

UNFINISHED HOPE

OUR RUINS - HIS RESTORATION



Ezra - Nehemiah | DISCIPLESHIP GUIDE

UNFINISHED HOPE

Intro | Our Ruins – His Restoration | 5

Discussion/Study Guides | Sermons | 7

Appendix | Word Studies | 48

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“Did you wake up feeling fragile? Read the bible till you find a promise strong enough to carry you through the day.”

-John Piper

¹Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. ²And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?” ³Tobiah the Ammonite was beside him, and he said, “Yes, what they are building—if a fox goes up on it he will break down their stone wall!”

- Nehemiah 4:1-3

INTRO | OUR RUINS – HIS RESTORATION

By Dave Parker – Kirkland, WA

In the Spring of 2017, area pastors gathered for a fascinating day of study of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah led by Dr. Tim Mackie, co-founder of The Bible Project. This was the kick off to yet another time of study and collaboration which has resulted in the booklet you hold and the accompanying sermon series entitled *“Our Ruins – His Restoration”*. What follows has come from hours of study and dissection of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah which, although two books, can easily be read and understood as one.

You are heading out on a journey of truth. Not always neat and prettily packaged truth but truth nonetheless. The Bible is absolutely honest. It doesn't hold anything back. We see the victories and failures of people as they are on display for centuries and this study is no different.

Let's set the stage and backstory. For decades the people of God, the Israelites have been in exile after years of disobedience to God who had brought them out of Egyptian slavery. Now, through the providential hand of God, armed with the hope of restoration that Jeremiah proclaimed, they begin to come *“home”*. Home to *“Promised Land”* that is being delivered to them once again. Jerusalem, the spiritual hub of *“home”* isn't the same. The temple is in dis-repair, the city is a mess and of course, the wall – the symbol of security and defense is no longer what it once was. This is the story of the attempt to rebuild, repair and restore.

We tend to accentuate the victories and ignore the failures in the lives of leaders like Ezra, Zerubbabel and Nehemiah but did you ever feel the tension in just explaining away the failures? Did you ever think that in those failures, God may be showing his redemption? Notice the wins but also note the losses as Ezra attempts to restore a love of worship and the Torah, Zerubbabel leads the charge in rebuilding the temple and Nehemiah leads others to rebuild the wall. What do you do with some of

the greatest leaders of all time who get to the end only to find that all that has been worked for is, or appears to be, falling apart? Does that make them a failure, or is it simply another longing that we have to see all the wrongs somehow made right?

This story of returning and rebuilding is our story as well. We can either ignore or embrace the human element -- the heart -- that tends to keep getting in the way and hijacking our well-intentioned efforts. It's our hope that as you allow these pages to lead you into your time of study, discussion and reflection that you will not just see historical fact but that you will see the thread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ being brought to the surface through revelation by the Holy Spirit. That no matter what "ruins" your life may be surrounded with, God's "restoration" is constantly and faithfully at work through Jesus. Your mess is never too big for Jesus' healing restorative power. Live daily in that hope.

As you begin, be encouraged with the same words Tim Mackie encouraged the pastors with: "Engage with the Spirit as you prepare. Find Jesus in the text and don't stop until you find Him. All Scripture points to the Gospel. Only Jesus gives life so look for the longing in the story and discover what Jesus can do about the same longing in our broken lives." Enjoy!

WEEK 1 | INTRO – BACKGROUND FOR EZRA - NEHEMIAH

By Aaron Gray – Bothell, WA

“You can learn many things from children. How much patience you have, for instance.”— Franklin P. Jones

SUMMARY

Some children learn well from examples and instruction. They are eager to please their parents or their teachers, and they are genuinely upset when they sense that they have let someone down. Others however...well, others seem intent on learning the hard way. No matter how many times they are told not to do something or how many examples they are given, some kids will only learn through trial and error, mostly error. Parents of this type of child know just how much patience and love it takes to walk with them as they mature and grow.

Israel, God’s Stubborn Child

When we read the story of the Old Testament, Israel often seems like that child who insists on learning the hard way. The prophet Hosea, speaking for God, even characterizes Israel this way: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. The more they were called, the more they went away; they kept sacrificing to the Baals and burning offerings to idols” (Hosea 11:1-2). When God called his people out of Egypt, he made a covenant with them. God promised to be their God, to protect them, and to provide for them. But, God also clearly spelled out the warnings for his people should they turn from him and worship other gods.

Passages like Deuteronomy 28:36 and Leviticus 26:38 show us what the ultimate consequence for rebellion and sin would be: exile to a foreign land. While there were some good times in Israel, the overall story of the Old Testament tells us of the people’s ongoing hard-heartedness and God’s persistence in pursuing them. However, after many centuries, God’s patience was exhausted, and the nation of Babylon conquered Israel, burned the city and the temple, and took the people away into exile. Yet even in this act of judgment, there was hope.

God’s Stubborn Grace

Yet for all that..., I will not spurn them, neither will I abhor them so as to destroy them utterly and break my covenant with them, for I am the Lord their God. — Leviticus 26:44 Even as far back as the time of Moses, God had promised that even though he would send his people into exile for their disobedience, he would not forsake them forever. And once the exile had taken place, God sent prophets like Jeremiah to remind his people that the exile would not last forever (Jeremiah 29:10). The people began to have their hopes lifted by these prophets, believing that God would indeed restore their fortunes and allow them to return to their homeland. “But you, O mountains of Israel, shall shoot forth your branches and yield your fruit to my people Israel, for they will soon come home. For behold, I am for you, and I will turn to you, and you shall be tilled and sown. And I will multiply people on you, the whole house of Israel, all of it. The cities shall be inhabited and the waste places rebuilt” (Ezekiel 36:8-10).

The Story of Ezra and Nehemiah

In the original Hebrew, Ezra and Nehemiah are part of one continuous work. These important books tell the story of God orchestrating the return of his people to the land of Israel. God raised up three key leaders in this move. Zerubbabel was in charge of the reconstruction of the temple (Ezra 3:8). Ezra is a scribe-priest charged with restoring the worship of the people of Israel. And Nehemiah was a former cupbearer to the king who was in charge of rebuilding the walls of the city (Nehemiah 1-2). What a time it must have been for the people of Israel as they saw the promises of God being fulfilled in their day!

Unfinished Hope

The book of Ezra-Nehemiah serves as the final chapter of the story of the Old Testament, but it is an unfinished story. Will the city be restored to its former glory? Will the walls be completed and the people kept safe? And most importantly, will God really return to his temple in glory like he promised (Malachi 3:1)? As the events of Ezra-Nehemiah unfold, we see that yet again, the people’s apathy and unfaithfulness lead to ongoing problems. The temple and the city don’t live up to the people’s picture of past glories, and the life of the people is marked by conflict and compromise. The readers of this book will expect a climax to the story, but—like the people of Israel—are left feeling let down by an anti-climax. Ultimately, this book leads us to long for God to bring all this mess to its

proper completion. As Christians, we have the privilege to be able to look forward in the story and see that Jesus is the completion that we long for, Jesus is God who comes suddenly to his temple, and Jesus is the one who will lead the people to worship God truly. As we read and study this important book, our hearts can be drawn to Jesus, the one true King of kings.

