

“The Book of the Law of God”

The Seventeenth in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

Texts: Nehemiah 7:1-6; 8:1-4, 13-18; Galatians 4:1-6

If you know the history of Israel, you know that there are great turning points in redemptive history which determine the subsequent course of events for the people of God. We find one of these turning points in our passage, when the people of Israel assemble for a covenant renewal ceremony outside one of Jerusalem’s gates just rebuilt by the Israelites, despite the sustained efforts of their enemies to stop the rebuilding process. The covenant renewal ceremony brought about a revival within Israel and led to a desire on the part of the people to return to those biblical practices revealed to them by God in his word. From this point forward, the Jews will be characterized as the “people of the Book.”

As we continue our series on Ezra and Nehemiah, we will consider, briefly, the opening section of Nehemiah 7, before moving on to spend the balance of our time in Nehemiah 8. One thing is now obvious—the repeated attempts by Sanballat, Tobias, and Geshem to stop the Jews from rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls, gates, and fortifications, have failed. As we learned from our time in Nehemiah 6, thanks to the capable leadership of Nehemiah, in just 52 days the Jews managed to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls and gates, much to the chagrin of the enemies of Israel, who, out of disdain, stooped so low as to make death threats and threaten blackmail when their previous efforts had failed.

If the rebuilding of the city’s walls was the theme of the previous chapters of Nehemiah, and if the first generation of returning exiles rebuilding the Jerusalem temple had been key to the Book of Ezra, one very important element of Israel’s religion has remained somewhat in the background until now—the central role the law of God played in the life of Israel. Now that the temple has been rebuilt, sacrifices resumed, priests and levites are once again performing their duties in that temple, and the city of Jerusalem finally has been made safe, the law of God now moves to the front and center of Nehemiah’s account. The focus of Nehemiah 8-10 shifts away from rebuilding walls to the renewal of that covenant which God made with Israel at Mount Sinai. Once the city’s walls have been rebuilt it is time to seek YHWH’s blessing and favor, and this entails renewing Israel’s covenant with YHWH.

The opening verses of chapter 7 make several important points and set the stage for what follows, so we will consider them briefly before moving on to discuss chapter 8. With the Sanballat saga seemingly at an end with the completion of the city’s walls, Nehemiah recounts his subsequent actions in verses 1-2 of chapter 7. *“Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many.”* If rebuilt walls and gates were necessary for the safety of the people and for the city of Jerusalem to become a habitable place, Nehemiah reminds us that while this all may be well and good, the people of Israel must not forget the reason why Jerusalem is so important—it is in this city that God’s temple stands, and it is in the midst of this city where YHWH’s people are to worship him according to his word.¹ This is why in addition to those gate-keepers who stood guard and opened and closed the city’s gates (no small task), Nehemiah appoints singers and Levites to serve in the temple. The one necessitates the other.

¹ Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 102.

Once again, Nehemiah mentions his brother Hanani, who was the one who first brought Nehemiah the difficult news about the sad state of Jerusalem, news which set the events recounted in the Book of Nehemiah into action (as recounted in the opening chapter). Nehemiah trusted his brother, as well as a man named Hananiah, and so he placed them in important positions in the city's administration. The "castle" refers to the Tower of Hananel which stood adjacent to the temple mount—a defensive fortification and watch-tower. These men were placed in charge so as to ensure that the city was properly defended, and its rebuilt gates function so as to bring order to daily life.

No doubt, recalling what happened back in the days of the Jebusites (2 Samuel 5:6) who were easily overcome by David when he captured Jerusalem from them, Nehemiah gives the following instructions to the people in verse 3. *"And I said to them, 'Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot. And while they are still standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors. Appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, some at their guard posts and some in front of their own homes.'"* Nehemiah insisted that an orderly routine be established so that the gates were opened at set times—late in the morning and closed for the day well before dark. Guards were appointed so that at no time when the city's gates were opened, were they left unmanned. The reason for this is given in verse 4, *"the city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt."* Much of the city within the walls was still in rubble. Few would choose to build there until it was safe to do so, and only if the city's routines were established so that people felt safe and could risk moving back inside the walls. Which, of course, they will begin to do now that order has been established.

