

NEHEMIAH

Lesson 10, Chapter 8

Today is going to be packed with information so have those pencils ready. Up to now the story of Nehemiah has been mainly about a devout, skilled, single-minded Jewish man who was sent to Jerusalem from the Persian capital by God to lead an endeavor that others had tried but failed; rebuilding the walls and city of Jerusalem. This is one of those books in the Bible that opens up cans of worms we might regret not leaving alone. It meddles in our personal lives and in our relationship with Our Lord as we examine our motives for what we believe and what we do; and it boldly calls us to PERSONAL action to make right what has been wrong, and to set aside our own best interests for the good of our faith community. We have also seen many practical applications of Biblical principles that are easily adapted to our modern lives, and others that leave us wondering. We have been given the example of not only what strong Godly leadership looks like in operation, but also the challenges a Godly leader faces, whereby sometimes the only option is to pick a solution from a short list among which none is particularly attractive. And we have seen the response of a Godly people who trusted God, knew their cause was greater than themselves, and so whole-heartedly dove headlong into accomplishing it.

Surprisingly we also found that the enemies of Judah, their location, and their irrational distrust and hatred for the Jews was the same then as it is now. The desire of a pagan enemy to occupy and control Jerusalem is the same then as now. But where is this burning desire, this stubborn ultimatum, to have Jerusalem as their own, which seems to dominate the thoughts of Israel's enemies, coming from? Recall that Nehemiah was perplexed by it too, as he responded to Sanvallat, Tovyah, and Geshem's demand to control the rebuilding of Jerusalem by saying: "But you have no share, right or **history** to commemorate in Jerusalem". In other words; what about Jerusalem makes controlling it so important to you since Jerusalem has never been your home, territory, or capital; but it has always been so for the Jews?

That question is best answered by recalling the ancient covenant that God made with Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. All the issues about who the Hebrews are, how they were established, where they are to live, who owns the land, which single city on all the earth has Yehoveh set His claim and Name to, and what constitutes the identity of a set apart people for God, are all contained within the Abrahamic Covenant. And thus the battle we see in Nehemiah over Jerusalem, and the battle we see in our time over Jerusalem, is all about the Abrahamic Covenant, even though few people on this planet (including the antagonists) seem to realize it.

And finally we ended our last lesson with a question whose answer is provocative, but ought not to be: who is the Bride of Christ? On the surface the book of Nehemiah seems like a strange place to visit that issue until we go to God's Word and find out the answer to that question is Jerusalem. And that answer is not allegorical, nor is it derived from hazy hints or vague clues, nor is it a manmade doctrine. Rather Jerusalem as Christ's bride is explicitly stated in Revelation 21:

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.

This Revelation Jerusalem is sometimes called **New** Jerusalem only because in its final form it appears on the **New** Earth. That is, everything is made new. However the New Jerusalem is still in Israel and it is still Jerusalem the city where God has established His Name. So we find that the matter of Jerusalem is not one that is purely temporal, or temporary. It doesn't end when Christ returns, and not even when heaven and earth pass away and are replaced with new ones. Jerusalem is central to God's plans not just of redemption, but of the eternal state that all whose names have been written into the Book of Life shall experience. To be clear, however, Jerusalem cannot be separated from its people and it has always been so. Since Jerusalem is the **city** where God has placed His Name, then it is intended to be occupied only by those **humans** upon whom He has placed His Name. Once again: this is the battle that Nehemiah was facing, and modern day Israel is facing. And since this is connected directly to the Abrahamic Covenant, we can continue in our study of Nehemiah understanding that this is the context for what we are reading both in the Bible and in today's news headlines.

However as we begin chapter 8 we transition into the Theological realm from what to this point has seemed like mostly practical historical records of a building program, and documenting problems with local trouble makers, and of listing certain prominent Jewish families that returned from exile in order to take a census. And since Ezra was the spiritual leader of Judah who arrived several years before Nehemiah did, we see him re-emerge and re-introduce the Covenant of Moses to the people of Judah who had just finished the wall. Even so, we need to keep in perspective that Nehemiah and Ezra were living at around 420 B.C., while the Abrahamic Covenant was ordained around 1800 B.C. So for the Jews that makes the Abrahamic Covenant very ancient and also very distant from their thoughts. The Covenant of Moses that Ezra would teach (which is the main subject of chapter 8) was around 900 years old by now; so it too was very ancient and very distant.

