

“The Return” Pt 2

A Walk Through the Old Testament—Class 22

Various Scriptures

Dr. Jeff Stivason

January 24, 2020

Jeff: Okay. Today I want us to think about *The Return* Part 2. Our purpose statement is up here. Israel has been exiled 70 years. And they are not any more obedient now than they were before they went into exile. And so the people of Israel had not apparently learned their lesson. And we'll see that as we go along today. But today we're going to look at what really amounts to the last look at the return that we're going to see recorded in the Scriptures. Remember that there were a number of returns, and we'll talk about that as we go. But we're going to see now that this particular return comes to a close. And there's a 400-year period of silence.

Like I said to you, the next time we get together we'll take a look at the entire history. So instead of doing it 22 weeks like we have been doing, we'll do it in one week and give you a one-week summary of it. And then the following week what we'll do is that we'll look at the inter-Testamental period, that period that really happens between Malachi and Matthew's Gospel. So you have that one page there separating the Testaments. Well, that one page amounts to about 400 years, and a lot happened during that time. So we'll look at some of that in-between time. And then after that we'll probably go on to the New Testament for a little while.

So I want to look at the following points. I want to look at the introduction to today's lesson, to just say a few words about that. And we're going to be really thinking about Nehemiah and his work in this period of the return. So we're going to look at his return. We're going to look at *the wall and the war that he engages in*. Also what he does; he goes back to Persia and then back to the land of Israel for a while. Then I'll just say a couple of words about *Malachi*. Then if we have time, and I'm hoping we do, I want to just say a couple of words about Nehemiah, the book of Nehemiah, the life of Nehemiah, and point out some things to you that I think are just interesting. You might find them interesting as well.

So *an introduction*. I want you to begin by thinking about God in His sovereignty. Nothing is outside of God's grasp. When we talk about the sovereignty of God, we mean that God is all-powerful. Nothing escapes His notice. And so all of the events of life, though contingent for us, were orchestrated sovereignly by Him. Nothing takes Him by surprise. And so everything that's ordered here was ordered by His divine providence.

Remember, Zerubbabel goes from the land of Assyria, actually the land of the Medo-Persians at this time because Cyrus decrees their return. So Zerubbabel goes from the land of the Medes and the Persians back to the land of Israel in 538. And then we find that in 458 Ezra returns. So there are ways of return that are happening.

But you can see the significant period of time that's elapsed, almost a hundred years, between the very first return and the return of Ezra. So about 80 years they're in the land before Ezra returns.

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Now the reason why I say this is because when you read the Bible, remember that you can get the sense that things just happen, one thing right after another. But that’s not the way they happen. Remember, we’re looking at a lot of events in a condensed manner. But there’s a long period of time that transpires before one particular event happens after another.

So Zerubbabel is in 538. Eighty years later Ezra returns. Now I just want you to keep in mind that not only is there a long period of time that transpires between events, but there are extra reasons why things happen. For instance, if you were to go into the throne room of the Medes and the Persians and you were to say to him “Now here’s the way I understand it. The people of Israel—“

And then he’d interrupt you and say, “Whoa, wait a minute!” He’d get his court informer and he would say, “Who are the people of Israel?” (*Laughter*)

And they would say, “You know, that area that used to be Damascus, the Syrian area that’s giving you trouble right now, south of them just a bit.”

He says, “Oh yeah, yeah! I know them. Go ahead.”

And you would say, “Wait a minute! Don’t you know the people of Israel? Look, Cyrus before you was decreed by Isaiah.”

“Hold on a second. Who is Isaiah?” (*Laughter*)

“He’s one of their prophets.”

“Oh yes, yes. Go on.”

So you need to understand that God does oversee all of these events. And not one of them happens outside of His sovereign decree and plan. But the people that are engaged with them in those purposes and plans aren’t always cognizant that they are playing the feature role. And so why, for instance, would Xerxes have sent Ezra back to the land? I mean, there was already one return, and there were multiple waves in part of that one return. Why would he send Ezra back to the land?

Well, there was a reason for that. Egypt was giving the Medes and the Persians problems. Now I’m going to throw a map up here in just a second. But Xerxes understood that the Syria-Palestinian area needed to be stable if there was anything to be done about the Egyptians. And maybe I don’t have a map up there. I must not have a map. All right, well here we go. (*Laughter*)

So the Medo-Persians are over here. The Syro-Palestinian area is here, only a much smaller one like that. And then Egypt is over here. So there needs to be stability in this area of the Medo-Persian kingdom. It needs to bring Egypt in to align with his purposes. So that’s the external reason for sending Ezra back. There needs to be some stability brought to the land.

What Ezra found when he returned was spiritual decay. The people of Israel were not much better than they were before. They’re back in the land and things are not going well. We’re going to find out why. Intermarriage is part of the problem.

