

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 9, Chapter 6 and 7

I need you to be a bit tolerant of me today, as it may seem (at first) that I'm wandering; I hope I'm not. But I feel strongly led to go this direction to bring you an important connection that can be easily overlooked in our study of Nehemiah; so I shall do so. I will open today's lesson on Nehemiah with this small detour because I've regularly asked you to notice how we could nearly transplant Nehemiah, the conditions facing Judah, Jerusalem and the Jewish people, as well as all their various antagonists and enemies, right out of their place in the Bible at 420 B.C. (the time of Nehemiah) and into the modern day world of 21st century Israel. Astoundingly it would all look about the same; the issues and troubles would be about the same; and the reasons for the issues and troubles would be about the same.

And the explanation for this head-scratching sameness that is found between these 2 distant eras actually traces back further yet to when God changed the world in the most profound way but almost nobody noticed; it happened when He ordained what we call the Abrahamic Covenant. The Abrahamic Covenant was the moment at which God carved out a single person from among all other humans in existence in order to create a group of people that would be set apart for Himself. And through this distinct and separated new people group God chose to bring about the redemption of humanity. The Lord determined that this single person, Abraham, would increase from a small Middle Eastern family into a clan, and then into its own tribe, and then finally into a great nation of people that consisted of many tribes. God Himself would protect and nurture them.

^{CJB} **Genesis 12:1** *Now ADONAI said to Avram, "Get yourself out of your country, away from your kinsmen and away from your father's house, and go to the land that I will show you.*

² *I will make of you a great nation, I will bless you, and I will make your name great; and you are to be a blessing.*

³ *I will bless those who bless you, but I will curse anyone who curses you; and by you all the families of the earth will be blessed."*

Notice the use of the words "away" and "go". This covenant is based on a mysterious and

almost unfathomable irony. It is that through division, election and separation of the human species into two distinct groups (the one attached to Abraham, called Hebrews, and the other one that consists of everybody else, called gentiles) there will eventually evolve some kind of ill-defined unity in which those coming from Abraham (the seed of Abraham) will be the agency of God's blessing for everyone else, meaning all the gentile families of the world. This ministry received its name to honor and declare our participation in this pivotal covenant that began the redemption process.

The words of Genesis 12 say that Abraham is to completely separate (to go away) from his country and even from his extended family. He can no longer consider himself to be part of his biological father's lineage. Abraham was the physical, tangible earthly separation of a divinely chosen group from all other human beings that would be the visible image of the invisible spiritual separation of Abraham's faith and God from all other faiths and gods.

This physical and tangible separation naturally led into the Hebrews developing their own identity that was represented by their own customs and traditions. After God first sent the Hebrews to Egypt as guests of Pharaoh and Joseph where they would multiply to around 3 million people, and then later after God delivered the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and redeemed them, next He gave them the Torah, which centered upon the Law of Moses. This divine Hebrew Magna Carta liberated, refined and reset the lifestyles of the Hebrew refugees in a way that at once corrected and set straight their spiritual beliefs but also fully integrated those beliefs into their human behavior. The Torah defined everything for them; from how to conduct their relationship with God to how to conduct their relationships with humans (Hebrew and gentile), with animals, and with their earthly environment in general even including the soil they lived upon. This resulted in a uniqueness and distinctiveness of culture, religion, and daily life that was not only in harmony with God's heavenly principles but was also in obvious contrast (I would say even in direct opposition) to the other cultures, religions, and daily lives of everyone else on planet Earth. This unique Torah lifestyle was to be strictly maintained as a sign of trust and loyalty and as a visible acknowledgment of their separation for Yehoveh, the God of Abraham, the living God of all Creation. And so by the very nature of their relationship with God the ways of the Hebrews were designed to be intolerant of other gods and other ways of life (all gentile), and at the same time those Hebrew ways were intolerable to the gentile cultures of the world. Thus ongoing separation was assured; but so was enmity assured between the Hebrews and other cultures.

And to reiterate: this was all the divinely planned intention and consequence of the Abrahamic Covenant. So naturally, fallen humanity and their leader, Satan, began (and continues) to try to dilute and undo what God had done through Abraham, knowing if accomplished it could possibly defeat God's plan of redemption.