QUESTIONS: _____

1. Where in your life can you relate to the people Israel, and have had to learn things the hard way?
2. How have you personally had your hopes and dreams left unfulfilled? What did that feel like? How did you try to cope?
3. The book of Ezra-Nehemiah brings into focus the warnings of unfaithfulness to God, but it also brings into focus God’s faithfulness to his covenant promises. How do God’s warnings stir your heart? How does God’s faithfulness bring you comfort? Where is God drawing you to trust in him more?
4. As we consider the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, what can we learn from this important chapter in the life of the people of God?

NOTES:

WEEK 2 | EZRA 1-2

By Aaron Gray – Bothell, WA

If you don't start somewhere, you're gonna go nowhere.
— Bob Marley

SUMMARY

Last summer, I took my family camping at Steamboat Rock in central Washington. Steamboat Rock is this unique product of geological history, a random butte that rises more than eight hundred feet above the nearby lake. One morning, we decided as a family that we were going to hike up the rock. Everybody was very excited and spirits were high. However, after getting partway into the hike, my wife and three of my children realized that they had failed to count the cost that it would take to finish. The steep incline, the rocky terrain, and the hot desert sun were too much for them. As they turned back to return to our campsite, I continued on with two of the children (who were only five and six at the time!) When we reached the top and enjoyed an absolutely incredible view, the children who made it were overjoyed! I was reminded how important it is to begin any endeavor with the end in mind so that you can finish well.

Commentary

As we look at the first two chapters of Ezra, we see that the people of Israel and their leaders are about to begin a massive undertaking. The city needs to be rebuilt, temple worship needs to be restored, and the people need to re-learn what it means to be a community. Most all of the people who are “returning” to Jerusalem had never lived there in the first place; they were born while in Babylon. But as they turn their attention to Jerusalem and the enormous project before them, the reader is left wondering, “will they have what it takes to finish the job?”

As we look at just the first two chapters of Ezra, a few critical insights emerge:

1. *God is sovereign in all things, including human affairs like politics.*

Did you catch what it said in the very first verse of the book? "...the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia." This proclamation from King Cyrus is not a chance occurrence or the product of mere human reason; the bible tells us plainly here that God is directly influencing the heart of the king so that God can fulfill his purposes for his people. It's like Solomon says in Proverbs 21:1, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will."

2. Worship is primary.

Chapter one of Ezra is all about the the plans and preparations to rebuild the temple. As the people head back to Jerusalem, it is priests like Zerubbabel who lead out first. The people clearly believed that their worship of God must be restored before anything else. I believe that this is important to know: in the lives of the people of God, everything flows from our worship of God. As Harold Best writes, "At this very moment, and for as long as this world endures, everybody inhabiting it is bowing down and serving something or someone—an artifact, a person, an institution, an idea, a spirit, or God through Christ...Nobody does not worship."

3. God is Faithful to His Promises and to His People

When most of us get to chapter two of Ezra, let's be honest: we want to skip it. The long list of names and numbers, the repetitious listing of the descendants of so-and-so...it feels irrelevant to our lives! But if you were one of the first readers of this book, you would have found this anything *but* irrelevant. God is calling his people out of exile and back to the promised land, reenacting the Exodus in a profound and new way. And the list of names show us that God is providentially restoring his people to the land that he gave to their forefathers. As Mervin Breneman, a bible scholar and commentator notes, this list was given "to show God's providence in reestablishing the covenant community, in reordering its religious life , and in revitalizing its cultural heritage. Thus the identification of the families and their place of origin was important for the self-identity of the people. They needed to recognize their roots in the preexilic Israelite community as reassurance that they were the continuation of God's redemptive plan, that God would not forsake them."

QUESTIONS:

1. Do you trust that God is sovereign in all things, including even seemingly mundane human affairs? Where does the idea of God's ultimate sovereignty challenge you or grate against you?
2. How important is worship (not just singing) in your life? Where is God calling you to make worship of him primary?
3. How is the gospel the ultimate picture of God's faithfulness to his promises and his people?
4. How does this faithfulness cause you to want to trust, worship, and follow Jesus with greater devotion?

NOTES:

WEEK 3 | EZRA 3

By Stephan Peck – Issaquah, WA

*“What He was, He still is; and what He did, He still does.”
– Peter Williams*

SUMMARY

Throughout my 6 years at Judson University in Elgin, IL I profoundly experienced God in the everyday stuff of life, classes, papers, projects, relationships, internships, conflicts, campus ministries, and eventually meeting Amanda, my bride.

In 2004, Amanda and I got married, and three weeks later moved to WA state to join a group of families to plant a church. We each had different responsibilities, and experienced God advancing His gospel through our lives individually and collectively. Yet, it was extremely difficult. In these times of difficulty, I definitively remember talking with Amanda about how it “used to be at Judson.” Remembering “the way it used to be” was not a catalyst to immerse ourselves deeper into the immediate and future plans of God, but instead clouded our appreciation for what was clear to us, and our trust in the unseen work of God. Repeatedly, God would redirect us from self-centeredness to God-centeredness through His Spirit, elders, and community.

Being fixated on the past will always threaten to derail the people of God from unwavering commitment to Him and His plans in the now and not yet. Even so, in His grace He appoints imperfect leaders to push back against the opposition by using them to invite the people of God to engage in His plans through repentance, worship, delegation, equipping, correction, encouragement, faithfulness and more.

God in His grace and mercy provided the way for His people to go from Babylonian captivity back to Jerusalem, their homeland. He appointed Jeshua and Zerubbabel and their team to take the lead in rebuilding the Temple after it had been destroyed. However, they did not start with the Temple foundation, they started with an Altar to God.

Starting with the Altar was a critical way for the people of God, as a united community (3:1), to focus their lives and their future work upon Him. The Altar was the hub of worship, led by the priests. Healthy and faithful priests and prophets had great hope that obedience to God's law would set the initial and ongoing trajectory of the people of God to remain committed to Yahweh and His perfect ways.

Out of the overflow of worship, Jeshua and Zerubbabel delegated resources and people to lay the new foundation for the Temple. This foundation would not be as large or extravagant as the first because they did not have the amount of resources David and Solomon had for the first. However, this would be the temple in which the Savior of the World would be received in.

As soon as the foundation was complete, the leaders of the community began the party, which included loud, emotion filled singing, the playing of instruments, praise and thanks. Just imagine thousands of people proclaiming, with one voice these words (3:11):

“For He is good, for His steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

Yet, within the sound of praise also came the sound of deep sorrow.

There were many who had seen the previous temple, but instead of rejoicing in the rebuilding of the Temple, they wept, and did so with great passion. It is likely many remembered the rebellion of the people of God, God's justice, and the destruction of the temple. However, being fixated on the past clouded their responsiveness to the restorative plan of God unfolding before their very eyes.