What was happening? Well, you remember that the Samaritans were left in the land. So over here in the land of Israel you had the land in the North. You have this middle period in the New Testament called Samaria. And then you have the land in the South. The Samaritans were the people who were left in the land. And they intermarried with

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those from Assyria who were brought in, some of the Babylonians and other foreigners. And their religion became diluted. It became syncretistic. In other words, other aspects of other religions were brought together with Judaism and Judaism was watered down. And so the problem of intermarriage is in Ezra.

It’s an interesting thing, really, when you think about the problem of intermarriage. When I talk about intermarriage I’m talking about believers marrying unbelievers. Why is that? Well, because in Genesis 6 that was the problem. The sons of God married the daughters of men. And it produced a defiled line that led to the Flood. Throughout the Old Testament you find the problem of intermarriage. You find believers marrying unbelievers, and this is the problem that you face. But you also find it in the New Testament. It too acknowledges that this is a problem. And so Paul says, “Don’t be unequally yoked.” What does Baal have to do with God? And so don’t be intermarrying. Don’t be unequally yoked. And so there’s an acknowledgment that this is a major problem.

You know, it’s interesting. I was out evangelizing one night years and years ago, and I was talking to this young man. And he was telling me that he had to keep his Bible at work. I said, “Why do you have to keep your Bible at work?”

He said, “Because my wife gets angry when I read it.”

I said, “Let me ask you a question. Did you come to faith after you married this woman?”

He said, “No.”

I said, “Did you marry her when she was an unbeliever and you were a believer?”

And he said, “Yes.”

And I said, “Can I ask you a personal question that you may be offended by?”

He said, “I guess.”

And I said, “Well, why did you marry her?” And he looked at me in such an indignant way and he said, “Because I love her!”

And I wanted to ask the follow-up question, but I didn’t. I wanted to ask the follow-up question. The follow-up question would be “Who do you love more? The God who told you not to marry an unbeliever or your wife who is an unbeliever?” I think the answer was rather obvious at that point.

But anyway intermarriage is certainly a problem. And the repentance that they engage in is short-lived. And we’ll see that, especially in the life of Nehemiah. So let’s move into *the life of Nehemiah*.

Maybe I have a map here. Yes, I do! I knew I had a map here somewhere. *(Laughter)* So here’s the land of the Medo-Persians. You remember that Assyria is there, Babylon is there. This is where all the action is, right here. The Babylonians, then the Assyrians, then the Medo-Persians. But right here is the land of Israel. And up above that it is the Syrian area. So it’s this area that’s full of unrest. And down here are the Egyptians. And so there needs to be stability in this area for them to have that sort of power over the Egyptians.

Caleb Falbo: You mentioned that Xerxes made the decree. But in the beginning of Ezra it talks about Darius making a decree to return. Does that mean that the decree of Xerxes was something different?

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Jeff: Well, here’s the problem. The problem is that the chronology of Ezra is a little bit hard to discern. So I think they’re drawing from the previous decree. But I think it’s Xerxes that actually sent Ezra down. That’s the way I’m understanding it.

Caleb: So the decree from Darius wasn’t what they were referring to?

Jeff: Well, there were multiple returns. So I think that it starts with Cyrus. And so I think that they were always trying to control that area. And there were multiple waves of return. So I think that they’re drawing from another decree. But I think that Xerxes is in power. That’s how I understand it.

Caleb: Sorry.

Jeff: No, that’s okay. Ezra’s chronology is a really difficult chronology. And I’m giving you the best of what I think. But there’s a likelihood that you can pick somebody up in the Old Testament and read on this particular period of chronology and it would be slightly different than what I’m giving you.

Jerusalem is ravaged. Zerubbabel’s wall, built 80 years prior, is now destroyed. Israel is not in good shape. And here’s the interesting thing. The interesting thing is that they need that stability. There needs to be that stability in that area of the world.

It’s interesting to me that we find Nehemiah the cupbearer being sent back by his own request. Now I want you to think about that for a minute. If you’re a cupbearer in the kingdom, you’re a very trusted person, aren’t you? Because you’re the guy who is tasting the food and drinking from the cup, right? You’re the last guy that food is going to get to before it gets to you. You need to trust this guy. So there needs to be stability in the land.

Now obviously this king must have thought that the need for stability in that area of the world was that great to send this trusted person. I mean, think about it. When he’s willing to take the person he trusts with his life to go and bring stability to that area of the world it must be a significant thing, because now he’s got to find somebody else to taste his food. So there must have been a dire need for that to happen, for the kingdom to have some stability in that area of the world.

I want you to notice something. I want you to notice something about Nehemiah. Here is this man who hears about what’s happening in Jerusalem, in his land. And it grieves him. That’s what we’re told in the first several verses of Nehemiah. He’s upset by it. News has been brought back, and it grieves him. This is a man who loves the church under age. He loves it.

