

May 8 : Scriptures Nehemiah 1-3

SUMMARY

Congratulation! Welcome to the book of Nehemiah. So, what's this book about? Oh, about thirteen chapters long. (Dad joke. Thank you. Thank you very much. I'll be here all week!)

Seriously, Nehemiah is a post-exile book, an account about the Jews who returned from the Babylonian exile around 538 B.C. There were three "returns" to Judah and Jerusalem. The first was in 538 B.C., and Zerubbabel (Governor) led it along with Jeshua (High Priest) (Ezra 1-6). The second return was in 458 B.C., led by Ezra, the priest (Ezra 7-10). The third was in 444 B.C., led by Nehemiah, of whom this book is the namesake (Nehemiah 1-13).

A way of thinking about Ezra-Nehemiah is similar to Kings-Chronicles. Kings focuses on royal matters, while Chronicles is more focused on spiritual issues. This difference in focus doesn't mean Kings *isn't* interested in spiritual matters. It is. Kings looks at royal matters with a spiritual evaluation. This dual perspective goes back to the Jewish idea that all life is sacred, not secular vs. sacred.

The book of Ezra centers on God's work to bring His people home, the rebuilding of the Temple, and national purity; definitely spiritual. Nehemiah zeroes in on rebuilding Jerusalem's wall under great opposition (the same kind as in Ezra's book), social issues, societal reform, spiritual revival, and a few returnee lists. See? It is much more administratively centered, and it makes sense because Nehemiah was a governor, and Ezra was a scribe.

The book begins in chapter 1 with a bad report coming from Jerusalem a full 94 years after the first return. The message arrives in the month of Chislev (roughly December). The upshot is that the city wall remains destroyed with burned gates, which is not good because it leaves the Jews defenseless in a not-so-friendly neighborhood.

Nehemiah is heartbroken, and he weeps and takes his concern to the Lord just like Ezra did when faced with a distressing situation (the intermarriage issue). Nehemiah's prayer is similar to other Hebrew scripture prayers. The prayer exalts Yehovah, confesses their sin, and calls on God to honor His covenant to forgive when people repent and answer their request favorably. It's a great pattern to follow in our prayers.

Here's a final note on chapter 1. Nehemiah says he was the king's cupbearer. This self-identification shows he was a highly trusted person in the Persian king's court. Among other duties, the king's cupbearer was responsible for tasting the king's wine to make sure it was safe to drink. Being so close to the king meant a lot of prior vetting and subsequent responsibility.

Chapter 2 opens with Nehemiah in his official duty as cupbearer. According to 2:1, it is four months later in the early springtime month of Nisan (Aviv). Nehemiah is still grieving over the news from Jerusalem. His grief is so apparent that the king notices Nehemiah's usually chipper demeanor change. Nehemiah now has a royally good chance to bring a request to the king, but it's not to be done lightly, given the shifting dispositions of emperors. I'm pretty sure Nehemiah has anticipated this moment and now speaks plainly to his Sovereign, describing the awful state of his ancestral land. Thankfully, King Artaxerxes is in a receptive mood and asks what Nehemiah wants. What does Nehemiah do? The same thing we all do when we're in an unexpected situation, like when we're driving and a cop pulls us over – we shoot off an emergency prayer for God's mercy!

Nehemiah then goes for it. He asks to be sent to Jerusalem to help rebuild the city (2:5). The king and queen are agreeable, so Nehemiah goes for more. He asks for authorization letters from the king for safe passage and building materials. The king agrees to that as well! Nehemiah heads out with a military escort (2:9) to the leaders of the western regions, two of whom are not too pleased with his arrival and will become significant pains in Nehemiah's *tuchus* (Yiddish for posterior). Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite will work to hinder and wreck Nehemiah's plans.