QUESTIONS:

1. What tools, daily rhythms, or resources have you found helpful to focus your life, work/school, and play upon God?
2. In what ways have you experienced being in community to be a critical part of you staying God-centered in all of life?
3. Who is a Christian leader in your life that God has used to not only help you grow in your relationship with Him, but also has helped you get directly involved in using your God-given gifts and talents to make a difference in this world? Why are both of things important?
4. What happens in your life when you (or we) take time to directly praise and give thanks to God for who He is and what He's accomplished through our lives?
5. There are all types of things that can seemingly weaken our faith in God throughout our journey with Him. Have you experienced falling into the "looking-back" trap? What happened? In what ways is falling into this trap so dangerous?
6. How can we come alongside each other when our hope in God is weakening because of fear, doubt or unhealthy comparison?

NOTES:

WEEK 4 | EZRA 4

By Stephan Peck – Issaquah, WA

“Isolation is sometimes necessary in order to maintain faithfulness in a hostile environment, but can also backfire and generate unnecessary tension with the surrounding culture.” – Tim Mackie

SUMMARY

A Broken Bike

After meeting Andy, my neighbor, I learned that due to his addiction to heroin he had no friends. He is in recovery, but shared with me that when he was under the influence of this horrific drug, he made a lot of very foolish choices, and these choices hurt many people and caused just about all family and friends to lose complete trust in him.

God kept opening doors for us to connect, so much so, that he eventually said I was his only friend. One day I was sharing with him that I was having some electrical and mechanical issues with my 150cc scooter. Due to his passion for motorcycles, he offered to help me fix my “wanna-be” motorcycle. As soon as he offered to help I felt a bunch of tension inside because I knew his past, I knew his inability to have a steady hand because of abusing drugs, and more than anything else I didn’t know if I could trust him. I took a risk and said, “yes.” He did help, but overall caused more harm than good. Trust matters greatly, and saying no is important even if it causes some level of awkwardness or even hostility. This is something the Israelites knew well.

Back to Ezra

Even though the foundation had been laid, the Israelites still had a mighty task at hand. Rebuild the Temple. The first Temple, under Solomon’s leadership took 7 years to complete. However, it would take 20 years to rebuild the second. Why in the world would Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the leaders turn down help?

These leaders had allegiance to Yahweh, which meant they had critical responsibility to oversee the moral direction and physical responsibilities

of the community of God. They turned down the “help” because to say yes to the adversaries (4:3) would be a direct invitation for moral corruption to enter their community. II Kings 17:24-28 gives us insight that these people combined the worship of their idols with the worship of Yahweh. This was an abomination and the first of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:3) made this crystal clear, “You shall have no other gods before me.”

Even after the adversaries were rejected from entering into the community, they still found a way to significantly disrupt the building of the Temple by means of ridicule, accusation and opposition. Their disruption was so intricate that it lasted nearly twenty years, and as a result prevented significant advancement of the building of the Temple, so much so that the construction came to a standstill.

The rebuilding of the Temple was the presenting circumstance, but what about the underlying circumstance? What in the world was God up to in what seems to be a complete waste of 20 years? How was this directly a part of God’s sovereign plan of redemption? Although they or we never fully know all of what He is doing, one thing is clear, God is committed to the growth and development of His people becoming who He has created them to be. “By means of the struggles and opposition that would continue to beset the community, much-needed spiritual development would blossom and grow” (Throntveit, M).

QUESTIONS:

1. Have you ever said “yes” to receiving help or advice from someone you should have said “no” to? If so, what happened? Why didn’t you say no? What has God taught you through that experience?
2. Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the team had no idea what they were in for when they said no to the adversaries. Even so, do you think they made the correct choice? Why or why not?
3. Go through verse 12, 13, 15 and 16 and identify the primary way the adversaries opposed the Israelites. What does it seem like their goal was? On a human to human level, how do you think these methods of opposition impacted the Israelites?
4. Have you ever been unjustly ridiculed, opposed, or reported? Without saying names, what happened? What did God teach you, or is still teaching you through that experience?
5. How should we pray for people who, out of hatred, ridicule, oppose, or accuse us or others wrongly?
6. In what ways can we help one another remain unwavering in our dependence on God when faced with short or extremely long opposition?
7. Who here is facing opposition, ridicule or accusations from one or more people? How can we help you? How can we pray for you?

NOTES:

WEEK 5 | EZRA 7:1-5

By Aaron Bauer – Issaquah, WA

“Eighty percent of success is showing up” - Woody Allen

SUMMARY

Anticipating God and Showing Up

We knew that this was our park even though the sign said the city owned it. Our group had been praying for the park and the people in it. We had been anticipating God’s work there for months and we felt like we owned it. We knew that God could do amazing things in that park to expand his kingdom and renown, even without us. It was not our calling to simply pray; the day came for us to show up.

A group of forty Christian teens and a few adults began to set up game equipment and light the charcoal grill in anticipation. This was our weekly ritual on Sunday nights in *our* park. We assumed that anyone who arrived in our park would certainly want to talk about Jesus along with a hot dog, snacks, and a game of Frisbee or volleyball. It was that confidence that led us into dozens of relationships with strangers who got a taste of the kingdom.

Local high school and middle school kids shared in games and ran off to go swimming along with our students. Muslim kids (from Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia) would check to see if the dogs were *halal*, but many of them did not really care. I remember being served tea (thick as espresso) by a Muslim Kurdish woman with her daughter and her Sikh boyfriend, in *our* park. We all learned how to follow Jesus in the multi-cultural setting that was our city. It was not arrogance, but faithful presence that led us to believe we could make a difference. It was not up to us to bring success or kingdom expansion, our success was defined as prayerfulness and presence.

Back to Ezra

It had been about 60 years since the temple was rebuilt in Jerusalem by Zerubbabel. The temple dedication was not the glorious and triumphant moment the people expected; there is no mention of God's presence filling the temple and those who had seen its former glory wept.

Ezra, a leader among the exiled Israelites in Babylon, had a religious heritage that went back to the priesthood of Aaron. He received permission from the king of Persia to return to Judah. He positioned himself squarely within prophetic expectations by following the pattern of the Exodus. His plan was to teach the Torah and rebuild the community and Ezra had high hopes for social and spiritual reform among the people.

Sometimes our expectations work out and sometimes they do not. The question comes down to being a faithful presence. We are asked to be present, to show up, and to anticipate God's work. Ephesians 2:10 shows us that God has prepared in advance the good works we should walk in. This is a combination of confidence in God and showing up: Faithful Presence.

QUESTIONS:

1. What are some of the reasons we are not prayerful about God's kingdom goals?
2. What are some of the reasons we don't show up to be a part of that work?
3. Read Ephesians 2:8-10 and discuss how our life together would change if we believed that God was already at work in the things he is asking us to do?
4. Share a story of how faithful presence has been met with a God honoring/kingdom expanding outcome. Share a story where it did not turn out like you had dreamed.
5. Gospel success is often measured by great stories of kingdom expansion, but do you think it should be more often measured by faithful presence? Why or why not?
6. Who do you know that needs to hear that their faithful presence has been a blessing? Make a plan to encourage them and share the story next time we meet.