And you know, I would just ask. Do you love the church. I mean, this is one of those points of application that we just can’t afford to miss. And when I ask you that, what I’m not asking you is do you love the doctrine of the church? In other words, I’m not asking you do you love the spiritual authority of the church? Do you love the sacraments of the church? What I’m really driving at is, do you love the people who make the church?

And it’s not that Nehemiah gets out his theological textbook and laments the doctrine of the church. He’s lamenting what’s happening to the people who make up the church under age.

And so what does he do about it? Well, he engages in prayer. And in chapter 1 verses 4-11 there’s this long prayer.

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Transcriber’s Note: Nehemiah 1:4-11, NKJV. *“So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, ‘I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments, please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father’s house and I have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.*

“Remember, I pray, the word that you commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.’ Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand. O LORD, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.’ For I was the king’s cupbearer.”

Jeff: But remember. In chapter 2 verse 4, when he’s in front of the king and the king says, “Why are you so down?”, we get that little phrase where he says, “*And he prayed, and he asked*”, right? And so this is a man engaged, who labors long for the church. He prays for the church. But also in the moment-by-moment needs of the day he prays for the church, especially as he’s ready to ask the king for help.

So he prays, but he also plans. In chapter 2 don’t you love how he asks the king for certain things? In other words, he asks him for things that he’ll need not only traveling to the land, but when he arrives in the land what he’ll need in order to bring about the stability that’s required, but also to bring about the fruitfulness of the land of Israel. I just love it. He prays and he plans.

He doesn’t say this. It’s that old joke, you know? The person is on top of the roof during a flood. And the helicopter comes by and God’s going to save me. And the boat comes by and God’s going to save me. You know, it’s that sort of thing, right? You have that sort of wrong view. The man dies and he goes to heaven. And God says, “What are you doing?”

And he said, “I thought you were going to save me.” The man says this to God.

And God says, “I sent you help out there in a boat.” (*Laughter*) You get it. So he prays and he plans. I think that’s important. I think it’s one of the practical things that you see in Nehemiah.

Nehemiah returns in 445 B.C., about 13 years after Ezra returns, or thereabouts. Now when Nehemiah gets back, about 13 years after Ezra, he notices that destruction has happened to the wall. And he notices all of the enemies afoot.

Now there are three antagonists in the area—Sanballat. This was the old ‘80s group Sandow Ballet. (*Laughter*) But anyway, thanks for appreciating that; I needed somebody

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to recognize that. Tobiah the Ammonite, and then Gehsum the Arab—three enemies that are here seeking to do major damage to the work that’s being done in Jerusalem. Interestingly you see Samaria at the heart of this. And we’ll see these figures, especially Sanballat and Tobiah, appear later. But these are antagonists to the church.

And you know, I think that here is another thing that we need to think about. I think we need to understand that there are enemies in the church in every age, whether it’s the church under age or it’s the church today. There are enemies in the church that seek to undermine it. And one of the things that I want you to notice—and we’re going to see it a little bit later—is this. We’re going to see that the people who are after the church in an antagonistic way do not always see themselves as hating God. And I think that’s an important thing. But we need to see that.

Why is it, for instance, that these groups are antagonistic to Israel? Well, not because they hate God. But why? Because they do not want to see Israel as a political and military threat to this particular area. You know, they would have understood why it was that Ezra would come up there and return to the land. They would have understood what Egypt was doing. In fact, perhaps they were even excited about what Egypt was doing. Why? Because these guys are not real happy to continue to be under the Persian Empire.

So there’s a lot of foment, a lot of unrest. And there is not a desire to see Israel become a strong satellite nation of Persia. And they know that’s what’s coming.

So it’s interesting. And I’m not going to spend a lot of time thinking about these maneuvers. But it’s interesting. We already saw last week how it was reported back to the court that this production was going on. And you needed to check the decree and make sure that there was a decree that was issued that said that they could rebuild. And so here again we have the same type of thing happening, the same kind of stoppage of work and starting again. Why? Because they’re actually using the Persians to undermine the work of the Persians in the Syria-Palestine area. So they realize that they could be a threat, and they don’t want that to happen.

But the fact of the matter is, they hate Israel’s God. The reason why they’re suppressing the work of the church is because they suppress their hatred for God, and it comes out in various ways.

They begin building in three days. As soon as Nehemiah gets back into town, building begins. He’s home three days and it gets started. And the antagonism happens in various ways. There’s mocking. There are negotiations that happen. There’s reporting back to the Persians. And there is at least one assassination attempt against Nehemiah’s life. So there is all kinds of antagonism that takes place.