So, what do you do when you face a new task? You assess the situation to get an idea of what's ahead. Nehemiah embarks on a secret night reconnaissance of Jerusalem to inspect Jerusalem's walls and evaluate what it's going to take to rebuild them. The people knew he had arrived from the Persian winter palace in Susa, but they didn't know what he was planning to do (2:16). After his wall perusal travels finish, Nehemiah gathers the leaders and drops the bomb, "Come, let's rebuild Jerusalem's wall, so that we will no longer be a disgrace" (2:17). To encourage them, he told them how the Lord was already working on their behalf by motivating King Artaxerxes to help. It didn't take any more than that to convince the leaders. The Temple was already finished (515 B.C.) and operating. Now it was time for Jerusalem and its walls to rise as well!

But the two sourpusses, Sanballat and Tobiah, along with a third sourpuss, Geshem the Arab, try to discourage and intimidate the Jewish leaders. They "mocked and despised" the Jews by saying they were just doing the work to stage a rebellion against their Persian

masters. Nehemiah's response is golden. "God will make it happen. And you don't have a thing to say about it because Jerusalem isn't yours. It's ours and has been for a really long time. So go pound sand!" (Actually, I added that last part. I was getting carried away.)

If you know anything about modern Israel and Jerusalem (Jews returning to the land since the late 1800s, Israel's Independence in 1948, the Jews taking all over Jerusalem back in 1967), this is a *very familiar* scenario. Many of the Arabs and "Palestinians" (a name that the political Arab leaders created to stake a claim on the Jew's homeland) have been mocking, despising, and attacking the Jewish citizens of the Jewish state since before its inception attempting to thwart its rebuilding. But God has been on the Jews' side. They've reclaimed, rebuilt, and restored their God-given homeland and are prospering, much to their enemies' chagrin. It's tough to fight against God.

Now comes chapter 3, and the rebuilding begins. What's noteworthy is how many men, regardless of their profession, jumped in to help, shoulder to shoulder. Nehemiah had them working in small groups on as many sections as they could so each part of the wall would rise around the city simultaneously as the others. Once they set the walls, they set the gates. When I read through it, I feel like I'm flying along the top of the wall by drone, watching all the workers setting the big stones in place. It's no small job. I've walked the walls of Jerusalem a couple of times, and it's impressive how far they stretch. Admittedly, the existing walls only go back to the 16th century when the Muslim Caliph Suleiman rebuilt those walls on their ancient foundation leftover from Jesus' day. Jerusalem was much smaller in Nehemiah's day, but it was still a formidable task.

As you read, notice the gate and tower names. Often city gates got their names from the activities at the gate. The Dung Gate is where you dumped animal dung and garbage, and the Fish Gate was likely where the fish market was. The Damascus gate was aptly named because it opened onto the road that one took to travel to Damascus. It's like the way people named streets in older towns. Here in Naples, Florida, we have Radio Road because that was the road people took to reach one of the city's first radio stations.

And so, the work is underway. With such a solid and committed workforce, what could go wrong?

INSIGHT

Many Bible teachers use the book of Nehemiah to teach about leadership, and that's a good thing. But for me, I like the encouragement it brings when I face larger-than-normal tasks like writing this *Cruisin' Through The Bible* running commentary that follows a

through the year Bible reading plan. This project is going to take me a whole year to do! When I first started it, it seemed daunting. But now that I've covered a sizeable amount of the Bible, I can see that I can accomplish it, but like Nehemiah, only with God's help.

May 9 : Scriptures Nehemiah 4-6

SUMMARY

Today's reading touches on two main troubles for Governor Nehemiah – external and internal issues.