Hebrew society, and the world in general, had undergone tremendous changes and advancements since those exiles of the Egyptian Exodus received the Torah in the wilderness. Most Jews (the tribe of Judah) were now living outside of their homeland. Ten of the original tribes of Israel were now exiled, missing and scattered all over the Asian continent, having assimilated into the gentile nations where they were living. Let me put this in easier to grasp terms: we are today living about the same amount of time-distance from the Crusades, as Nehemiah was living from the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. And for us whatever happened during the Crusades is not only ancient history, but drawing any practical parallels between the living conditions and political and religious realities of that time versus our world of the 21st century is almost unimaginable. That is at least partly what Ezra was dealing with as he read the Law to the Jews, and then the people and even the lay leaders tried to figure out how they might be able to follow God's laws and commandments considering the radically different circumstances they faced as opposed to when Moses first received it on Mt. Sinai.

Let's read Nehemiah chapter 8 together. We'll start with the final verse of chapter 7 since it really belongs as the first verse of chapter 8.

READ NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 8 all

The first issue we encounter is whether what we just read occurred immediately upon the completion of the walls (on Elul 25), or had some time passed? Elul is the 6th month of the year and we're told that the congregational meeting and celebration led by Ezra that is described in Nehemiah 8 began on the 1st day of the 7th month, Tishri. However could that possibly be the case? The people would have had to finish the wall and then exhausted return home to their various towns and villages, gather their families and then journey back to Jerusalem. Nehemiah would have had to gather all the family leaders around Judah for the census in less than a week. Many scholars surmise that such a scenario is a practical impossibility and so offer the solution that the historical value of this section of Nehemiah is worthless fantasy, or that perhaps this congregational gathering actually occurred the following year and not immediately after completing the wall.

Once again, with no evidence but only personal opinions and speculations, some Bible scholars seek to question the veracity or historical accuracy of God's Word. I see no practical reason why this couldn't have happened exactly as told. Since this event of chapter 8 involved a religious gathering, why couldn't their religious leader, Ezra, have been planning this event for some time while the wall building was ongoing? It's not impossible to do 2 things at once and to co-ordinate them. In fact there is no reason that these celebrations of the 7th month couldn't have happened regardless of the stage of wall reconstruction Nehemiah might have been at; completing the wall was not at all needed to have this event. For sure this was not a celebration to commemorate completing the wall, it was to celebrate God's ordained Biblical Feasts, and those occurred on known and fixed days in the Torah.

If we know the Torah we know that the 1st day of the 7th month (Tishri) is called **Yom Teruah**, the Day of Trumpets, the first of the series of 3 fall feasts, all of which are celebrated in the 7th month of the year.

Leviticus 23:24 CJB

24 "Tell the people of Isra'el, 'In the seventh month, the first of the month is to be for you a day of complete rest for remembering, a holy convocation announced with blasts on the shofar.

CJB Numbers 29:1

"In the seventh month, on the first day of the month, you are to have a holy convocation; do not do any kind of ordinary work; it is a day of blowing the shofar for you.

How to observe the Day of Trumpets is only lightly defined in Holy Scripture. We are given the ritual offerings to be made by the Priests at the Temple and we have the call for the common people to come to a holy assembly. But other than for blowing shofars or trumpets and that the day is to be a Sabbath, there is no other instruction. As we move through the chapter we notice that no mention is made of celebrating Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, on the 10th day of the month (an exceptionally holy and important observance), but instead we jump right over it to Sukkot (which begins on the 15th day of the same month).

In our time the Biblical feast celebrated on the 1st day of the 7th month is no longer called **Yom Teruah**, the Day of Trumpets, but rather **Rosh Hashanah**: Jewish New Year. And as the two different names tell us obviously these are two entirely different purposes for the same day, and this says that something strange has happened over time. So this would be a good place to take a brief detour to explain about the Jewish calendar. I realize we've talked about this several times, but it is complex; and since it is something that modern day religious and secular Jews, Messianic Jews, and even Hebrew Roots folks pay close attention to we need to understand it to help us better understand the Scriptures. And frankly, I'm inundated with questions about Biblical and Jewish calendar issues, and most of the time what is assumed is ill informed and is actually some peculiar mix of Tradition, Bible, Judaism, and just plain error. So let's begin with this issue of calling the 1st day of the 7th month (Tishri) Jewish New Year. Common sense asks a very simple question that I hope you have already thought about: how can a New Year begin in the 7th month of a year? It sounds like an oxymoron. By all reason and logic New Year's Day ought to be the 1st day of the 1st month of any new year. Right?