What I want you to see though is *the secret to building the wall*. There are some really practical things here that I think are interesting. Go to chapter 3. I think you’re going to find this fairly interesting to see. Chapter 3 of Nehemiah.

Notice first of all that there is the “where you are” principle. If you notice, the people who are commissioned to build the wall are commissioned to build where they live, or where they have activity. Their priests surround the gates where they’re going to use tools, and so on. So what he’s doing is, he’s saying, “Look, if your house is built in this section of the wall or near this section of the wall, who’s likely going to invest most in

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the security of this area of the wall? You are.” And so where you are along the perimeter of the wall is where you’re assigned to build.

And the other thing that comes out of this is that if you look at chapter 3 it says, “*And next to him.*” It’s kind of a neat way to think about it. Where am I and who is next to me? And that’s an interesting principle that’s there.

The Tekoite nobles are there. Now the Tekoites are workers. But the nobles of the Tekoites are not.

Now what is it that we ought to notice about that? It’s that they’re noticed. Their inactivity is noted. The Tekoites are working; their nobles were not working. I think it’s kind of interesting.

You know, I always think to myself about the character who’s cast in a negative light, recorded in Scripture for all eternity. (*Laughter*) Go ahead, Ted. Are you stretching or are you—No, you’re stretching. All right. So the Tekoite nobles are noticed; those who are inactive are noticed.

Notice Malchijah the son of Harim. Notice this. This is frankly one of the most interesting pieces. If you go back to—Where am I?

Brave Man: The barn.

Jeff: I am at the barn. Go back to Ezra with me a minute. I think this is it, Ezra 10:31. “*Of the sons of Harim: Eliezer, Ishijah and Malchijah.*” So this is Malchijah the son of Harim.

Now I want you to think about this. Why is he listed in Ezra right there? Because he is one who is guilty of intermarriage. Isn’t that interesting! He is one who is guilty of intermarriage and he’s here building the wall.

Now I’ll tell you what I think that means. I think that means that this is a guy who is guilty of intermarriage and repents of it. And he’s a part of the build now; he’s a part of what’s happening. It’s interesting to me that he’s mentioned. And you think of him at the convention in the last chapter of Ezra. It’s striking.

Caleb: When you say he repented, what—

Jeff: Well, it’s an assumption, because I’m not sure. But it looks like he’s all in.

Caleb: Would you imply a divorce, or—

Jeff: Well, remember what Ezra made them do. Ezra made them put away their foreign wives. That was what he made them do. He made them get rid of them.

And then this one. Notice 3:12 of Nehemiah. Shallum and his daughters were working on the wall.

Transcriber’s Note: Nehemiah 3:12, NKJV. “*And next to him was Shallum the son of Hallohesh, leader of half the district of Jerusalem; he and his daughters made repairs.*”

Jeff: You know, that’s cool! Get the daughters out there! (*Laughter*) Get them to work. And you know, it’s one of these things where I’m extrapolating from this, but—

Ted Wood: A lot of extrapolation.

Jeff: A lot of extrapolation. (*Laughter*) That’s cool. You know, I think it’s standard practice; you know what I mean? It’s pretty neat.

And then And then Nehemiah the son of Azbah. I don’t know this. This is even more of an extrapolation. Okay, I’m just saying it; I’m saying it up front. Nehemiah is

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mentioned in Ezra 2:2 as one of the people who came back under Zerubbabel. If this is the same Nehemiah, (and I think it’s a stretch; I don’t know if he is or not), this is an old guy. I mean, do you know what I’m saying? He’s older than Ted. *(Laughter)*

All right. And then notice this. In 3:20, Baruch. Now if you have an ESV, it will be in the note at the bottom. But it says that he worked vigorously. You know, it’s kind of neat. The way he worked is being described. “*Diligently*” is the way it’s rendered in some translations. And I just think that when you look at the building of the wall in chapter 3, there’s a lot of neat stuff there when you begin to think about what’s there.

The wall took 52 days to build. We read that in 6:15-16.

Transcriber’s Note: Nehemiah 6:15-16. “*So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of Elul, in fifty-two days. And it happened, when all our enemies heard of it, and all the nations around us saw these things, that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God.*”

Jeff: I mean this guy Nehemiah must have been quite a man, a motivator and an administrator, to get this type of work done so efficiently. Before we go on, any questions that you have about that, or thoughts? Yes, Tom?

Tom Hansz: Nehemiah is listed as the son of Hachaliah. He has a different father than the one you’re listing here.

Jeff: Well, that may be a different Nehemiah. That’s what I’m saying.

Tom: That’s right; yes. I didn’t want people to get confused.

Jeff: That’s right. Go ahead, John.

John Christopher: There’s an excellent book out there written by John White. It’s called *Excellence in Leadership*. It’s from Inter-Varsity Press. It goes through all of this business about Nehemiah’s style of management—looking at the problems within and the problems without, and how he handled them. It’s a great thing to learn from that and implement the lessons learned there.