Chapter 4 picks up with Sanballat and Tobiah, the Jews' enemies, offering up a cold dish of mocking opposition and insults to discourage the work (4:1-3). Thankfully, the wall-rebuilding efforts are paying off, for the wall is rising. But as the wall is increasing, so is their opponents' fury. What does Nehemiah do? He takes it right to Yehovah, Israel's protector (4:4-5). I've sometimes said to myself, "I wouldn't wish thus and so on my enemies" because the experience was so terrible. Nehemiah doesn't have that problem in this chapter. Because Sanballat and Tobiah have so angered the workers through their sniping words, Nehemiah prays an imprecatory prayer. Imprecatory means "To invoke evil upon; curse" (American Heritage Dictionary). He asks Yehovah to do to them what had happened to Israel, "Make their insults return on their own heads and let them be taken as plunder to a land of captivity" (4:4) and not to forgive their sin and guilt (4:5). That's pretty heavy stuff.

Is an imprecatory prayer a godly thing to do? There's debate about that. As we'll see, some of the Psalms are imprecatory psalms and none too pleasant. On the other hand, Apostle Paul taught us to "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse" (Romans 12:14). Jesus set an example for us in that "when he was insulted, he did not insult in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten but entrusted himself to the one who judges justly" (1 Peter 2:23). Yes, we should pray for our enemies and not curse them. Yes, I know it's tough to do when your enemies are hammering away at you and getting away with it. I like the prayer the rabbi spoke in *Fiddler on the Roof* when asked if there was a blessing for the Tsar. "A blessing for the Tsar? Of course. May the Lord bless and keep the Tsar... far away from us!" Yes, let's pray for our enemies, but we don't have to let them have their way with us. At best, let's pray that the Lord deals with them according to His justice and move on with our work for the Lord, which Nehemiah and his team do.

Nehemiah reaches an encouraging milestone. The wall is half completed around the city. This wall height gives the Jews protection, but they're still vulnerable to attack. Now the frustrated opposition escalates their attack. What they couldn't slow down with words, the enemies will try actions, and they mean business! They plan sneak attacks to harm the Jews and confuse them (4:11). What do Nehemiah and the Jews do? Pray and prepare. You might say they "Pray-pared" themselves!

Initially, Nehemiah stations guards to cover the workers (4:9). When the attacks become more widespread, Nehemiah deputizes whole families to protect the wall's vulnerable spots (4:13). This move tamps down the enemies' attack, but Nehemiah realizes he has to make adjustments to defend the builders. Half the people pull guard duty from then on while the other half build the wall (4:16). Furthermore, the builders arm themselves just in case (4:18). The same guard-worker shift moves to the nighttime hours as well. Governor Nehemiah moves all the Jews and their servants within the city walls for safety. And so the work continued, with the external problems kept in check.

But chapter 5 brings internal problems, primarily a social one, caused by finances. The Jewish returnees need food, but it's not like they're rich. When they're short on money, they mortgage their fields to get grain. Others have to borrow money to pay the Persian king's tax. Sadly, some families have to resort to indentured servitude, which is allowed under Yehovah's Torah (Leviticus 25:39), but seriously, is this really the time to exercise such an option? Some selfish opportunistic individuals take advantage of their compatriots' distress in the challenging situation. Nehemiah confronts those wealthier people who have been charging interest and enslaving their fellow Jewish citizens. So, Nehemiah leads by example, "Even I, as well as my brothers and my servants, have been lending them money and grain. Please, let's stop charging this interest" (5:10). It's okay to lend out the grain but not charge interest from those who can't afford it. It only serves to dig their financial hole deeper. Governor Nehemiah calls on the citizenry to restore all collateral land, produce, houses, and interest they've been charging. Remarkably, everyone agrees and takes an oath (5:12).

Speaking of leading by example, Nehemiah shows his character by not taking advantage of the people as the previous governors have done by "heavily burden(ing) the people, taking from them food and wine as well as a pound of silver" (5:15). Instead, he takes his place among his people in the middle of the work. Nehemiah wouldn't even take the food allotment that was rightfully his as Governor. Instead, he has the 10-day allocation of food prepared and invites "150 Jews and officials and guests from the surrounding nations" (5:17). What a selfless, self-sacrificing *mensch* (Yiddish for a person with integrity and honor)!

