Nehemiah 8:13-10:39*

Today In Your Reading...

The people of Jerusalem celebrated the Festival of Shelters. To commemorate the exodus, “the people cut branches and used them to build shelters on the roofs of their houses, in their courtyards, in the courtyards of the Temple, and in the city squares. Everyone who had returned from captivity lived in these shelters for seven days...” (8:16, 17). Ezra the scribe read from the book of law of God on each of the seven days, as was prescribed by God. The people also confessed their sins and worshiped the Lord; and everyone was filled with great joy!

After the seven days were completed, the leaders held an assembly to praise God. “Praise His glorious name,” they shouted. “It is far greater than we can think or say. **You alone are the Lord.** You made the skies and the heavens and all the stars. You made the earth and the seas and everything in them. You preserve and give life to everything, and all the angels of heaven worship you. You are the Lord God... and **You have done what You promised, for You are always true to Your word**” (9:5-8).

The leaders recounted to the people the details of the exodus, the miracles of God, the covenant He made with their ancestors, and how they neglected Him and His laws. They also reminded the people of their national sins, God’s just punishments, and His mercy to spare them. “What a great and merciful God you are!” (9:31).

As a result of all that God had done for them, the people vowed to “accept the curse of God if they failed to obey the law of God as issued by His servant Moses. They solemnly promised to carefully follow all the commands, laws, and regulations of the Lord” (10:29). They were serious enough about this pledge that they and their leaders put it in writing (9:38). **They genuinely wanted to obey God’s instructions.**

Daily Reflection

Is obedience to God’s instructions important to the Christian life today? Why or why not? If so, what is the motivation to obey the Lord?

Of course obedience to God is important but why? We no longer obey God’s commands because we have to (out of duty) but because we want to. **Our motivation to obey is love.** Jesus said, “Those who accept My commandments and obey them are the ones who love Me” (John 14:21; 1 John 5:2, 3). Our motivation to obey is gratefulness for what He has done for us.

What does your obedience to the Lord demonstrate to those around you?

Obedying the Lord glorifies Him in the eyes of others. He also promises to bless us for obedience. “Do not merely listen to the word... Do what it says... Whoever looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom and continues in it, not forgetting what they have heard, but doing it, they will be blessed in what they do” (James 1:22-25).

How obedient have you been to the instructions God has for you? Do you take seriously His expectations or do you shrug them off? **Can a disobedient child honor his parents?** Honor the Lord by being obedient to His words.

Gatekeepers

Today In Your Reading...

Nehemiah did a bit of record-keeping for the sake of future generations. He documented the leaders of the people who returned from exile and where exactly they lived. While these lists may seem unimportant to us, to the Jews, who keep careful records of their family history, the lists would have been a great service to them.

As I was reading the records, I was intrigued by a group of people that I had never before given much attention. Of course, the priests and Levites get a great deal of coverage in the Bible and rightfully so; but the servants that caught my eye today were the gatekeepers. I'd like to point out two things — their family history and their responsibilities.

First, gatekeepers were descendants of "the clan of Korah" (*1 Chronicles 9:19*). Korah was a notorious villain in Israel's history (*Numbers 16*). He defied Moses' authority and incited a rebellion against him. Though the Lord quickly squelched the insurrection, the whole thing was a disgraceful event for the people of God, one they would like to forget. How embarrassing it must have been for anyone to say that they were descendants of Korah. It would be like saying you were a descendant of Judas Iscariot, the man who betrayed Jesus.

However, the Lord is gracious and kind. He does not hold grudges, but He forgives; and **He chooses to use the descendants of Korah, despite their past sins and shortcomings.**

On display here, in the use of the gatekeepers in the Temple work, was the mercy of God, particularly in light of what gatekeepers did, which leads me to my second point.

Gatekeepers "were responsible for guarding the entrance to the Temple sanctuary, just as their ancestors had guarded the Tabernacle in the

camp of the Lord" (*1 Chronicles 9:19-32*). "They were stationed on all four sides... The chief gatekeepers were in an office of great trust, for they were responsible for the rooms and treasuries at the house of God. They would spend the night around the house of God, since it was their duty to guard it. It was also their job to open the gates every morning. Some of the gatekeepers were assigned to care for the various utensils used in worship. They checked them in and out to avoid any loss... Others were responsible for the Temple furnishings, the items in the sanctuary, and the supplies... Some members of the clan of Korah were in charge of preparing the bread to be set on the table each Sabbath Day."

Wow! While all eyes were on the priests and Levites and the ceremonial sacrifices and offerings, *these faithful gatekeepers were behind the scenes serving the Lord in very important ways.* Guarding the sanctuary, keeping the furnishings and utensils, and protecting the money and food — they must have been trustworthy individuals to have been given such important responsibilities; and, yet, they are a group that we hear very little about.

Daily Reflection

I am so thankful for the men and women who volunteer every week in our church. Though all eyes are on those leaders on the stage, there are countless "gatekeepers" with important responsibilities. Our church could not function properly without their faithful service.

I am also grateful that God uses me to do His work, a sinner with a checkered past, with many flaws and failures. Praise God that He does not hold grudges, but in His mercy, He uses imperfect people to do His work. What about you? Are you a faithful gatekeeper? Have you acknowledged His mercy in using you to do His work? Believe me, **He is recording your service.**

Care Enough to Confront

Today In Your Reading...