Fast forward from Abraham to the time of Nehemiah. Why was it so terribly important to the Lord that, first, the Jewish exiles of Babylon would be returned back to their own land (instead

of merely being allowed to remain in peace in the Persian Empire where they now were); then second, Ezra would be sent to reform the Priesthood and re-establish the Torah as the societal basis for the Jews of Judah; and then finally Nehemiah was sent to put up a wall that ONLY Jews could participate in constructing, and ONLY Jews could live behind, and ONLY Jews could control the holy city of Jerusalem? It was to re-establish the uniqueness of Hebrew culture upon the very land promised to Abraham and to once again visibly and tangibly divide and separate God's people from all others. It was to continue the purpose and the promise of the Abrahamic Covenant.

So as we continue in our Bible study, when we see Nehemiah make the decision to adamantly oppose any interference by, and to prohibit any inclusion of, the local gentile rulers and their people as concerns the matters of Jerusalem, Judah and Jewish culture it is the protection of the Abrahamic Covenant that we are seeing. Did Nehemiah consciously realize that that is what he was doing? I don't know; but if so it was only indirectly. But what he did directly realize and acknowledge time and again was that rebuilding Jerusalem was God's specific will and so God was orchestrating it all, and Nehemiah (as was Ezra) were willing vessels to do something that would, of course, infuriate the local gentile potentates surrounding Jerusalem as well as go against the grain of some of the Jews who found certain benefits from having a great tolerance for, if not alliances with, the enemy.

This same battle for the continuance of the Abrahamic Covenant is today occurring within the modern state of Israel, even though the majority of Jews and gentiles, and especially our leadership (including Christian leaders), have no awareness of it. And why would most Christians be aware of the nature of this battle if they are taught that God not only did away with the Covenant of Moses (the Law, the Torah), a belief that has become the second most foundational doctrine of the Church next to Salvation in Jesus, but that by the same logic then **all** previous covenants from God are also now null and void and that includes the Abrahamic Covenant?

So through the Abrahamic Covenant the Lord created a culture (the Hebrews) that felt that because of their set apart nature it would be impossible for anyone born outside of that unique Hebrew culture to come and join it in brotherhood unless that person completely renounced not only their former gods, but also the heritage they were born into; this would necessarily include willingly dissolving their former national ties and allegiances. And the outward expression of this renunciation and now a new brotherhood with the Hebrews would be, of course, the complete adoption of the unique Hebrew culture and lifestyle.

Since Babylon, that unique Hebrew culture and lifestyle has been encapsulated, outwardly, in Judaism, which has steadily evolved into a system of traditions and behaviors. This reality played a defining role in New Testament times when Paul was taking the Gospel message to gentiles, and trying to explain that while through faith in Yeshua gentiles were indeed joined to the Hebrew Covenants established by the Hebrew God, that didn't necessarily involve gentiles

renouncing their own cultures and adopting all the outward cultural expressions of Jewish culture that were most visible in the traditions and behaviors required by Judaism. And yet, it's not as though every aspect and tradition of Judaism was bad or wrong or should be shunned. So what was going on with Nehemiah, and what is going on with modern day Israel, and what is going on in Judaism and in Christianity has a common beginning point: the Covenant of Abraham. And we must never lose sight of this reality or we lose all context for understanding the world of the Bible and even our world of today.

Let's pick back up where we left off last week in Nehemiah Chapter 6. And it was at this point that all the attempts of Sanballat, Tobiyyah, and Geshem to get Nehemiah to travel to a place called the Ono Valley to have a meeting with them had failed. These meeting invitations were in the form of a particular message sent to Nehemiah 4 times; and each time Nehemiah rejected it because he suspected that their intent was to assassinate him.

A 5th message was sent, but it was meant as a means to spread a rumor. And the rumor it hoped to initiate was that Nehemiah was building the walls of Jerusalem to use it as a citadel of rebellion against King Artaxerxes, and that Nehemiah was about to declare himself as King of Judah. Nehemiah denied it, and told the ruler that this pack of lies would still not coerce him to a meeting that would likely result in his death.