Things start to get intense in chapter 6. The wall is complete, but the people are still working on gate construction. This point in the project is critical. The completed walls are tough to breach, so attackers look for the weak spots – the wooden, iron reinforced gates. Once the workers set those gates, the city becomes nearly impregnable. The Jews' enemies, Sanballat, Tobiah, and a new guy, Geshem the Arab, and all the other enemies try to draw Nehemiah out of the city to kill him (6:2). Then they try to force him out with

a false accusation that Nehemiah is planning to have himself crowned king. The implication is that they will send this “rumor” will to the Persian King. “So, if you want to dispel this rumor, Nehemiah, then come on out, and we’ll talk.” Nehemiah, wisely, isn’t buying it. He knows it’s just a ploy, so he ignores them and continues the construction’s final stretch with a prayer for Yehovah’s strength to complete the task.

Well, Nehemiah’s enemies aren’t giving up. Now they try an inside job. They attempt to use a hired man (6:12) to scare Nehemiah into taking refuge in the Temple. Their goal is to make Nehemiah look like he’s more interested in saving his skin rather than standing with his fellow Jews to give himself a bad reputation. A shepherd who would abandon his sheep! Nehemiah doesn’t buy that either. He utters another prayer that’s not quite as imprecatory as the previous one. He places the “outside” threats and their inside stooges into God’s hands to deal with as He sees fit (6:14).

At last, the wall is complete; gates, towers, and all! It’s incredible to me that it took only 52 days from start to finish. But then again, Nehemiah had a lot of help, and he coordinated the project wisely even under threat from their scheming, unruly, hostile neighbors. And speaking of them, it is now *their* turn to lose heart (6:16). The project is completed so fast and well that they realize it must have been the Lord helping them.

I find the final part of today’s reading so familiar. 1) Nehemiah’s supposedly loyal co-leaders were in league with Nehemiah’s enemy, Tobiah. They communicated with “the enemy” behind Nehemiah’s back rather than supporting their Governor. Why? Because they had made an oath and bound themselves to the more powerful person. Perhaps they felt he would be the better horse in the race. If you’ve seen the movie *Braveheart*, this is the same conniving, capitulating, and compromising undercutting by which the Scottish nobles betray William Wallace, who had the nation’s best interests in mind.

So, the betraying leaders fake faithfulness to Nehemiah while they undercut him. They paint Tobiah as a good person while betraying Nehemiah by divulging private conversations. Meanwhile, Tobiah continues his written frontal assaults. Obviously, the spineless co-leaders had no faith in their Governor and would probably sell him out along with the rest of the Jews if they could get something out of it.

INSIGHT

As I read about “Nehemiah’s table” again, a couple of New Covenant scriptures came to mind. “Let us be glad, rejoice, and give him glory, because *the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has prepared herself. She was given fine linen to wear, bright and pure. For the fine linen represents the righteous acts of the saints.* Then he said to me, ‘Write: *Blessed*

are those invited to the marriage feast of the Lamb!" (Revelation 19:7-9) and "After this I looked, and there was *a vast multitude from every nation, tribe, people, and language*, which no one could number, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. *They were clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands*" (Revelation 7:9).

The final people of God are not going to be just Jews. Nor will they be just Gentiles. They will be one people – Jews and Gentiles – who, like with Nehemiah's table – will sit at the table with the Jewish leader of Jerusalem, one people under God. This single verse in Nehemiah 5:17 is a beautiful description of the Messiah's kingdom and the wonderful Marriage Supper of the Lamb, when all of His people will sit with Him and celebrate!

May 10 : Scriptures Nehemiah 7-9

SUMMARY

The wall may be complete, but there's still danger lurking outside the city walls. Therefore, Nehemiah appoints gatekeepers and Levites as watchmen under the leadership of a man who "feared God more than most," Hanani, commander of the fortress. Nehemiah orders Hanani to open the gates only at certain times (during the day when incoming people can be clearly seen and screened) and make sure there are plenty of guards when the gates are shut for the night.