NOTES:

WEEK 6 | EZRA 7:10

By Aaron Bauer – Issaquah, WA

“Did God really say...?” - The Devil

SUMMARY

The Battle For Your Heart

Reading books has gone out of fashion in the US. Statisticbrain.com reports that 42% of college students will never read another book after they graduate. Also, 80% of U.S. families did not buy a book this year and 70% of adults have not been in a book store in the past 5 years. Is it any wonder that it seems weird to a lot of people when we encourage them to read the Bible? “What am I going to get out of it?” “It looks like it will take a long time to get through it.” “A ONE YEAR plan? Who has the patience for that?”

Well, what *are* you going to get out of understanding the Bible? You should not expect it to be a confirmation of the way you think and for it to align with the passions of your heart. It is counter-cultural. The Bible overturned culture then and it still does to this day. This is a good thing, we need light in the darkness and clarity in the fuzzy haze of our society. In many ways, it is more than a haze. It is darkness. The enemy of your soul has total sway (it would seem) in the hearts and minds of those who do not follow Jesus (friends, neighbors, and co-workers).

Understanding the Bible (reading, memorizing, studying, meditating AND practicing) leads you to be able to see the enemy’s lies for what they are. As you take every thought captive and line it up with the Gospel, you will spend less time in darkness and enter into the marvelous kingdom of light. This is wisdom. God, in his joy for you, wants you to think more and more like him and experience his joy. What are you going to get out of understanding the Bible? Joyful victory and the confidence that comes with obedience. The battle for your heart is won by the truth of the Gospel.

Back to Ezra

Ezra set out for Jerusalem on the first day of the first month of the year and arrived four months later. The text says (v9) that the good hand of his God was on him because . . . his heart was set on the Torah of the LORD: to study it, to obey it, and to teach it. What a combination! Ezra set his heart on Jerusalem and came as a master teacher, not having just studied the Scripture, but having applied it. Ezra came in the manner of Moses (on the first day of the year like the Exodus, but from Babylon instead of Egypt) bringing the Torah of the LORD (in Hebrew the word LORD is written with the four Hebrew letters- YHWH)

The Torah or law, is in itself a fascinating development in the history of religion in the world. Before the Torah of YHWH, people groups were at the whim of the local or regional shaman who would tell you what your god wanted from you. This was arbitrary and costly: sometimes they required your children as a sacrifice. Some people still live in this fear. Then YHWH revealed his Torah and people like Ezra studied, obeyed, and taught it so they would have no confusion on what the Lord required of his covenant people. As for covenant faithfulness, the world had to wait much longer for the Messiah who would be the faithful one to fulfill it. Jesus now offers a new heart to God's covenant people and his Spirit to guide us into truth.

QUESTIONS:

1. Look up 2 Corinthians 4:4 and Ephesians 4:18 and discuss the implications of these passages.
2. Do you believe that some people's minds are darkened by the enemy? Why or why not?
3. The Psalmist says he delights in the law of the Lord (refer to Psalm 1 and 119).
4. What role has the Bible played in helping you discern the truth in everyday life and obey it?
5. What happens to those who study the word but do not obey it? See Matthew 7:24-27 for help.
6. What are some practices that have helped you get into the Word of God and get the Word of God into you?
7. Who has God brought around you that you can train to obey Jesus?

NOTES:

WEEK 7 | EZRA 9 & 10

By Marty Simons – Bellevue, WA

“With the best of intentions, I have become a Tyrant.” – Claudius

SUMMARY

Grace and wisdom must accompany biblical conviction with leadership

One day while Jesus was teaching in the Temple the religious leaders brought a woman to him. “She has been caught in adultery, the law says she must be stoned, what do you think?” they asked. Jesus answered: “Very well, but let the one who has no sin throw the first stone.” Jesus looked down as the crowd slowly dispersed with the oldest leaving first. When He looked up again, the woman was the only one there. “Where are your accusers? Didn’t even one of them condemn you?” He asked. “No, Lord” she said. Jesus said, “Neither do I, go and sin no more.” The law had a prescribed punishment for a specific sin, but Jesus demonstrated the grace and love of His Father by pardoning her. We, too are to show the grace and love of Jesus to the world around us.

Back to Ezra

In these chapters Ezra is confronted with a dilemma. The exiles had been there for 60 years and had begun to marry the locals who were not Jewish. The great momentum begun with the return has hit a snag.

We see at the beginning that life happens. Ezra is informed that some of the people have married foreign women and had their children also marry them. Some of them were among the leaders. This was not unknown since Moses, Boaz, and David had done it as well. However, there is special pressure on this because of the previous punishment inflicted on Israel and Judah for being faithless to the Lord. Their concern is that their identity as the spiritually united people of God has become “polluted” by these marriages.

Ezra has a visceral reaction to the news. He knows the law and seems to understand the importance of being holy. The people mourn with him at this offense at God.

Ezra lets the Word and wisdom work when he prays and asks God to forgive them. He identifies with them in their sin and betrayal of the commandments of God. As he prays many other Israelites come and weep bitterly with him.

A man named Shecaniah proposes that the ones who have married foreigners divorce them and send them and their children away. He then commands Ezra to stop praying and mourning and do this.

They put the plan in action, examine the cases, and then divorce and exile the wives and children. The book ends with a list of all the people who had married foreigners.

Of note in the story:

- God had commanded the Israelites to be Holy and worship only Him. He had never commanded them to be racially pure and there are some significant people who weren't born Jewish. Two of these are in the line of David.
- Ezra is truly shaken to his core at the news of the intermarriages. He is not faking indignation. This really distresses him.
- Ezra appeals to the Scripture for the instruction concerning the sin, but leans on Shecaniah for wisdom in what to do about it.
- Shecaniah is not married to a foreigner. He doesn't have to give up anything.
- The Bible gives us no hint as to whether or not this was the right thing to do in this passage.
- We live our lives by the grace and mercy of God, as did they.
- God hates divorce. (Malachi 2:16)

QUESTIONS:

1. How concerned are you with personal holiness? Do you think it is an important attribute of a believer? What are general areas that believers have been commanded to be holy?
2. What sins would cause you to have a visceral reaction? How would you respond to someone who is committing those sins?
3. Give some examples of the differences between a reaction based upon the law and one that includes grace and wisdom.
4. Look at Matthew 18: 15-20 and suggest some courses of action when you do encounter sin in another believer.

NOTES:

WEEK 8 | NEHEMIAH 1:4-11 & 4:12-14

By Marty Simons – Bellevue, WA

*“We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps.”
– Proverbs 16:9 NLT*

SUMMARY

We follow the Perfect Champion into our Finished Hope

Several years ago the TV show “Band of Brothers” aired and the world was introduced to Dick Winters. His character and actions during the war allowed the producers to base the show around him. He didn’t seek to be a leader, but when he was put in that role, he excelled. A man of faith, Winters lived a life quite different from most of his fellow soldiers. While other officers and troops hung out at the village pub, and enjoyed the social life in neighboring towns, Winters rarely left Aldbourne, choosing instead to pore over tactical manuals and plan for D-Day. In preparing to lead men in combat, he felt his time to be extremely precious and thus devoted as much of it as possible to becoming “totally proficient in tactics and technology” and developing his own “personal perspective on command.”

Major Winters ultimately found that his “intense study paid huge dividends in Normandy.” Not only did he have ready solutions to the challenges he and his men faced in combat, but his hours of quiet reflection proved invaluable in another way.