Bishop Rodgers: What’s the name of the book?

John: *Excellence in Leadership* by John White, who is not the John White of Geneva; it’s another John White.

Ted: Is there any significance to the fact that the queen was sitting with the king in Nehemiah? I read an account one time that said that the queen mother, maybe the queen grandmother, was Esther. Could that be possible?

Jeff: You know, those are the kinds of speculations like I’m speculating. *(Laughter)*

Ted: Keep extrapolating.

Jeff: There’s a lot of extrapolation going on. Those books on leadership have some value, but there’s a lot of extrapolation in those too. They are kind of the groundwork from where I get this kind of stuff.

Don Maurer: Now he admits it.

Jeff: What’s that?

Don: I said now you admit it.

Jeff: Well, I’ve not read those books, except know that years ago James Montgomery Boice had one that was like that, and it was like a leadership thing. And I just remember

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reading it and reading those kinds of extrapolations in there. So I think that’s an assumption.

Don Nemit: Are we doing the mike, or no?

Jeff: I don’t have it.

Don: One of the neatest lessons that I’ve derived from Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshum is that they keep inviting Nehemiah to come down. He turns and says, “no, no, no!” He trusted the Lord in all that. That’s a great lesson. Stick to the plan that God gave you. And leave those characters out there who try to come up with this crazy sticker on cars now. It won’t work. Stick to the plan that God gave you. Nehemiah did.

Jeff: Yes. It’s phrased, at least in the New King James, as “*I’m doing a great work, and I’m not coming down.*” It’s the whole idea of prioritizing, right? I’m doing a great work.

You know, it’s kind of neat when you think about it, right? Here we go, we’re going to extrapolate. (*Laughter*) But not really. I want you to think about it for a minute. He’s doing a great work. But if you were to ask the king of Persia what kind of great work he was doing, he would have said, “Well, he’s bringing stability to the Syro-Palestinian area for the glory of the Persian Empire.”

But if you were to ask Nehemiah, he would say, “I’m rebuilding Jerusalem which is the city of David to the glory of God.” You know, it’s just kind of interesting when you think about motives for doing certain things. Sometimes those are not always straight and visible to everyone. Sometimes maybe you’re the only one who sees.

You know, the enemies probably said something like this. “You say you’re building this for the glory of God. Right! You’re doing this to build your own kingdom, right? You’re doing this for the Persians. You’re doing this for—“

Don Nemit: Nehemiah.

Jeff: “You’re doing this for Nehemiah. This is going to be your city,” that sort of thing. So it’s kind of interesting how those dynamics work out. Anybody else? Okay.

All right. So *Nehemiah and reform*. There’s a lot of spiritual and moral decay that’s happening in the land at this time. In part you see the intermarriage issue continuing to be a problem. And we’ll see that. But some of this moral and spiritual problem actually manifests itself in the economic reform that’s needed.

For instance, if you were to go to chapter 5, notice this. Notice that there’s a question of the four within this particular group.

Now I want you to think about this for just a minute. Within a small, struggling, weak, disadvantaged group there are those who are suppressing others. You know, I’ll tell you. I’ll never forget the lesson I learned, a very practical lesson like this one that I learned.

My son is in a wheelchair. I took him to a sled hop. And there were probably six or seven guys his age in this group. And you know, many of them were older than him. And you know, I thought to myself, oh, what an opportunity for these older guys to have a younger guy look up to them.

Because let’s face it. They were in wheelchairs and they probably did not have a whole lot of people looking up to them. So here’s this opportunity for this young guy to

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come. I’m thinking this as a father; this is great. My kid has an opportunity to look up to them. They have an opportunity to teach him. This is going to be great.

Do you know what happened? They saw an opportunity to depress and oppress somebody that was weaker than them and less good on the ice. I sat back and thought to myself, *you know, this is a valuable lesson for me to learn*, right? We will not always gravitate toward virtue, and what may even in the long run glorify us. We will gravitate toward what will be to our hurt and the hurt of others because of our sin.

It’s interesting this. Nehemiah also tries this. “After the wall is built, what do you need?”

Well, no one has been living in the city, right? No one has been living in the city because it’s not fortified, it’s not defended. There’s no farm land there. So now he’s got to seek those and give incentives to those who are outside the city to come back and live within the city. And then those who volunteered, they’re just given a pat on the back. They’re encouraged because they’re doing it for the good of the city.

You know, I want you to think about that for just a minute. That’s really one of those things that’s a lesson to us, isn’t it? I mean, there are things that we could be engaged in that seem like a waste of time or a disadvantage to us. And we do them anyway because we believe God is calling us to do them. I just think that’s a powerful lesson when we think about it.