In Nehemiah 7:5-73 we have what amounts to an archival copy of Ezra chapter 2, which Nehemiah inserts directly into his narrative—material which we covered during our time in Ezra. This genealogical record includes the names of all those who returned from the exile in Babylon and who now comprise a "who's who" of Jerusalem's leading citizens (like America's Mayflower descendants). Nehemiah tells us in verses 5-6, *"then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I found written in it: These were the people of the province who came up out of the captivity of those exiles whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried into exile. They returned to Jerusalem and Judah, each to his town."*

As we jump ahead to the end of chapter 7, we read in verse 73, *"so the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, some of the people, the temple servants, and all Israel, lived in their towns. And when the seventh month had come, the people of Israel were in their towns."* Among those who gathered at the Water Gate for the scene which begins to unfold in chapter 8 are those whose ancestors are included in Ezra's genealogy. Ezra makes his first appearance in the Book of Nehemiah, participating in the covenant renewal ceremony described in chapter 8. The prominence of Israel's covenant with YHWH at Mount Sinai in the day to day life of the Jews is very apparent by the fact that the law (the central feature of that covenant) is mentioned nine times in this chapter.²

According to Nehemiah's account, as the scene opens in verse 1, *"all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel."* Whether the people gathered on their own, or were summoned to assemble is not made clear—although, things like this do not usually happen spontaneously. The scene is one in which the people (including the families mentioned by Nehemiah in the preceding

² Davis, Ezra-Nehemiah (part fifteen)

chapter) gather outside the Water Gate for what everyone knows to be a significant occasion. Just as the people built the wall as one man, so to they now assemble as “one” to hear the Book of the Law read aloud. Since the wall was completed on the 25th of Elul (which is the sixth month) and as we will see in verse two, this assembly occurred on the first day of the seventh month (the high point of the Jewish year),³ the covenant renewal ceremony followed soon after the completion of the walls, and included the building of a large platform from which the Book of the Law could be read to the people.

Ezra—who has not been mentioned previously by Nehemiah and who is revered by the people—will be present to read the Book of the Law (all or part of the Pentateuch). We know from Ezra 9:3 ff and 10:1, that Ezra often withdrew to pray for Israel in private, but on this occasion it is he who will read the Book of the Law of the Law of Moses, which Nehemiah explicitly tells us that the Lord himself had given to Israel. Despite the opinion of critical scholars that the law (especially the Book of Deuteronomy) was compiled and edited for occasions such as this, Nehemiah flatly declares that this is the law given by God to Moses at Mount Sinai. These laws were not the mere opinions of Jewish scribes who wrote and compiled them for occasions such as this. The law was the revelation of the perfect will of God given to Israel through the agency of Moses nearly a thousand years earlier.

If critical scholars are correct, Ezra committed a “pious fraud” that day,⁴ reading a only document recently composed while allowing the people think it had been revealed to Moses by YHWH a thousand years earlier. Nehemiah’s account everywhere presupposes that these commandments of God were canonical Scripture, given to Moses by God and were now read to the assembled people in order to renew God’s covenant with Israel on the occasion of the completion of Jerusalem’s walls.

Nehemiah tells us in verses 2-3, that “*Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.*” The Water Gate was on the east side of the city—the side opposite from the temple, where one might think such a ceremony would be held. According to Deuteronomy 6:7 the law is not tied to worship in the temple like the sacrifices. “*You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.*” The law will be read at one of the city’s most important public places—the Water Gate.

You can just imagine the excitement generated by Ezra’s presence, as well as Ezra’s personal joy that all that he sought and for which he had prayed in the days before Nehemiah for was now a reality. The huge assembly consisted of all those, men, women, and children who could understand what was heard. Ezra read for approximately five hours, but you can be sure few slept and no one asked him to stop. This calls to mind the scene on the plains of Moab, recounted in Deuteronomy 4:1-8 when Moses commanded the people, “*and now, O Israel, listen to the statutes and the rules that I am teaching you, and do them, that you may live, and go in and take possession of the land that the LORD, the God of your fathers, is giving you. You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you. Your eyes have seen what the LORD did at Baal-peor, for the LORD your God destroyed from among you all the men who followed the Baal of Peor.*”

0. Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 103.

⁴ Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 104.

But you who held fast to the LORD your God are all alive today. See, I have taught you statutes and rules, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?"

To a group of exiles who returned to this same land after having come under the covenant curses of the law and exiled to Babylon, and to now be present for a covenant renewal ceremony commemorating the rebuilding of the city and its temple, Ezra's reading of the Book of the Law, no doubt, brought Israel's history back to life. The people knew these words from the Book of Deuteronomy, and those who understood what was about to happen would not have missed the significance of this day.