The completed wall of Jerusalem was dedicated with singing and celebration, “for God had given the people cause for great joy” (*Nehemiah 12:43*). Nehemiah had accomplished his assigned task — rebuilding the wall — and, thus, returned to his position as the king’s cup-bearer.

Though he had left Jerusalem and the Temple in good condition, organized and honoring to God, in Nehemiah’s absence, things began to unravel, primarily because of a crooked priest named Eliashib. Here is where we were introduced to the prophet Malachi, who was sent by God to warn the priests of God’s displeasure. “A son honors his father and a servant respects his master. I am your Father and your Master, but where are the honor and respect I deserve? You have despised My name! ...You have left God’s paths. Your guidance has caused many to stumble into sin” (*1:6; 2:8*).

When Nehemiah heard the news of what was happening, he asked the king to return to Jerusalem and correct the problems. It is Nehemiah’s second trip to Jerusalem that closes the Old Testament chronologically. Though in the traditional order of our Bibles, the book of *Malachi* is the last in the Old Testament, *Nehemiah* covers the final recorded events.

While I am certainly impressed with Nehemiah’s leadership during his first visit to Jerusalem, in rebuilding the city walls, I am more impressed with what he does in his second visit. Consider the following activities. First, Eliashib the priest had desecrated the Temple (probably for profit) by allowing Tobiah, an enemy of God, to have one of the storage rooms. Nehemiah threw Tobiah out of the Temple, along with all of his belongings, and had the room purified for sacred use instead (*13:4-9*).

Second, Eliashib and other leaders had allowed people to stop bringing tithes and offerings to the Levites, which meant that they did not have food and could not survive; they, in turn, left the Temple to work in the fields, and, therefore, the Temple was neglected. Nehemiah called all the Levites back and restored them to their duties; he rebuked the leaders and restarted the tithes and offerings (*13:10-14*).

Third, Nehemiah confronted merchants who were selling their wares on the Sabbath Day. He kicked them out of the city and closed the gates on the weekends (*13:15-22*). Fourth, he discovered that many of the people, including leaders, had married foreign wives; he chastised them for breaking God’s covenant (*13:23-31*). Finally, Nehemiah did not abuse the people with taxes, nor did he take advantage of his food allowance, and he required his staff to work alongside the people instead of lord their authority over them.

Daily Reflection

The more I read about Nehemiah, the more I respect this man. No wonder he was a cup-bearer to the king. He was a man of great character and integrity; he was honest and trustworthy. **He was zealous for the Lord, wanting nothing more than for Him to be honored.** He could not be bought or swayed, and, he displayed tremendous courage in confronting sin.

How do you respond to the sin around you, to those who dishonor God by their actions?

Do you care enough about God’s honor to confront your sin and the sins of others?

The End or the Beginning?

Today In Your Reading...

We closed the Old Testament with two prophets, Malachi and Joel, both of which spoke of events regarding the arrival of the promised Messiah. With prophecies regarding Christ, there are typically **two fulfillments**, one that is partial in His first appearance and another that is complete at His second coming. This truth confused the Jews and it can still be confusing to us. However, we have more information than they did, regarding Jesus' purposes and plan, and, thus, we can discern the two advents in these prophecies.

For example, the Lord told Malachi, "Look! I am sending My messenger and he will prepare the way before Me. Then the Lord you are seeking will suddenly come to His Temple. The Messenger of the covenant (Messiah), whom you look for so eagerly, is surely coming. But who will be able to endure it when He comes? Who will be able to stand and face Him? For He will be like a blazing fire that refines metal..." (3:1, 2). He continued, "Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord arrives..." (4:5).

It was protocol in those days for kings to send a messenger ahead of them before their arrival, so that people would be ready to receive them. Thus, for the Messiah to do the same made sense to God's people. The Jews knew to be looking for one whose "voice was crying out in the wilderness" to prepare the way of the Lord (*Isaiah 40:3*). However, since there are two advents of Christ, there will be two messengers to go before Him. The New Testament identifies John the Baptist as the first messenger (*Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:2; Luke 1:17; John 1:23*). The messenger to announce the second coming is Elijah the prophet. Elijah appears with Jesus at the Mount of Transfiguration (*Matthew 17:14*) and could be one of the two witnesses mentioned in the end times (*Revelation 11:1-3*).

Another prophecy with a **double fulfillment** is that of the work of the Holy Spirit. God told Joel, "I will pour out My Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men will dream dreams. Your young men will see visions. In those days, I will pour out My Spirit even on servants, men and women alike" (2:28, 29). Peter recognized the partial fulfillment of this prophecy at Pentecost, when Christ's followers were filled with the Spirit (*Acts 2:16-21*). However, this prophecy will be completely fulfilled when Christ establishes His kingdom at the second coming. Thus, Joel provides signs for God's people to know when that will occur.

Daily Reflection

I love that the Old Testament ends the way that it does, with **reminders of the promise of the coming Messiah**. The Lord was reminding His people that He would make all things new and restore them to Himself. "I, the Lord, will live in Zion, the holy mountain. Jerusalem will be holy forever and armies will never conquer her again... Judah will remain and Jerusalem will endure through all generations. I will pardon My people's crimes... and I will make My home in Jerusalem with My people" (*Joel 3:17-21*).

How would you summarize the Old Testament?

What excites you about the New Testament?