As the famous saying goes, “No plan survives first contact with the enemy,” and Major Winters encountered many scenarios to which there was no textbook answer as to how to proceed. In such situations he proved able to deftly improvise. The months of stillness to which Winters had exposed his mind left it keenly responsive to insights and intuitions — giving him what he termed a true “sixth sense” when it came to making decisions.

Back to Nehemiah

We are now introduced to Nehemiah. Nehemiah also spent a great deal of time in quiet reflection and prayer before the Lord as preparation for

the way he was going to be used. When we meet him, he has a great burden for the predicament of his people and for Jerusalem. He hears that things are going badly and so he turns to the Lord and prays.

In Chapter 1:4-11 we read his prayer for the nation and his situation. He is begging the Lord to forgive them and to remember His covenant with them to bless them if they turn from their sin. He confesses their sin as well as his own. He then asks that the king will show him favor in his role as the king's cupbearer.

We see from this that Nehemiah is a man who appeals to the revealed Word of God and has great faith that God will do as He has promised. He has a desire to help his people, but he waits for the Lord's timing.

In chapter 4:12-14 we are now in Jerusalem and Nehemiah is overseeing the building of the walls. They are threatened on every side, but Nehemiah trusts the Lord to protect them. He posts armed guards and tells them not to be afraid because the Lord will fight for them.

In this we are shown that Nehemiah is like a second Joshua, one who knows that the Lord has and will fight for them. His heart is grieved for the sins of His people and he desires to honor the Name of God

QUESTIONS:

1. What part of the text or sermon had the greatest impact on you?
2. How can you prepare yourself for God to use you?
3. What does a life of faith look like?
4. Give three ways that you can demonstrate faith in God this week

NOTES:

WEEK 9 | NEHEMIAH 2-7

By Christopher Rich – Marysville, WA

“Organizational culture eats strategy for breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

– Peter Drucker

SUMMARY

Chinese Ghost City

Rising up in the middle of a barren desert in the region of Inner Mongolia is a grand city with world-class architecture, stately public plazas, and even massive sports stadiums. It's all brand new and all built in less than a decade, quite a feat of design, engineering, and planning all expertly executed. Ordos Kangbashi has everything structurally necessary to be a vibrant city, regional hub, and international partner capable of supporting over half million residents. Yet in 2009, the reports began to come out there was something vital missing in the urban core; no business or vibrant life, because there was no people.

Back to Nehemiah

The project of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem is complete. The physical structures, once so fragile a fox walking on them would be unsettling, are now robust and secure. Great progress is visible. Anyone inspecting the work would conclude it was a great accomplishment worthy of celebration. However, the true work of rebuilding the city has only just begun. While the city was physically wide and large, there was much missing in order for it to represent the City of God filled with the people of God on mission for the glory of God.

People Required - Walls alone do not make a city or a church. Structures and systems are necessary to support a culture but they cannot make or maintain a culture on their own. They exist to support the creation and sustenance of a rebuilt culture. Yet in the church we are easily distracted by focusing on building out ministries, events, programs, activities etc. We forget these only exist for people! Nehemiah was not satisfied with the finished work of the wall because he knew the work of recreating the city was unfinished. As long as the people in the city remained so few there would be no one to help bringing new life to the city. Culture flows

from people's hearts. Life in the city being renewed with a new culture can only come from people who have been made new by receiving new hearts for God from God.

Participation Required – People merely present is insufficient to form a new culture. When a culture is built on the majority only consuming rather than everyone contributing, it will fail to mature. Progress will be unsupported, and eventually everything will fall back into disrepair and decay. Everyone in the City of God (and the church) is there for a purpose and is necessary for the vision and mission to advance and the culture to flourish. Active participation using time, talent, and treasure to move the ministry forward is not optional. For people who have been made new by God their purpose is to engage not just observe.

Protection Required - For a new culture to flourish it must have a stable, structured, and secured environment. This requires vigilant leadership aware of what cultural influences are coming into the city and how people are being influenced. Great walls are ineffective in protecting if gates are always left open. Nehemiah appoints leaders who are “faithful and God-fearing” for the sake of making sure the gates to the city are not open all the time. Outsiders can and do enter the city to freely experience the blessing of the city life while security is maintained. In the church, protection like this allows for the church to have influence in there surrounding community; living among and engaging with them while remaining faithful to God.

Perfection [Not Yet] Realized – In chapter 5 we see a sneak peak of internal challenges still facing Nehemiah in rebuilding a new culture. There will always be disappointment and frustration when we are working with imperfect people participating in a mission of forming a culture to reflect the glory of our perfect God. We are called to continue striving to form a new and better culture of God's people for God's glory. But we should remember we will not create a perfect city. We long for a city only God can build. We cannot build it for Him, but the one and only God has promised to build it for us.

QUESTIONS:

1. Why are structures and systems necessary for a church community to remain effective on mission? What does it look like when people support structures rather than structures supporting people?
2. What does it mean that culture flows from our hearts? Why is it essential for church culture to be formed by people with new hearts given by God? What is the alternative?
3. How would you describe your participation your church community? Is it more characterized by consumption or contribution, why? What do you believe your purpose is at and in your church community?
4. What does it look like when churches only reflect the culture around it? What does it look like when churches retreat from the culture around it? Why are both dangerous?

NOTES:

WEEK 10 | NEHEMIAH 2-6

By Christopher Rich – Marysville, WA

*“The power of an air force is terrific when there is nothing to oppose it.”
– Winston Churchill*

SUMMARY

Brutal Ride

The second bike loop of the Coeur d’ Alene Ironman was a far different ride on an identical stretch of road. In the morning the temperature was mild, the sky was clear, with not a breath of wind. Lap one was completed in record time as I charged hills and coasted down grades. I had visions of easily exceeding all my goals. Now past noon the thermometer hit 90, the sky was thick with smoke from a massive nearby fire, and gale-like winds were steady in my face. Brutal. Months of training prepared me to face my own internal opposition, I did not think the greatest enemy to finishing my race would come from outside.

Back to Nehemiah

Rebuilding and restoration of something fallen into disrepair or corruption is distinct from creating something where there was previously nothing. The people of God are going to face more outside resistance to rebuilding because external forces and factions have grown comfortable with the City of God (which is a symbol of the church) being impotent. Many will not want to see the church flourish and some will actively work against our mission. Wisdom and conviction of God must be exercised in handling outsider opposition.

Schemes of the Enemy - Wisdom begins by recognizing there is a very real enemy prowling like a lion seeking to destroy. So don’t be surprised when you face opposition. We do well to not assume every outsider is an enemy and to remember not all opposition will be external. Because of sin we are all outsiders, it is only by the grace of God in Jesus we become part of the family. Restoration will meet resistance. Sanballat and Tobiah are “displeased greatly” and “enraged” when Nehemiah seeks the welfare of the people. They use deceit inviting Nehemiah to Ono to harm him. They practice intimidation relentlessly mocking the work of God’s people and continually pestering Nehemiah. They attempt

manipulation threatening to spread fake news and tell the King Nehemiah seeks to make himself king of the Jews. They question the motives of his mission and even hire someone to try to convince him to quit for his own safety. This is how Satan seeks to attack God's people through subversive temptation and direct accusation.