Nehemiah reinstates the Jewish feasts. He gets the priesthood working. He gets the Jewish calendar working again. And so they engage in the Jewish feasts. There’s the reading of the Law. This is a great chapter; the reading of the Law is here. And what happens is that Ezra gets up and reads it.

And then there are other priests out there who translate it to the people. And the interesting thing about it is this. When the people hear the Law, what happens? They begin to weep. And this is the reaction that repentant people have to the law.

And yet listen to how Nehemiah is. Nehemiah says this. He’s the quintessential administrator. “This is not a day of sorrow; this is a day of feasting. Stop your crying!” You know? It’s the engineer in him. (*Laughter*) And so the people are encouraged to celebrate because of what they’re doing in terms of what the feast is all about. And so it’s great stuff.

Covenant renewal happens in Nehemiah chapter 9. A lot here; I’m just going to say a couple of things built around this idea of repentance. There’s so much more we could say, but I’m just going to say a couple things.

Notice that *they turn and do right*. Look at 8:13 for just a minute.

Transcriber’s Note: Nehemiah 8:13, NKJV. “*Now on the second day the heads of the fathers’ houses of all the people, with the priests and Levites, were gathered to Ezra the scribe, in order to understand the words of the Law.*”

In 8:13 they hear read in the Law, or hear the priest translating the Law for them, that they were supposed to celebrate the Feast of Booths using booths. And they go, “Hey, we’ve not been doing this.” And so they go out and they build booths. And so they’re hearing the Law, weeping because their lives don’t conform to it. And what they’re doing is, they’re saying, “Let’s bring conformity to our lives.”

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And then what do they do? They repent in sorrow because they’ve not been doing the things of the law. So they repent in sackcloth and ashes. But they know that’s not going to save them. The One who is going to forgive them is the One who they describe in 9:17.

Transcriber’s Note: Nehemiah 9:16-17, NKJV.

*“But they and our fathers acted proudly,
Hardened their necks,
And did not heed Your commandments.
They refused to obey,
And they were not mindful of Your wonders
That You did among them.
But they hardened their necks,
And in their rebellion
They appointed a leader
To return to their bondage.
But You are God,
Ready to pardon,
Gracious and merciful,
Slow to anger,
Abundant in kindness,
And did not forsake them.”*

Jeff: And notice that the description in 9:17 looks an awful lot like, if not exactly like Exodus 33, when God describes Himself to Moses when He hid him in the cleft of the rock. So repentance is going on. But again the repentance is somewhat short-lived.

Let me say a word to you about what happens next. Nehemiah stays in the land of Israel for about twelve years. He returns to Persia. We know that he returns to Persia. This is another one of those perplexing things. Let me just share this with you. This is another perplexing thing; I don’t know the answer to this.

If you go to 13:6, *“While this was taking place I was not in Jerusalem.”* So we know that he has gone back to Persia. *“For in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I went to the king.”*

Why is he described as the king of Babylon when he’s the king of Persia? I don’t know the answer to that. I don’t know if he’s living in Babylon at the time and so they describe him locally. I don’t know. There is a variety of answers that scholars give to why that’s the case. I don’t know the answer to it. I just can’t give it to you definitively.

But I know that Nehemiah stayed in the land twelve years. He returns to Persia and the king. And he’s there perhaps three years; I don’t know. And then he returns to the land again. And when he returns he finds that everything has regressed.

What do I mean? Well remember the enemy, Tobiah the Ammonite? He’s now living in the temple. The priests are going back to the farm land. They’re not active in the temple anymore. Tobiah is living in it. That’s his new digs. And guess what? We learned back in 6:16-17 that he’s also related to some of the prominent people. And isn’t it always the case? Do you know what I’m saying? He’s related to some of the people who are the

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higher-ups in Jerusalem. Once Nehemiah leaves, that radical zealot, they say, “Hey Tobiah, come on over here! We’ve got a great room for you!”

All right. *Sanballat in Samaria*. The priest’s son marries Sanballat’s daughter! What? You’ve got to be kidding me! So Nehemiah returns. He finds spiritual decay and moral decay, and so he brings about changes.

Now what I want you to think about is this. He cleanses the temple. He just goes in. I love this guy, right? He throws out the furniture. “Get it out of here!”, you know? He throws Tobiah out. He shuts the gates. Before the Sabbath day at sundown he shuts the gates. And all the merchants are camped outside the gates, tempting the people to come out and buy and sell on the Sabbath. And he says to them all, “If you don’t leave I’m going to come down and lay hands on you.” I just love that!

And he will. Why? Because when they had intermarried, remember, he rips the hair out of their beards and stuff like that. I mean, he’s just a fanatic! And don’t you love it? Oh, he pulls the hair out of their beards! I just love it! Do you know what I mean? Can you imagine this? This is a guy who would have many lawsuits against him today. *(Laughter)* Many lawsuits.