So next these persistent gentile leaders tried a new tactic altogether and enlisted the services of a prophet (or better a false prophet) named Shemaiah, whose job it was to try and convince Nehemiah that he was in imminent mortal danger and to abandon his post and flee for his life. Or, alternatively, to go with Shemaiah to the Temple, enter the sanctuary and lock the doors, in order to escape a plot to assassinate Nehemiah. Nehemiah refused to run away leaving his people to the wolves; and also he refused to stay but to hide inside the Holy Temple because God's laws prohibited anyone but Levite priests to enter; Nehemiah was a layman. So once again we see a Godly leader who exhibits obedience to the Lord, courage in the face of personal danger, and unwavering leadership but with a shepherd's mentality, in contrast to some typical worldly local leaders who cared only for their own power, agenda and wealth. Nehemiah is a man for all seasons, and leader for us to pattern ourselves after.

Let's re-read the last few verses of chapter 6.

RE-READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 6:15 – end

This chapter concludes with some important historical information. It is that from the moment that Nehemiah ordered the wall rebuilt and work commenced, it took only 52 days to get the walls re-built to a point where there was a completed protective fence around Jerusalem,

without gaps. However the wall was rebuilt to only half its original height. Later they would add to its height but without nearly so much urgency needed. The wall was completed on the 25th day of the month of Elul, only days before Yom Kippur, and less than a month before the start of Sukkot. So, this work was accomplished during the hot summer months that made it all the more difficult. Yet, because it was summer, there was an advantage because there were more hours of daylight than in the winter and so more work could get done. This also means that from the time Nehemiah first received his royal commission to go to Judah and rebuild Jerusalem, to when the wall was completed to its half-height was a mere 6 months. What an accomplishment!

And while Nehemiah deserves the greatest credit for his planning skills, persistence and refusing to be deterred from his mission, even by threats on his life, it was the zeal with which the Jewish laborers worked that is so inspirational. It was truly a community-wide, cause-driven and sacrificial effort because these laborers had to set aside their own best interests in doing their farming to have food for their families so that they could devote their work hours to rebuilding the wall. Even so, let us realize for the sake of intellectual honesty that although a number of previous administrations had tried and failed to rebuild the wall over the past century, each had made some amount of progress. So what Nehemiah and the Jews of Judah accomplished began at a point of construction that was far advanced from what Zerubbabel found waiting for him as he led the first group of Jewish exiles back from Babylon to Jerusalem.

I can't help but chuckle a bit of an evil little chuckle when we read in verse 16 of these gentile rulers and their people who did everything short of war to try to subvert the Jews from rebuilding their city, falling into depression and losing self esteem over the sight of the completed protective barrier around Jerusalem. But what really put a chill over them was that they knew that such an accomplishment was because of Israel's God. Battles of this kind were regularly seen as much as battles between the gods of the different nations as between people. And to the mind of the ancient, that the Jews did this in such an expedient fashion was proof positive that their God was more powerful than the gods of those who opposed them.

Verse 17 is a sort of additional commentary NOT about what came next, but rather provides us some additional information about the sorts of things that had gone on during this period of wall building that had just concluded. And what we find is that certain unnamed leaders and aristocrats of Judah (Jews) had been having correspondence with these pagan enemy rulers. Without doubt these Jews acted as informers who kept Toviyah and Sanvallat well apprised about what was happening behind those walls. And yet, as one would expect to happen, and as we remember the mass divorces that Ezra required of those Jews who had married foreigners, many relationships involving family ties had been created between the Jews of Judah and the gentiles of Samaria and Ammon. Thus we read that Toviyah was actually the son in law of a Jew, and Toviyah's own son Yochanon had married a Jewish girl. So the Middle East being what it is, those extended family members were generally bound to remain an ally with Toviyah even if their personal sympathies might lay with Nehemiah. In fact, verse

19 explains that these Jews who were related to Toviyah tried to speak on his behalf to Nehemiah, and then whatever Nehemiah had to say about Toviyah in return was reported back to him.

Bottom line: Toviyah manipulated his Jewish in-laws and his friendships with some other influential Jews to try and convince Nehemiah to cave in to him. So Nehemiah had insiders working against him that no doubt caused him to take certain steps that may not have been particularly popular with the common Jews (such as when he would not allow these Jewish family men to return home at the end of the day, but rather had to sleep inside Jerusalem). However as their leader, the wise and experienced Nehemiah knew things about some of these Jewish nobles who had ties with the enemy; things that could not be shared with the common Jews. So Nehemiah had to navigate this tangled situation with as much delicacy as strength.