Strategy for Security – The reality of external resistance should drive us to communal reliance for mutual security. In Nehemiah, everyone working on the mission to build the wall is armed with a sword. In the church everyone is armed with the word of God, we need to carry it with us daily. When building the wall, no one works or stands alone. So they can't be easily picked off. Building community means no one is isolated and individuals regularly gather with God's people. When the trumpet blasts and the alarm sounds it is time for the community to rally to help those in need. More than just the leaders or a few individuals, everyone participates and contributes to the security of the community. The community regularly prays for protection and is deployed ready to act. Ultimately, we do not protect ourselves, God does. A gospel community has confidence knowing it is God who is fighting, and winning, for us. We do not fear because our God is great!

Steadfastness in Mission - If enemies cannot succeed in defeating the mission they will do everything they can to distract from it. The enemy wins when we stop working on what we are called to. Nothing was going to halt the building of the wall "For the people had a mind to work." The focus of the mission is the construction of the City of God (Kingdom culture) not the skirmishes with opposition. We will have battles, but the mission is not in defeating enemies but proclaiming the victory of our King Jesus. The redemption of God's elect was the primary mission of Christ that gave him focus of vision at the cross. Because of His tight grip on us as His people, we can labor with confidence at the mission He has given to us until His return! Jesus is enough, Jesus wins!

QUESTIONS:

1. Why do we find it more difficult to rebuild or restore than it is to create from scratch? When have you experienced this?
2. Describe the various ways the enemy and external opponents seek to resist the work of Gospel restoration in the lives of individuals, churches, and communities.
3. Discuss the role of Gospel Community for the strength and security of God's people on mission together. When have you seen community rally when someone is in need? How have you seen individual Christians "picked off" or kept from mission when they have remained isolated from the community?
4. How are you most likely to be distracted from mission? When have you been more focused on facing opponents of the Gospel than proclaiming the Gospel? Where do you need engage on mission? How does Jesus give us confidence for the mission?

NOTES:

WEEK 11 | NEHEMIAH 8:1-12

By Nathan Cedarland – Grays Harbor, WA

“The word creates and nourishes the community while the community proclaims and embodies the word.... Bible interpretation is not just about me and my Bible. It is about God’s word to his people...”
- Total Church

SUMMARY

Pigskin Community

During my early growing up years, backyard football was a staple among the kids in our neighborhood. And yes, we played tackle, “none of that wimpy two-hand-touch stuff” we would proudly declare. The game of football, you might say, was foundational in forming our little band of ragamuffins. We probably would never have spent so much time together, had it not been for the existence of that game. Yet, not only did football help establish our community, the enjoyment of the sport itself was dependent on the very community it formed. Spiraling the pigskin high into the air and running to catch it myself, pretending to be both quarterback and receiver, was mildly entertaining for a few minutes, but it paled in comparison to the pleasure of a real game with my neighborhood buddies. Football helped create a community for us and in reality, it could only be played and enjoyed in that community context or in one like it.

Back to Nehemiah

Our society holds independence and individualism among its chief values, and if we’re honest, many of us also have a deep suspicion of authority. This is the world we live in, and like fish swimming in water totally unaware that they are wet, we have become so accustomed to these values of western culture that we often don’t even realize their impact on our thinking. The values of the Kingdom of God are indeed upside down in comparison. In the Kingdom, the King graciously calls us to submit our lives to the authority of his word and to live in mutual

dependence on our fellow Kingdom citizens. God's commands are life-giving. Rather than taking away our freedom they bring us into true freedom and establish a shared life of love. It was the rejection of God's authoritative word in Eden that led to the breakdown of true community to begin with. So as God works in human history to restore community he does so through his word. We see this on Mount Sinai. After Israel is brought out of Egypt, they are given the law to establish them as a new community under the reign and rule of Yahweh (and most of the laws they are given can only be obeyed in the context of community). No doubt, mindful of this precedent, Ezra and Nehemiah understand that if true community renewal is going to take place, the Scriptures must be brought to the heart of the people's shared life. They get that fact that God's word was never meant to be known only by an elite group of scribes but to be taught and applied in the broader community (see Nehemiah 8:13). Trying to apply scripture outside of community would be like an individual trying to play a boardgame for 3+ players by himself, or like a baseball player who makes it to third base but doesn't have anyone else on his team to bat him home, or like trying to play quarterback and wide receiver at the same time. You get the point. Word and community go together. "The word creates and nourishes the community while the community proclaims and embodies the word." In Nehemiah 8, we see two significant ways that the Scriptures work to rebuild community. First, by exposing our sin (verses 7-9) and secondly, by pointing us to the good news of a secure refuge in Jesus (verses 9-12). A community where these two elements are absent is not a community shaped by the Scriptures or submitted to God's authority.

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QUESTIONS:

1. In what ways has society shaped your beliefs about authority? In what ways has the individualism of our culture hindered your commitment to community under God's authority?
2. Are there ways in which your community/family, as a whole, has ignored the authority of scripture in your shared life and practices? To what extent is your shared life based on God's word? To what extent is it based on other things?
3. As you realize ways in which you as an individual, community, or family have rejected or ignored the authority of the Scriptures, what does repentance look like? In light of your failure, what does it look like to find refuge in Jesus?

NOTES:

WEEK 12 | NEHEMIAH 9-10

By Monty Wright – Snoqualmie Valley, WA

"Christians in revival are accordingly found living in God's presence (Coram Deo), attending to His Word, feeling acute concern about sin and righteousness, rejoicing in the assurance of Christ's love and their own salvation, spontaneously constant in worship, and tirelessly active in witness and service, fueling these activities by praise and prayer."

- J.I. Packer

SUMMARY

It Looks Right, But Something Is Missing

I flipped the switch and nothing happened. Frustration overwhelmed me. I had been remodeling our kitchen for two weeks, and had just finished connecting power to the center island. I was excited to see everything "light up", validating my amazing electrical skills. "Click, click, click," Nothing. No power, no light, no joy! I checked the connections; they seemed fine. I checked the breaker panel; everything on. I crawled under the house to inspect the wires; nothing seemed out of place. I was baffled. My checklist for the job was complete but the verdict was in, "no power." Then it hit me. There was this one pig-tail connection that was tricky. It was in the wall by the center island and connected the island to the power-source. At first I dismissed this being the problem because I plugged my drill into the outlet and it worked, but something had happened that *I couldn't see*. One hidden wire connecting the island has slipped out of the wiring nut. After some crimping and securing of the wires everything was on working well! Sometimes, we can have everything checked off on our spiritual wiring list, but if we are missing that one vital connection, nothing works. In Nehemiah 9-10, the people have done all the right things to spark revival, but it doesn't "light up." While everything looked as it should, they were disconnected from the power of God's Holy Spirit to move revival from the head to heart. Will power never results in dynamic spiritual transformation, only God's power does.