Malachi is a prophet around the time of Nehemiah. He’s the last prophet in Israel with the same conditions. One of the things that I love about the story of Malachi is that tithing is an issue—giving to the Lord, right? And seeing that His temple can run with the sacrifices, and so on. And one of the pictures that he gives in his prophecy is that someone is leading a sacrifice to the temple. And it’s limping along and its eyes are hanging out. *(Laughter)* And he sees that and he says, “Take that to the governor and see if he’ll accept that as your taxes, because I’ll tell you what, the Lord’s not going to accept that as a sacrifice.” It’s just great, the challenge about the tithing and that God will open the floodgates of heaven, and that sort of thing. A lot is there—the refiner’s fire and so on. Elijah is there, and so forth. Elijah will be John the Baptist. And then 400 years of silence after Malachi. That’s what leads us up to the inter-Testamental period.

I wanted to say a word in the remaining time I have about something that I’ve noticed in the book that you may find interesting, perhaps not. But before I get there, any questions or thoughts that you might have about this? Yes?

Bill McCoy: It’s interesting that Nehemiah and Ezra have these three antagonists. Actually we only have three enemies—the world, the flesh and the devil. Whoever put them in that order I think had great insight.

Bishop Rodgers: When Nehemiah went before the king looking sad, he was risking his life. You didn’t go before the king looking sad. So he was all out.

Jeff: Yes, that’s right. Well, let me share something. I think here’s a pattern. Sometimes when you look at the Old Testament you can see what I think are types that find their fulfillment in the New Testament in antitypical material. For instance Jonah is a type of Christ. Christ fulfills what he typifies.

One of the things that I find interesting is this. When I look at the book of Nehemiah I just want you to think about this for a minute in terms of the pattern that you see here. So Nehemiah is in the kingdom of Persia. He is at the right hand of the king, enjoying position and honor and even power. He is sent to Jerusalem so that he might enter into the

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poverty of those who are in Jerusalem, so as to bring light to it and repentance and upbuilding.

Nehemiah’s life is one of obedience. There’s an interesting assassination attempt near the end of it. Though he doesn’t die, there’s just an attempt. The wall is finished, the work is finished. And he returns to Persia. And in returning to Persia he’s there for a short period of time. And then he returns to the land and finds faith lacking, and so returns in judgment.

I don’t know about you, but who does that remind you of? Yeah, it’s just kind of funny to me as I’m studying the book of Nehemiah. I thought to myself that the pattern of the book reminds you of the life of Christ Himself. I don’t know what to make of that other than that I shouldn’t be surprised by it; neither should you. But I think it’s there. I think it’s there for our learning. And so it’s kind of neat; I just thought I’d share it with you. But do you have any last comments or questions before we end this today? Yes?

Brave Man: I read a book that got me thinking about this, about Nehemiah. It was really a dead-end job. I don’t know long he was the cupbearer. You think, “Oh, here I am. I’m stuck with this job. You know, how is God using me?”

Jeff: I can quit at any time, right?

Brave Man: I’m sitting on the bench; I’m doing nothing, blab la bla. He obviously overheard one guy giving a testimony of sorts how much trouble there was back home, and his heart was broken. And you know, this is inspiring. Maybe the Lord is not using you, and you’re stuck somewhere, insignificant in life. But you know, in God’s perfect timing and His sovereignty, look out! God will send you somewhere beyond your imagination. And you’ll be compelled and empowered by the Lord to do something a little bit less or a little bit more, you know, in the front line, or He’ll send you to the back line. But He is just awesome. That’s what I see through all this. The Lord can take a man and give him skills and giftings to so inspire a nation to rebuild. Isn’t that marvelous?

Jeff: Well, I think that the lady following you up from across the street asking you if you’re a pastor is—

Brave Man: Out of the blue. How did she know that? I never met her, she never saw me. That’s what the Holy Spirit can do. So what I see is that the glory of God has done all this until we gain in our thinking. But as I started out, the sovereignty of God is awesome. You don’t think you’re involved or whatever, or you have a side job. But just stand back and give glory to God. That’s all I can say.

Jeff: You know, I’ll just say this to you too. You know, it’s really interesting. We’re to hold in tension the whole idea of contentment and a hunger for significance. And I think both of those things are legitimate. A hunger for significance can be like sin. You can turn it in on yourself and it can encumber us. But there is the call to be contented wherever we are. And there is the hunger for significance that is something real. And it’s not something that we ought to suppress, but it’s something that we ought to guard against when it comes to sin, you know? And I think that what you’re saying is true. Don’t

Don Maurer: Yes. It’s interesting to me, the great mercy and condescension of the Lord, where they complain in Malachi 3. “Oh, what good is it serving the LORD? The

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wicked prosper.” And yet God doesn’t rebuke them. He says, “I’m going to write a book of remembrance to you.” Wow, that’s just great condescension on God’s part!