The truth is that there is nothing approaching consensus within Judaism and within Jewish and Christian academia to explain exactly when it happened that the Jews started celebrating the 1st day of Tishri as the start of a new year. What we do know is this: the words **Rosh Hashanah** (meaning head of the year) never appear in the Hebrew Bible, and there is also no mention of a New Year celebration. The first documented mention of the 1st of Tishri as being celebrated as Jewish New Year only happens in the 1st century A.D., at around the time of Apostle Paul. In the teachings of **Hillel** and **Shammai** (the leading Jewish teachers of that day) there is a recorded discussion of the proper prayers to be recited on New Year's Day, the 1st of Tishri.

A bit later, in the early 200's A.D., the newly created Mishna records rules for the 1st of Tishri being reckoned as Jewish New Year, and among those rules is that this date shall be used for counting years (that is, the Hebrew year advances by one on the 1st of Tishri), and for calculating Sabbatical Year cycles, and therefore also for counting Jubilee years.

What we also know from ancient records is that the 1st of Tishri was regularly used by the Babylonians and Persians for counting the years of a king's reign. And that the 1st of Tishri was typically counted as the beginning of the agricultural year. Further, other than for pure speculation by Bible commentators and Jewish Rabbis, there is no written evidence, and there is no Jewish tradition that can be found that claims that before the Jews were exiled to Babylon there existed such as thing as Jewish New Year. So the only thing ordained or celebrated on the 1st day of Tishri, the 7th month, was **Yom Teruah**, the Day of Trumpets or the Feast of Trumpets.

Biblically speaking it is the month of **Nisan** that is called the 1st month of the year and this is found in Leviticus 23 and in other places (of this there is no debate). So clearly the 1st of Tishri as the designated New Year, even though it still retains the designation as the 7th month of the year, memorializes some change that occurred but that the Jews weren't ready to completely re-number the months of the year to accommodate this new tradition.

Now let's talk about this from another angle. The Torah and the Old Testament do not use names for months. Rather like the days of the week, in Hebrew months are only numbered one through twelve. So why are modern day Jewish calendars NOT called by the number of the month (like in the Torah), but instead are called by specific names (like Nisan and Elul and Tishri)? Because those month names are not Hebrew, they are Babylonian names. And, once again, we find no use of those names until some time AFTER the return from Babylon. And since modern Hebrew Bibles are taken from the Masoretic texts that were written around the 10th century A.D., we'll often find those Babylonian names inserted into the Scriptural text, but they were not there in the original. Truth is, it doesn't really hurt anything to give months names rather than numbers, anymore than it hurts anything to give names to the days of the week instead of the Biblical way of just numbering them.

However, as anyone who has lived long enough learns, little things that at the time seem insignificant can lead to bigger things of much greater significance. One step down any slippery slope almost inevitably paves the way for more steps. What is self-evident is that the Jewish exile to Babylon represented a sea change in how the Jews called their months, in the ways they celebrated both Biblically ordained and manmade events, and even (as with Rosh Hashanah) changed the way they counted years on a calendar. The modern Karaite Jews (who are strictly religious but do not follow Rabbinic Law), refuse to follow anything but the Biblical definition of the calendar as we find it in the Torah. So for them the new year occurs on Nisan the 1st, the Biblically defined 1st month.

And from the practical viewpoint we must remember that only about 5% of Jews ever returned to their homeland, Judah, from the Babylonian exile (and that's probably too generous an estimate); almost all Jews voluntarily remained where they were in exile and later became known collectively as the Diaspora. So it is rather easy to see how after 3 or 4 generations in a foreign land that welcomed them, and in a situation where assimilation made life much easier, the Jews adopted many Babylonian ways and traditions and naturally some of the associated vocabulary. And some of those Babylonian ways and traditions slowly crept back with them to Judah including a New Year celebration on the 1st day of Tishri, which was an established Babylonian tradition, but was given the very Jewish name of **Rosh Hashanah** so that it fit better with Jewish society.

And by the way: the full name for the Babylonian month of Tishri is **Arah Tishritum**. In Aramaic (the language of Babylon) it meant, "The month of beginning". So, I'm sorry to inform you that when Orthodox Jews, secular Jews, Messianic Jews and Hebrew Roots folks stress celebrating Rosh Hashanah, we are really celebrating Babylonian New Year. So to turn up our noses at the typical January 1st New Year and declaring it as a pagan Roman day and non-Biblical, while insisting that Jewish New Year must be Biblical and holy, is simply wrong. In fact it is rather disingenuous to call it Jewish New Year because the Jews didn't invent it; they borrowed it from their Babylonian captors.