I'll tell you a little secret: the job of a leader is certainly not to alienate or lord over those he is leading; but neither is it his first duty to make friends and try to satisfy everyone. Sometimes a leader must see through a person who seems sympathetic, or popular, or well meaning and harmless enough; but in reality that person is only waiting for an opportunity to subvert, manipulate, and otherwise cause division if not havoc. This problem is one of the most common social dynamics found within a group and one of the most common things an experienced leader knows to be always on the lookout for. Those not in leadership usually don't know about it or detect it until it's too late because they have other duties and interests and personal gifts, so they don't know about things that have gone on behind the scenes but which the leader is well aware.

That was precisely the case for Nehemiah; he was always in the crosshairs not only of his enemies but also of those Jews who pretended to be loyal friends and followers. And he handled it about as well as it could have been handled, but not without some of the inevitable fallout. We haven't encountered anything that tells us that Nehemiah was well-liked or popular; he was simply someone with high integrity who got the job done when no one else could. In fact, we've seen him regularly going before the Lord essentially saying to God that You know my heart and my purpose and why I'm doing what must be done, so please give me merit for it. I can't help but believe these pleas to the Lord were because he often had criticisms leveled at him (some deserved, some not) and there was no end to the complaining and second guessing. But he proceeded calmly and confidently because he understood that this was just all part of the job description; a job God offered to him and a job that he had signed up for.

Let's move on to chapter 7.

READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 7 all

Some time has passed since the end of chapter 6; no doubt many weeks, possibly a couple of months. Saying the walls were complete is in relation to hanging the doors so that a completed defensive perimeter was formed. Work on the walls would still continue for quite some time, as they needed to be built higher than their present height of around 15 feet in order to give the type of protection that was needed against armies as opposed to guarding against unwanted thieves and bands of marauders.

We stop hearing of Sanvallat and Toviyah at this point, but that doesn't mean they have thrown in the towel. This is the Middle East and time definitely does not heal all wounds. Shame and honor still mattered and Sanvallat, Toviyah, Geshem and others had some level of shame they were undoubtedly seething over because of being outfoxed by Nehemiah and thus making them look foolish in front of their people. So watchfulness by the Jews was still required. Thus the first thing we hear of upon completion of the wall is the establishment of a system of guards and watchmen atop the newly built gates. However it is most curious that we read of Levites and singers (who were also Levites) being appointed as gatekeepers and guards. This is hardly the job of Temple workers. So some scholars see this as some type of later addition to the original text. There is no evidence for this other than these scholars don't think these words belong here. However if we assume that the text is correct, then considering the light population of Jerusalem at this time, and what could only be called a continuing state of emergency at least in Nehemiah's estimation, it is reasonable to think that there was little choice but (for a time) to enlist some readily available Temple workers to augment too few laymen as watchmen and guards. After all; the bulk of the laborers would have gone home and back to farming after completing their obligation to finish the wall.

In verse 2 we see Nehemiah staffing his governor's administration now that a reasonable level of security has been achieved. His brother Hanani, and another fellow of a similar but different name, Hananyah, are assigned as co-administrators over Jerusalem. The text calls Hananyah the commander of the citadel and I think this probably means that he was part of the royal bodyguard that came with Nehemiah from Shushan in Persia; that is he was a military man and it made sense to assign him as the chief commander for the defense of Jerusalem. We already know of Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, because he was the one who brought the plight of Jerusalem to his brother's attention and got the ball rolling in the first place.

Verse 3 is another one that some scholars consider a problem. They see it as a somewhat unintelligible passage. Admittedly it is not clear, at least not in the way that Westerners construct sentences. But we must allow that what is said here is said by someone over 2000 years ago in a Hebrew culture, so likely it made perfect sense to him. The gist of it seems to be this: the non-Levites of the city were organized into a rotation system of guard duty. Many residents' homes were literally built into the city wall (a usual and common practice in that era), and so those residents were specifically assigned to watch the wall sections where their homes were located.

But as extra precaution, for the short term at least, the gates were to be closed when the sun was the hottest and then (it is assumed) the gates will be reopened by the same guards as the early afternoon passes. Now this might seem strange as to why they would do this. But S.R. Driver has discovered at least 2 documented instances in Roman times when city gates were overrun because it was the habit of the soldiers to take a siesta after eating lunch, and this practice was well known by the enemy. And since in our story it was laypeople being used as gate guards, it would be all the more tempting for those guarding the Jerusalem gates to take a little time off after lunch and relax figuring who would attack at the hottest time of the day and in broad daylight? So Nehemiah's solution was essentially to close the city gates during that time and not reopen them until the people on guard duty were ready to be alert again. Pretty clever.

