

Sunday Oct. 18, 2020
 Lesson 7: Food for Our Souls
 Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1-12

Context:

We move from the book of Joshua to the time of chaos after the fall of Israel. The book of Nehemiah is also in the Old Testament and narrates the story of the rebuilding of a kingdom. Today we will focus on how responsible teaching helps us form the church into a community of faith.

In our Bible, the story of Nehemiah is a separate book. In the Hebrew Bible, Nehemiah is combined with the book of Ezra as the timeline is the same of their authorship, sometime around the late fifth or early fourth century BCE.¹ Throughout both books, there are shifts of third-person narrative to autobiographical accounts.² Many modern scholars place the mission of Nehemiah as later than the mission of Ezra, sometime during the reign of King Artaxerxes I of Persia in 458.³ Thus, Nehemiah follows the works Ezra and his mission.

The importance of when these individuals were a part of Israel's history comes from the role they played in post-exilic rebuilding. Ezra made moves towards religious revival and conformity per accounts in the book of Ezra.⁴ When Nehemiah, the cupbearer of the Persian king, learned of the state of affairs of his home, he asked to return to assist in the rebuilding of his beloved Jerusalem. Due to his royal connection, he was able to secure a place as a "governor" of the land and go home to help with reconstruction efforts.

Nehemiah's arrival in the city of Jerusalem was unfortunately devastating. The rumors of a demolished kingdom proved some of the rumors were true. The walls were still in ruins and the Temple still needed room for improvement. Nehemiah soon began reconstruction even though the attempts of leadership were sabotaged by rival groups and neighboring principalities.

After dealing with all the pushback and various building challenges, they were able to rebuild the walls and look to the furnishing of the Temple. The time came for them to have an annual celebration and thus the people gathered at the city. The scribe Ezra read the Instruction scroll and proclaimed its meaning. Leaders stood around him and were to be there to help others interpret. At the conclusion the people heard what was expected of them and some wept. The leaders told them instead to celebrate and rejoice because God was their strength. As they interpreted the counsel, the concern turned to celebration.

¹ Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 426.

² Ibid., 426.

³ Ibid., 428.

⁴ Ibid., 428.

Application

The story of Nehemiah is wonderful for anyone who wants to consider the study of leadership in the Bible. In Nehemiah's story, we are reminded of how there will always be difficulties when it comes to leading people. No matter how charismatic or effective a leader may be, there will always be struggles for them to face. However, when the leader is able to give the vision and lead in mission, the results can be incredible.

In this case, Nehemiah is able to rebuild the walls, dedicate the Temple, and then urge the people to listen to the teachings of old and remember their roots. In this beautiful scene, we have all people gathering together to hear the instruction scroll. There are scribes, leaders of the tribes, the priestly line of Levi, and the royal officials standing on the platform. The scene is meant to be one of awe as Ezra reads the scroll.

Yet the people are rusty. For years, they have fallen away from the reading of the scroll and the meaning is not as clear as it used to be. The people cry after the reading for whatever reason and there is concern as to what this will mean for them. The leaders then remind them this is a celebration and they are to rejoice about what is happening in their midst.

As we read of the people coming to terms with ritual and what the teaching calls them to do, we are reminded of how teaching can both provoke and also challenge us in our walk with God. Often times, humans are quite good at interpreting things the way we want and believe so strongly in things we cannot even tell you where we learned those things. Or we do not even try to learn because as a mentor once told me: "thinking hurts." We might discover we have some work to do and we would rather avoid the task at hand.

Yet both Nehemiah and Ezra were relentless in their pursuit of telling the truth. They knew what was at stake and why the people needed to hear the teaching in the scrolls. At stake was their identity as the people of God and the future of their people. God will be God and yet God still demands humanity listen to what God is doing.

The same goes for us as we think about leadership today. At times clergy and lay leaders know things to be said and truth needs to be spoken. It may be foreign to people or people may not like it. And yet the truth needs to be declared.

Responsible teaching reminds us of how following and obeying Jesus is rarely easy and at times it will demand things of us we would rather not have touched. Our time, our money, and our presence are all demanded by other places and other things. We may even find it more rewarding to do whatever we want whenever we want.

For leaders, the easier routes always offer short-term relief and guaranteed success. People will like you if you do what they want. If you don't have to teach anything, people can do as they like and you don't have any conflict or messes to address for the time being. Appearances can be kept and people can feel good, a shallow feeling devoid of any true joy and meaning.

Or leaders can take the harder routes and challenge the status quo. Sticking to responsible teaching and accountability will encourage those who want to grow and for others it will threaten their world. As a community of faith, we are not to put our stock in those who are anxious or those who threaten. Instead, we are called to trust our Lord and do the right thing, following Jesus even if the route is hard and difficult. The rewards will be eternal.

What does good leadership look like to you? Why do you think responsible teaching challenges us? How have you seen leaders make tough, yet needed decisions to move forward? How can you grow deeper in your walk with Christ by doing the right thing?

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