But what is perhaps most troubling to me is the entire notion of the Jewish leadership and Jewish people virtually discarding the name and occasion that God gave to the day, **Yom Teruah**, and all but the most religious Jews discarding the Torah commandment that it is a Sabbath of complete rest and a day for blowing trumpets (and nothing more). Many Jews in Israel, and most outside of Israel, see it as a time of partying just as do gentiles. And this is because such a change in both name and meaning disconnects an important God-ordained holy day from the 7 Biblical Feasts (of which it is the 5th Feast) and confuses and obscures its prophetic place as a milestone of the redemptive process in the series of 7 Biblical Feasts. **Yom Teruah** is the victim of that slippery slope that we talked about.

I'll close our detour of the Jewish calendar with this: I have no doubt that there was nothing but good will and good intent when Christmas was invented. However, just as when Rosh

Hashanah was created, Christmas was created using existing pagan holiday symbols and dates, and well established religious, political and traditional reasons for its existence (that had nothing to do with Yeshua) with the result that it all got mixed in with an otherwise admirable purpose for its creation. Of itself there is nothing wrong with calling a day New Year's Day to mark the start of a new year, or calling a day Christmas to remember the birth of Christ. However look what it has led to (in fact the result was entirely predictable). One seemingly harmless manmade tradition opens the door to next. Once the tradition is established and the Biblical ways are modified or set aside, then anything goes. And then the God-Commanded Biblical holy days become secondary or forgotten, but the holidays born from new traditions become dominant because they please us more than the days God ordained, since they came from our imaginings in the first place and so we can make them anything we want them to be.

If we pay close attention we are seeing a great example of this quandary of holy days versus tradition in Nehemiah, and it shows how very difficult it is to keep God's Word as time marches on, and as societies change, and as world conditions evolve, and as we create new traditions and customs to deal with it all; and soon in a couple of generations no one even asks where the traditions came from or if they are, as currently practiced, even right minded. That's enough about calendar issues for today.

What I so enjoy about the opening of chapter 8 in Nehemiah is the continuing and inspirational zeal of the common folks of Judah. As a Pastor I live for those times when those I speak to and care for seem to enthusiastically drink in every drop of the Word of God. It was the common folks of Judah who pressed Ezra to bring the Law of Moses to them, and to teach them. These people had been living in or near the ruins of their holy city for many years; an unwelcome daily reminder of the ruinous effects of rebelling against the Lord. They were eager to hear God's Word, so that they could learn and obey it; no doubt hoping to avoid any future disasters.

What else warms my heart is that it was not only the men who came, but the women and children; this convocation was open to all who were able to be still and understand. What this is referring to is those who were mature enough to make sense of what they heard. So a small child, 6 or 7 years old perhaps, was not included in this group, while a 10 year old might be. This was so very important because if these children could be taught the truth of the Torah from the earliest age, then the chances that they would follow it and discern the difference between God's Word and the manmade traditions that had been so dominant was all the greater. And here in verse 2 it is confirmed that this congregational meeting began on the 1st day of the 7th month, which from a Biblical standpoint would have been the occasion of **Yom Teruah**. So, from the Torah perspective, they were at least following the commandment for the Biblical Feast of **Yom Teruah** to meet together in a holy convocation. But the logical question comes: were they actually celebrating the Feast of Trumpets, or were they celebrating Babylonian New Year? Or perhaps some mix of the two? There is nothing here that tells us. However, since the earliest documentation we have of this day being called Rosh Hashanah is the first century A.D., then it is highly unlikely that here, some 500 years earlier, that it was

New Year that was being celebrated.

Verse 3 explains that Ezra read the Torah to the people from early morning (meaning first light) until noon; probably around 6 hours. They were standing NOT in the Temple courtyard, (because women were present) but rather near the Watergate. More details are now given to us. A special wooden platform was constructed so Ezra could be seen and heard by the large crowd. This is our first clue that indeed this day had been anticipated for some time and preparations had been made well in advance. Making a platform like this using rudimentary carpentry tools would have taken weeks. Thirteen named men stood on either side of him; leaders of some sort no doubt. But who they were, and exactly what they represented is not stated. Might they have been Levites? Or Priests? All we have is 13 listed names.

The reading of the Torah was preceded by prayer. We are told that this prayer was essentially praising the Lord. Let me comment here that almost every time we see the word Lord or Adonai in these verses (and in most verses of the Old Testament), the word in the text is not Lord or Adonai, it is YHWH, the ineffable formal name of God that the Lord Himself told to Moses. So verse 6 says that Ezra **barach** Yehoveh, using His actual name, and not a generic term for God. And Ezra then incorporates a popular Persian term for God as he calls him the “great God” (**hagaddol Elohim**). We won’t find this term used anywhere else in Hebrew Scripture. But considering that the bulk of the people standing before him had come back to Judah from Persia, it is understandable that Ezra would use such a familiar term in this setting.