Now we run into a very serious demographic problem that Nehemiah knew had to be solved as rapidly as possible. After the wall was finished the next task was to increase Jerusalem's population. Without that Jerusalem would never be truly secure, and the economy would continue to languish. We need to grasp that Jerusalem was significantly smaller at this time than prior to the Babylonian exile. However, the main advantage to being inside a city was the protection afforded by its walls. Until just now, there had been no walls so most common Jews made their homes in the countryside so that they could farm for a living. Those who were now farmers had no interest in abruptly abandoning their fields and moving back to city life. Thus many destroyed homes inside the city walls still lay in ruins, and there were none who seemed interested in rebuilding them and living there. What to do?

In response to this dilemma, God inspired Nehemiah with an idea. And this idea began by drawing up a genealogical listing of all the Jewish families who returned from Babylon and where they were now living; the goal was to relocate some of them to Jerusalem. And as he was formulating his plan, trying to figure out just how to perform his census, a list was discovered of families with their genealogies and where they went to in Judah upon returning from Babylon; Nehemiah felt that this was a great stroke of luck and no doubt the best place to start. The list we read here in Nehemiah 7 is the same one we find in Ezra chapter 2 so we can be certain of its source.

The two lists are not identical but are very close, and the minor differences are because their purposes were different. The order of names, some of the numbers associated, spellings of some names and things of that nature vary a little between the Nehemiah 7 and Ezra 2 lists as we have them in our Bibles, but they are obviously essentially the same list and if you want some detailed information about the list, please consult our study of Ezra chapter 2.

I would like to borrow a brief summary of this chapter from the esteemed scholar H.G.M Williamson who I think does a wonderful job of seeing the spiritually important principles contained in a chapter that on the surface seems mostly about dry bookkeeping. He comments in this way:

“Whereas Nehemiah may have regarded the discovery of the list of the families who made up the core of the population as administratively fortuitous, we should not overlook its present, theological statement: those who should rightly populate the City of God (Jerusalem) stand in direct continuity with the community who had earlier experienced God’s redemption in the second Exodus (the return from Babylon). We, too, do well to remember that necessary as bricks and mortar or organizational structures may be, Christ’s Church is neither founded on nor maintained by these alone; it is they who have experienced the grace of God for themselves who become members of Christ’s bride, the new Jerusalem”.

I’m ending this lesson with this statement for a couple of reasons: first because I think he is right on in his points. And second because of the last few words of this statement that might have startled some of you, especially if you have been raised up in a modern Evangelical Church environment. And this statement is that Christ’s bride is the New Jerusalem (a statement that I am in full agreement with). Why would Mr. Williamson think this and why would I concur? Because despite what we often hear about the identity of the bride of Christ as being the Church, in fact the bride of Christ is the New Jerusalem consisting of the redeemed city inhabited by its redeemed people. The city and the people cannot be separated; they are spoken of as a unit, an entity.

Revelation 19:7-8 CJB

⁷ "Let us rejoice and be glad! Let us give him the glory! For the time has come for the wedding of the Lamb, and his Bride has prepared herself- ⁸ fine linen, bright and clean has been given her to wear."

CJB Revelation 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the old heaven and the old earth had passed away, and the sea was no longer there. ² Also I saw the holy city, New Yerushalayim, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

Revelation 21:9-10 CJB

⁹ One of the seven angels having the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues approached me and said, "Come! I will show you the Bride, the Wife of the Lamb."

¹⁰ He carried me off in the Spirit to the top of a great, high mountain and showed me the holy city, Yerushalayim, coming down out of heaven from God.

New Jerusalem is Christ's bride. The organic connection between Israel, Jerusalem, the Redeemed and Yeshua's bride couldn't be stronger. And this is why we must, together, continue to work to realize our Hebrew faith roots, comfort Israel, learn about the Torah and the entire Word of God, and to inspire those of the Christian and Jewish community who currently are oblivious to this connection to open their eyes.

We'll take up Nehemiah chapter 8 next time.