Jeff: Yes.

Corky Semler: Perhaps once in the next week or two we can spend a little bit of time in the book of Malachi talking about how God feels about money, and the application to our lives. I think that’s important. Sometimes money turns into an idol for us.

Jeff: You know what? We’ll probably go to the New Testament and come back to Malachi and do that. It would be nice to get into the New Testament a little bit and kind of stretch our legs.

Frank Melnyk: I was raised Ukrainian Orthodox and married a Baptist. And sixty years later we’re still here. But the fact is that God used her as an instrument of me coming to Christ.

Brave Man: Amen; great point.

Jeff: And there’s a lot of truth in that. But that should be the exception and not the norm. Frank, the norm should be that we’re not unequally yoked. I hate to say this to you, but if your wife would have come to me and said, “Should I marry this Frank Melnick guy?”, I’d have said no.

Frank: That’s what her parents said. *(Laughter)*

Jeff: I am so glad in this case that she did not listen. But if it were my daughter I’d be saying, “No, you can’t be unequally yoked.”

Caleb: That sort of raises the question in Ezra. Was he just in telling them to divorce? And if so, what principle changed between that time and 1 Corinthians 7, where Paul says that even if you’re unequally yoked, stay with your spouse?

Jeff: You know what? I’m really glad you asked that at this time. *(Laughter)* I was so afraid that somebody was going to ask that early in the game when you’re talking about Ezra, and no one did. So you lost your opportunity. *(Laughter)*

You know, to give a quick answer, the fact of the matter is that even in the New Testament people argue that there are no exceptions for divorce and remarriage. And some people argue that there’s one exception, and that’s unfaithfulness. And some people will argue for two exceptions, unfaithfulness and desertion.

You know, to give a quick, easy answer is really difficult. But you’re raising not just the exception issue. You’re saying that in 1 Corinthians 7 Paul says that if the unbeliever desires to stay with you, then stay with him. And here in Ezra he’s telling them to put away their foreign wives, which seems to be a lot different and contradictory piece of advice. And I think that part of what I would say and part of the answer is that with the church under age there is a difference in terms of the requirement. So, for instance, there are aspects of the law that are unchangeable and immutable. Then there are aspects of the law that can change.

For instance, the Sabbath Day is an instance of this. The Sabbath Day is eternal; it’s part of creation. But the day changes. It was on Saturday; the New testament changes it to Sunday. So there are aspects of the law that are unchangeable. Then there are aspects of the law, that very law, that are changeable, mutable.

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And so I think that what you sort of have to parse out is what aspects of the law are unchanging, and what aspects of the law are able to change?

For instance, when you look at marriage itself, Deuteronomy 24 says that Moses granted the people an exception for the hardness of their hearts for divorce. So it wasn't just in Ezra. It's actually in Deuteronomy 24. And it's actually the Deuteronomy 24 passage that people react to and interact with when it comes to the New Testament passages that talk about why now there is either not room for divorce, or that there are exceptions to it. So it's much more of a complex answer than I can give right now. Those are the moving parts. I don't know, My own personal position is articulated in the Westminster Confession. I believe there are two exceptions. I believe unfaithfulness is an exception, and in 1 Corinthians 7 that desertion is another exception. So I believe there are exceptions, which in some ways is consistent with Ezra 3.

Ron Baling: My impression in Corinthians is that he's talking about two people who were married. Both were not believers. And when you come to faith, then you don't.

Jeff: That's my understanding as well.

Ron: There's a difference between—

Jeff: That's why I said what I said to Frank. I said that ought to be the exception, not the rule. These are two Greeks that come together.

Bishop Rodgers: We need to be careful, because the Lord no longer asks us to wipe out whole villages. God works in a contextual way. Now since the Lord has come, it's a very different ball game.

Jeff: Yes. Certain people of Canaan were under the Ban, right? And so God was using the nation of Israel to enact judgment on those people. And now He tells us to love our neighbors as ourselves. And so there's a difference there, too. You find God working different ways throughout the depth of Israel. There was one more, but I think we should—Thanks a lot, Caleb. *(Laughter)* Everybody's leaving now because of that one. *(Laughter)*

Let's pray really briefly and then let us end. Father, thank You for this day and for the time You've given us. And thank You for Your word. Father, though we may not understand it all, Lord, we work to understand it. And we know and have confidence that Your Holy Spirit will bring us to unity, if not in this life then certainly the next in our thinking about it. And Father, we pray that You would keep us ever striving to understand it, for it is in fact Your word. And we delight in it and we thank You for it in Jesus name. Amen.

Brave Men: Amen. *(Applause)*