Back To Nehemiah

The longest prayer in the Bible is found in Nehemiah 9:5-35. It is the Feast of Tabernacles, a celebration reminding the people of God's provision when they escaped the bondage of Egypt and wandered to the Promised

Land. In **9:1-5** the people spend a quarter of the day *reading from the Torah*; a quarter of the day in *confession and worship*; then, for the remaining 6 hours, the priests led the people in this *prayer, and time of worship*. **The first connection was in place: God's Word, confession and worship.**

9:5-15: *Praise* to the God who created everything. *Praise* to the God of Abraham who honors His covenant throughout all generations. *Praise* to the God who is the great deliverer from slavery. *Praise* to the God who protected them on the journey, and provided for them in the wilderness. *Praise* to the God who gave us Torah, the beauty of Sabbath, and provided water and manna in the desert as well as a Land of their own. **The second connection is in place, worship.**

9:16-17: *Confession* for the sinful response their forefathers had to the beneficence of God. **The third connection is in place, confession.**

9:18-21: God's demonstrated His *grace* in response to their ancestor's rebelliousness through compassion. He did this by His mercy, forgiveness, and kindness. He never abandoned them as they journeyed, in fact He led them visibly, provided for their physical needs and gave them His Spirit to instruct them. **The fourth connection is in place, God's grace.**

9:22-31: Israel's cycle of sin. The nation had developed a pattern: 1. God blessed His people. 2. The people turn away from God in times of blessing. 3. God allows their enemies to overcome them in order to bring them to repentance. 4. In their distress they cry out to God. 5. God, in His mercy, delivers His people. 6. The cycle starts all over again with rebellion.

9:32-38: The people cry out for God's deliverance and make a covenant with Him. **The fifth connection is in place, surrender.**

Chapter 10 shows who the people were and what they promised to do. Everything seemed to be in place for revival: prayer, confession, worship, and surrender, but it doesn't happen. The one connection they were missing was the power that is available to us, the Holy Spirit. There is a

great difference between human will power and God's power. Only God's power can end the cycle of sin and transform our life.

QUESTIONS: _____

1. Have you tried to please and honor God more through your own power, rather than trusting and receiving His power?
2. How has God provided for, protected and shown you His compassion in the past?
3. What is one thing you can start doing today to ensure you are connected to God's power rather than your own power?

NOTES:

WEEK 13 | NEHEMIAH 12:27-13:31

By Rich McCaskill – Issaquah, WA

“We're all gonna die” - Audience member

SUMMARY

In March 2017 Jake Gyllenhaal and Ryan Reynolds co-starred in *Life* a suspenseful sci-if thriller set in outer space. The premise of the movie was a scientific space crew that had discovered an advanced life-form suspected to be responsible for the extinction of life on Mars. Over the course of the movie, this creature which they lovingly named Calvin, evolves from a friendly single cell organism into a killing machine. In the end, there are only two scientists left in the space station, Dr. Miranda North and Dr. David played by Gyllenhaal.

There are only two escape pods remaining. So Dr. David sacrificially offers to use himself as bait and lure Calvin away from Dr. Miranda and into one of the pods. Dr. David then plans to fly his pod out into deep space taking this malicious life-form with him. His plan will save his crewmate and Earth at the same time. As he launches Dr. Miranda takes the other pod and returns to life on earth. Dr. David is successful in using himself as bait. Both pods are loaded and launched. And they cross paths in the starry night sky; one heading towards earth and the other towards deep space. The audience watches as one pod enters the earth's atmosphere and splashes down into the Indian Ocean. It is a perfect picture of self-sacrifice and the salvation that comes when someone substitutes himself for another. Dr. David is our hero and we all expect to see Dr. Miranda emerge from the earthbound pod looking up to the sky with an expression of gratitude for what Dr. David has done.

But surprisingly this is not how the movie ends. The pod splashes down. The nearby fishermen paddle over and peer in. But, what they see takes their breath away. It is the wrong capsule. Against his will, Dr. David has been overpowered and has lost control of his pod allowing Calvin, the killing machine, to enter Earth's atmosphere instead of Dr. Miranda. Despite Dr. David's impassioned warnings from inside the capsule, the fishermen open the pod door. The screen goes black, and the credits role.

And as they do, I hear someone in the row behind me as groan, “We’re all gonna die!”

Back to Nehemiah

This depressing and frightening ending to *LIFE* reminds us of the ending we encounter here in Nehemiah. As we were journeying through Nehemiah and Ezra we got excited about the spiritual progress and the revival that was happening in the community of God’s people. Like Dr. David in *Life*, we see Ezra and Nehemiah bounding onto the scene with the solution everyone needs. But here in the end of the story we have an unexpected crash landing. When Nehemiah comes back to check on the community of God’s people he finds many of the areas which had once experienced revival are now in shambles.

In the **Temple** we learn that Eliashib has done an “evil deed” (Nehemiah 13: 7) and allowed Tobiah to move in and start living at the Temple. This was the same Tobiah who had ridiculed them and made their work of rebuilding so difficult. Now he is living in God’s house! This is surely a crash landing.

In regards to the **Priesthood** we learn that God’s people have stopped giving their tithes and offerings. As a result the Levites have stopped leading worship and they have returned to work in their fields.

We also learn that God’s people are working on the **Sabbath** and merchants from all around the area are coming in from far and wide to buy and sell on God’s holy day. In all of these ways we see that the previously beautiful progress has ground to a halt. People have reverted back to their old ways.

It is a crash landing and it shows us something very clear. As wonderful as Ezra and Nehemiah both were, as leaders of prayer and action, neither one is the ultimate savior God’s people have been waiting for. This ending leaves the reader looking for a better priest, a better solution, a better revival.

QUESTIONS:

1. Tell of a time when you experienced Christian community that did not live up to its potential.
2. When fellow Christians compromise and let you down: Do you
 - a. Embrace the individualism of our culture and forsake being in community with them?
 - b. Follow them in their compromise and accept their sin as simply being “real” and “transparent”?
 - c. Work to improve things seeking to restore others in a spirit of gentleness?
3. In these moments of let down, how does it help you to hold on to the promise of Jesus when he said “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18)?
4. All of Scripture points us to Jesus and our need for a Savior. Where in your life do you need the restoration and revival that only Jesus brings?

NOTES:

WEEK 14 | HEBREWS 8

By Rich McCaskill – Issaquah, WA

“You can make me perfect again.”
-U2 “All Because of You”

SUMMARY

A Happy Ending

When J.K. Rowling began publishing her Harry Potter books in the late '90's there was a lot of concern from Christian parents that this was a dangerous series to let their children read. Many of those parents were shocked in 2007 when Rowling confessed to being a believer. In fact, *the Telegraph* ran an article titled *J K Rowling: 'Christianity inspired Harry Potter'* It was during her 2007 book tour when the public realized she was in fact a believer in Jesus and a member of the Church of Scotland. When you look closely at the themes she weaves into the final book and the way Harry lays down his life for his friends, you can see clear parallels with Jesus' sacrificial death. After completing the series, she published another book that was eventually adapted for the screen called *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*. If *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* was an allusion to Jesus' journey to the cross, then *Fantastic Beasts* was an allusion to the Biblical picture of Heaven. At the end of the movie, the main characters use their power to literally remake and restore their broken down world. Buildings that had been destroyed are rebuilt. Streets that were desolate become like new. They even use their power to create a rain storm that wondrously removes everyone's traumatic memories. As the rain falls healing their minds it is a vivid picture of the promise in Revelation 21:4 that God “will wipe every tear from our eyes” All of us are longing for happy endings and J.K. Rowling knows that the best one you can find is in the Bible.