The platform was big enough to fit Ezra and thirteen others (likely priests). We read in verse 4, "*and Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiyah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand.*" It is probable that these men read portions of the law in succession, such as we might find in a modern synagogue. According to verse 5, "*Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood.*" Standing is the liturgical action tied to "listening and understanding," just as kneeling is appropriate for prayer, as seen in the next verse, when "*Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen,' lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.*"

The occasion is both solemn and yet joyful. As one commentator points out something we might easily miss, this day marks a genuine transition in Israel's religion. Whereas before the days of Ezra-Nehemiah (and Second Temple Judaism), the Jews were a people associated with the glory of Solomon's temple and the possession of the land that God promised to them. But from this day forth, the Jews become a people of the Book. There is a fundamental change in emphasis seen in the future course of Israel. The law was read to the people from a high platform, and the people were moved (emotionally speaking) upon hearing it. But there was no glory-cloud, no miracles, nor did this day center around the temple as on the day when Solomon originally dedicated "the House of YHWH" when it was filled with the glory of God.⁵ Nothing like that here, even though a revival occurs when the Book of the Law is read.

In verses 7-8, we read of how the covenant renewal ceremony unfolded. "*Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiyah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.*" The act of making sure the people understood refers not to translating the law from Aramaic into Hebrew (as many argue), but rather in expounding the law—explaining it to the people through teaching and preaching. One scholar makes a good case that this actually meant breaking each section of the law down into smaller chunks (paragraph by paragraph).⁶ The key point is that the law was read and

⁵ Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 106.

⁶ Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 291-292.

expounded so that everyone understood it.

The response to the demands of the law was initially sorrow and mourning. On one level this is certainly understandable. This is a glorious day in Israel's history. For this one afternoon, it were as though the people were back with Moses and the Israelites on the plains of Moab, about to enter the promised land. No doubt, it would have been easy to be overcome with emotion. Everyone had worked so hard to rebuild the temple and the city, and their labor had borne fruit. On another level, the reading of the law certainly brought with it the conviction of sin, as it does to this very day. Who standing there could truly say when the law was read, "Yup, I've done all that." Well, sadly, many did, just as they do today. Perhaps those teaching the law (like Ezra), and who were explaining it, pointed out that at least one purpose of the law is to excite and expose our sin (Paul's point in Romans 7).

Three times in verses 9-12, the people are exhorted not to be sad and not to weep. This was a great day in Israel's history. This was a day of joy, not sorrow. The Book of the Law has been read to the people, and this is, after all, a day of covenant renewal. We read in verse 9 that "*Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, 'This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.' For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.*" The law has brought sorrow for both reasons just mentioned. Yet weeping and sadness was not appropriate for this day when the people heard the law read as a reminder of God's covenant faithfulness. The temple has been rebuilt. Sacrifices for the people's sin are being offered in accordance with the Word of God. The city's walls have been rebuilt and Jerusalem can now return to its former glory and prestige among the Gentiles. Why? God's covenant with Israel has been renewed.

In verse 10, Nehemiah again exhorts the people that this is a day to celebrate, not to weep. "*Then he said to them, 'Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.'*" In verse 11, the Levites added to Nehemiah's exhortation, "*so the Levites calmed all the people, saying, 'Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.'*" Yes, one purpose of the law is to bring judgment and curse. But this is a day not to focus upon God's judgment and curse, but upon his faithfulness. This is a day to eat good food and drink good wine precisely because God renews his covenant with Israel, which this day has been read to all the people with understanding.

This is a day to reflect upon the joy of the Lord. Such joy provides strength to a people who have just finished the herculean task of rebuilding the ways of God's city. This is a day for the wall-builders, those protected by the walls, and the beneficiaries of charity to commemorate the fact that God has preserved his people by thwarting the schemes of the devil (through his agents Sanballat, Tobias, and Geshem). God's people are now reestablished back in the land from which they had been exiled. And it marks a new future for Israel.

The people listened to the exhortations and their weeping soon turned to joy. We read in verse 12, "*all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.*" God had spoken. He opened the people's ears. They heard the Book of the Law read aloud, and even better, on this day, they understood the law which was read to them and which brought them joy.