We get some vivid imagery here of the customs of worship of the Jews in that era. They shout “Amen” out loud in unison to denote public agreement with what Ezra had just prayed. They raise their hands to the Lord to show their need for Him. They bow their heads before the Lord to show their reverence for Him, and they fall prostrate on the ground in submission to Him. There are many symbolic ways for us to express love, admiration, loyalty, humility, and so on to God and while we see only a few here, we all need to be very accepting of our brothers and sisters in the faith who have their own favorite ways. I can assure you that most of what you personally choose to do in that regard has as much to do with your personality as an extrovert or an introvert, as it does with whatever religious background and culture you grew up under. It is we humans who tend to get bent out of shape over the various expressions towards the Lord that happens around us in a worship service; not God.

Verse 7 gives us a list of 13 more people, but this time they are positively identified as Levites. Should we see any significance in the number 13 since we’ve now encountered it twice? Possibly, but I think most anything we could think of would be fanciful. What was the function of these 13 Levites? It was to help the people understand what Ezra had read to them. Look; this isn’t at all hard to picture. The Jewish people were hearing the Law (something they were completely unfamiliar with) and they needed help in just how to grasp what some of those laws and commands meant that now had to be applied in the context of their time, in their living conditions, as Jews living nearly a millennium after when the Law was first given. Interested

people have questions when they're being taught; and we were told earlier that these folks were eager and attentive.

But it also appears that these 13 Levites had Torah scrolls in their hands, and they were reading, translating, and explaining to individuals or small groups. I can only explain this by saying that I imagine not everyone in the crowd could hear Ezra clearly, and so the Levites were roaming around in areas where people couldn't hear. In fact, this is precisely the function that God ordained the Levites to do; to teach laypeople the Torah. Also imagine that not everyone spoke Hebrew. In fact since the language of the exile in both Babylon and Persian was an early dialect of Aramaic, and even though Hebrew and Aramaic have similarities, no doubt many in the crowd knew little or no Hebrew and needed translators to repeat what Ezra read to them in their now "native" tongue. Plus, the Torah was of course written in Hebrew.

I have been to a number of Messianic and Christian worship services in Israel and this exact thing going on is the norm. Even though Hebrew is the official language of Israel, Israel is in reality a melting pot of languages due to so many Jews coming home from Russia, Ethiopia, Poland, and some English speaking places as well. So if a congregation is able, they will have translators sit with groups of people in the audience who speak the various languages, and they will interpret the Hebrew that the Rabbi or Pastor or Bishop is speaking and follow him along speaking in Russian, English, Polish, or Ethiopian. This is actually a pretty difficult and distracting process, but the people are so hungry for God's Word that they will strain to learn it.

In light of that, I would like to close with this thought that begins with a short passage from the Gospel of Mark.

^{CJB} Mark 6:1 *Then Yeshua left and went to his home town, and his talmidim followed him.*

² *On Shabbat he started to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They asked, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom he has been given? What are these miracles worked through him?"*

³ *Isn't he just the carpenter? the son of Miryam? the brother of Ya'akov and Yosi and Y'hudah and Shim'on? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.*

⁴ *But Yeshua said to them. "The only place people don't respect a prophet is in his home town, among his own relatives, and in his own house."*

⁵ *So he could do no miracles there, other than lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them.*

⁶ *He was amazed at their lack of trust. Then he went through the surrounding towns and*

villages, teaching.

If the speaking and teaching of God's Word is not met with a proper attitude of acute interest by the hearers, and does not bring forth a kind of responsiveness from those listening that leads to incorporating the wisdom of the Word into our own lives, then the Word has fallen flat and there is no practical value to it ever having been spoken in the first place.

In this passage in Mark even Yeshua, our Christ, was so frustrated by the lack of expectancy and by the poor attitudes of the listeners who mostly just questioned His credentials since they knew Him and that he wasn't from the formal Jewish religious establishment, He gave up on them. He laid hands on a few sick people to heal them (who must have expressed trust that He could heal them) but otherwise was unable to do the miracles that He wanted to do in the lives of these people whom He cared for. So, He left and took His message to others who wanted to hear it and would accept the many wonderful blessings and miracles He had for them.

We'll continue this chapter next time.