A New Covenant

After reading the crash landing at the end of Nehemiah however, it dawns on us that we must search beyond the Old Testament for the happy ending we want. And this is the search that leads us to Jesus. This is not the only place in the Old Testament where we experience this feeling. In fact, the Old Testament is filled with these moments where

the need for a Savior and the longing for a New Covenant is palpable. In Jeremiah 31 God does promise a new covenant for his people. And in the New Testament book of Hebrews we discover that Jesus is the one who has actually brought it about. Hebrews 8 says, “But now Jesus, our High Priest, has been given a ministry that is superior to the old priesthood, for he is the one who mediates for us a better covenant with God, based on better promises.”

Where Nehemiah and Ezra and the people of Jerusalem failed to provide a happy ending, Jesus and his new covenant people succeed. In describing the new Covenant, God promises “I will put my laws in their minds and I will write them on their hearts.” This is one of the most profound differences between the Covenant Ezra and Nehemiah brought and the Covenant Jesus brought. The Old Covenant was engraved on tablets of stone and it was external to God’s people. The New Covenant is engraved on our hearts and it is internal. This is what God was referencing in the promise he made through Ezekiel “I will give you a new heart and I will put a new Spirit in you. I will take out your stony, stubborn heart and give you a tender responsive heart. And I will put my Spirit in you so that you will follow my decrees and be careful to obey my regulations” (Ezekiel 36:26-27).

This is the happy ending of the New Covenant. And it all comes through Jesus. It comes through his perfect life, his painful death and his powerful resurrection. One day he will make all things new and make a true happy ending. Until then, he gives us a foretaste of what is ahead by rebuilding every believer from the inside out. When we rely on him as our Savior he sends his Spirit to dwell within us and he rebuilds us into a new community. This is what Jesus called being born again (John 3).

In our lives, like in Nehemiah’s life, things fall apart. Our spiritual life can decay. But we have a better leader than they did, a Leader that Ezra and Nehemiah point towards. His name is Jesus and he is our priest who has come to truly put the entire world back together again. His starting place is within our very hearts.

QUESTIONS:

1. Reflect on your life story. When was the first time you turned to Jesus to restore you? If you haven't turned to Jesus what holds you back?
2. Have there been times in your life where you looked to someone or something else to make you whole?
3. How is that person or thing insufficient and incomplete as your Savior?
4. Read the passage in Hebrews 8 and share which part of the New Covenant is the most exciting to you.

NOTES:

רִיבְּזָ (mā'ôz) - Mountain, Stronghold, Fortress, Place of Refuge

The noun רִיבְּזָ appears only once in the book of Ezra-Nehemiah (Neh 8:10). Yet it is a key word for the understanding of this book as it pertains to its relationship with the message of grace throughout the whole narrative of the Bible.

1. This word typically refers to either a fortress (Dan 11:31) or a defensible city (Isa 17:9; 23:4). Examples of this are the city of Sin in Ezekiel 30:15 and the city of Tarshish in Isaiah 23:14. This definition is significant in our context since fortifying Jerusalem is the reason Nehemiah originally went back to Jerusalem.
2. This word is also used, especially in the Psalms, in reference to God's protection over his people (Ps 28:8; 31:2). Psalm 27 is perhaps the most notable and well-known example of this. The Psalmist refers to Yahweh as the fortress of his life. In other words, God is the one in whom the psalmist finds refuge, protection, and safety. "This example emphasizes the trust that God's people may place in him. They have nothing to fear, for he is there to protect them from all calamity" (NIDOTTE).

The use of רִיבְּזָ in Nehemiah fits the second category. Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites tell the people, who were mourning after the reading of the Law, to eat, drink (basically to celebrate), for that day is holy to the Lord. The reason they give the people for celebrating and for not being grieved is that "the joy of the Lord is their רִיבְּזָ" (Neh 8:10). Many versions translate this word as "strength" (NIV, ESV, KJV, NASB, CSB). The HCSB is actually one of the few versions that render this word as "stronghold." This translation is to be preferred over "strength" since the connotation of רִיבְּזָ really is about the Lord being a place of refuge and protection for his people rather than giving them strength or power (cf. Nah 1:7).

The people of Israel might be rebuilding their wall to make Jerusalem a fortress, and a city where they can feel secure. The real stronghold of the people, however, is the joy of the Lord. This phrase can mean the joy the people have from God or the joy God takes in his people. Consider

Zephaniah 3:17 “The LORD your God is in your midst, a mighty who will save; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will quiet you by his love; he will exult over you with loud singing.” Yes, they have been disobeying the Law of God for years, but Yahweh still rejoices over them as his people. That truth alone should be their assurance that they are safe and protected. The joy of the Lord is their stronghold!

זָכַר (zākar) - Remember, Reflect on, Commemorate

The verb זָכַר has a broad range of meanings throughout the Old Testament. For the sake of our study of Ezra-Nehemiah, we will focus our attention to this word only in his appearances in this book. The word זָכַר appears only in the section of Nehemiah (1:8; 4:14; 5:19; 6:14; 9:17; 13:14, 22, 29, 31).

A common usage of this word is when a human asks God in prayer to remember a past promise he made. Moses has his fair share of this kind of intercessory prayers when mediating on behalf of Israel. Nehemiah has a similar moment in his initial prayer on behalf of Israel (1:8). In fact, he quotes a promise that God made through Moses.

Later, Nehemiah urges the people who are building the wall with him to “remember the Lord, who is great and awesome” (4:14). The mighty deeds of God and God’s greatness itself is the basis of their assurance that the Lord will be with them as they continue to build and fight.

The majority of times this word appears in Ezra-Nehemiah, the verb is used by Nehemiah in an arguably controversial context. Nehemiah asks the Lord to remember something good that he did, or something evil that someone else did. The very last sentence of the book reads, “Remember me, O my God, for good” (Neh 13:31).

There’s no space to deal with this issue here. However, one should be aware that commentators are divided in interpreting these prayers. Is Nehemiah’s desire to be remembered by God a righteous desire, or a self-righteous one? Is he trying to vindicate himself on the basis of his own merits, or is this a righteous prayer that follows the style of the Psalms?

(cf. Ps 132:1; 74:18, 22; 89:50-51). This is something that the reader will have to determine.

However, some thoughts worth considering are that (1) the Psalms are usually regarded as model prayers for saints to emulate. Nehemiah's prayers are very similar to these prayers. (2) Historically, Nehemiah's prayers have been read positively, and Nehemiah himself has been considered a model of a godly man. (3) Most of the times the word "remember" is used in the context of a human urging God to remember something, the connotation is, at first sight, positive (i.e. Moses prayers, Samson's prayer, Hannah's prayer, the Psalms, etc.). (4) On the other hand, Nehemiah, arguably, uttered some dubious actions towards the end of his life, like pulling people's beards. This seems harsh to our hyper-sensitive western social correctness. This could, however, be a real zeal for the temple and the Law of the Lord.