The covenant renewal ceremony produced a revival of sorts in Israel—true revival not being found in the hoopla stirred up in a revivalist's tent, but as a consequence of a renewed interest and love for God's word. According to verse 13, the day after the covenant renewal ceremony, the effects could be clearly

seen. “*On the second day the heads of fathers’ houses of all the people, with the priests and the Levites, came together to Ezra the scribe in order to study the words of the Law.*” In other words, the people pled with Ezra to teach a Bible study. The “heads of households” the priests and the Levites wanted to know more. Ezra was the man with the zeal, knowledge, and authority to teach the Scriptures. We would expect the people living through these events and most closely associated with them to have a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. Unless the Scriptures were read and studied—instead of merely observing the ceremonies and traditions established by them—people grew far too ignorant of the Bible’s content.

Remarkably, their study of the Scriptures prompted them to rethink some of the things they had been doing. According to Nehemiah’s account, after reading and studying the law, “*they found it written in the Law that the LORD had commanded by Moses that the people of Israel should dwell in booths during the feast of the seventh month.*” Recall from Ezra 3:4 that the feast of booths had been re-instituted during the days of Jeshua the high priest when the temple had been rebuilt. The feast of booths had two elements. One was the celebration of the ingathering of the harvest, while the other was to commemorate Israel’s time in the wilderness, when the people lived in tents (booths) in the wilderness.⁷

What the Jews had not been doing however, was setting up booths as part of the celebration—perhaps because of the danger and chaos in the land, before the city’s walls were rebuilt and more security was in place. But now it was time to see the feast returned to its “biblical roots.” We read in verse 15 that “*they should proclaim it and publish it in all their towns and in Jerusalem, ‘Go out to the hills and bring branches of olive, wild olive, myrtle, palm, and other leafy trees to make booths, as it is written.’*” The biblical account of this is found in Leviticus 23, which seems to come as a surprise to the people, who were celebrating the feast, but not observing key features of it.

Evidence of revival flowing from the covenant renewal ceremony can be seen in the willingness of the people listening to Ezra teach on Leviticus 23 to return the feast to a more biblical manner of celebration.⁸ According to verses 16-17, “*so the people went out and brought them and made booths for themselves, each on his roof, and in their courts and in the courts of the house of God, and in the square at the Water Gate and in the square at the Gate of Ephraim. And all the assembly of those who had returned from the captivity made booths and lived in the booths, for from the days of Jeshua the son of Nun to that day the people of Israel had not done so. And there was very great rejoicing.*” The joy of rediscovering what the law actually taught and then implementing it is clearly a fruit of a renewed sense of being YHWH’s people who stand in covenant relationship with him. He is their God, and they are his people. Obedience to the law is a fruit of that faith stirred by the covenant renewal ceremony.

Remarkably, the chapter ends in verse 18, with the news that “*day by day, from the first day to the last day, he read from the Book of the Law of God. They kept the feast seven days, and on the eighth day there was a solemn assembly, according to the rule.*” The more Ezra taught from the law—texts such as Deuteronomy 16 and 31 are in view, where these things and times are prescribed—the more the people desired to conform their practices to the word of God. God’s word will produce even greater fruit, as we will see in the next two chapters.

The key point of application has to do with the Book of the Law. The recovery of the centrality of the

⁷ Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 108.

⁸ Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 295.

law to regulate Jewish life and conduct, as a consequence of covenant renewal, actually prepares the way for the coming of the Messiah. As we see in our New Testament lesson, Galatians 4:1–7, Paul writes, *“the heir, as long as he is a child, is no different from a slave, though he is the owner of everything, but he is under guardians and managers until the date set by his father. In the same way we also, when we were children, were enslaved to the elementary principles of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God.”* The law served as the guardian for Israel until the Sinai covenant had run its course and it was now time for the coming of Jesus Christ—Israel’s Messiah. This is why the Book of the Law became the central focus of Jewish life and practice—preparing the people for the coming of Jesus. It showed them their sin and their need of a Savior.

Because Jesus has now come—in fulfillment of the law—we enjoy benefits and privileges of which the Jews present that day for covenant renewal at the Water Gate could only imagine. For us, covenant renewal is not a rare event, nor a once in a lifetime occasion when you might be lucky enough to be present. For us, every Sunday is a day of covenant renewal. The Book of the Law is read, we confess our sins, and then hear the wonderful words of the new covenant, the Book of the Gospel—“go in peace, your sins are forgiven.” And then we come to this table for a feast better than fat and new wine, where the mediator of the new covenant gives himself to us through bread and wine.