Nehemiah also realizes that trying to protect an entire city with such a small populous would be very difficult. So, God prompts him to deal with the issue. Just as Nehemiah started rebuilding the wall with a fact-finding mission (2:12-13), so Nehemiah conducts a fact-finding population assessment to find out who returned from the exile and from what family.

I want to point out again that ancient writers sometimes put their screeds (writings) together in different ways than what we're used to. We've reached one such example. Chapter 7 ends with the family list. Chapter 8 picks up with Ezra reading the Torah and observing the Feast of Tabernacles, chapter 9 recounts Israel's national confession, and chapter 10 is Israel's vow of faithfulness. Then suddenly, in Nehemiah chapter 11, we pick up the account of resettling Jerusalem, the topic we left at the end of chapter 7. What gives?

According to the Holman Christian Standard Bible commentary, many scholars believe Nehemiah 8-10 is an insert from the book of Ezra to link Ezra's and Nehemiah's work together, or the writer of the two books (as one scroll) lifted the material from Ezra to help construct Nehemiah 8-9. If you read from the end of chapter 7 directly to the start of chapter 11, it continues the story of leaders populating Jerusalem. It's not a big deal and just an observation to make you aware of it and "square" the text. The segue from chapter 7 to the material in 8 is "When the seventh month came and the Israelites had settled in their towns."

Chapter 8 covers Ezra's read-through of Moses' Torah per the Torah's command. "At the end of every seven years (a Sabbath Year), at the appointed time in the year of debt cancellation, *during the Festival of Shelters (the 7th month, days 15-21)*, when all Israel assembles in the presence of the Lord your God at the place he chooses, *you are to read this law aloud before all Israel*. Gather the people—men, women, dependents, and the resident aliens within your city gates—*so that they may listen and learn to fear the Lord your God and*

be careful to follow all the words of this law. Then their children who do not know the law will listen and learn to fear the Lord your God as long as you live in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.” (Deuteronomy 31:10-13). This reading is what Ezra is doing, and only he starts on the 1st day of the 7th month (8:2) rather than the Feast that begins two weeks later.

As Ezra reads the Torah (8:3), a team of Levites translates and explains the words (8:8). Interestingly, as the group reads and expounds, the people begin to grieve. Why? I believe it's because the realization of everything the nation had gone through in the previous centuries with the warfare and exile was revealed to them. They knew that their ancestors had brought the troubles on themselves. However, Ezra and the Levites encouraged the people. It was a day of new beginnings, not a day of mourning. The people finally “get it” and begin celebrating!

Of course, as they read through the Torah on the 2nd day of the 7th month, they come across the sections on the Lord's designated national feasts – Passover, Unleavened Bread, FirstFruits, Shavuot, Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles (especially Leviticus 23). “Hey! We're in the 7th month, and the Lord commanded the Israelites to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for a week (8:14). Let's do this!” And so the Jews spread the word about the upcoming feast, cut branches to create their make-shift temporary huts all over the place, and live in them as the Lord commanded. It is such a tremendous celebration that it earns the description, “The Israelites had not celebrated like this from the days of Joshua son of Nun until that day. And there was tremendous joy” (8:17). In fact, the Feasts of the Lord are known today by the Jews as The Seasons Of Our Joy! Ezra and his team continue to read through God's Law during this whole time.

After all the celebrating, the Israelites move into a time of national repentance and recommitment, recorded in chapter 9.

The prayer of confession breaks down like this:

Exalting God (9:5-6), Yehovah's dealings with Abraham (9:7-8), Yehovah's deliverance of His people from Egypt, the covenant at Mount Sinai, and care for them in the wilderness (9:9-15), Israel's unfaithfulness and the Lord's mercy (9:16-21), Yehovah's help in conquering Israel's enemies and leading them into the Promised Land (9:22-25), and Israel's stubborn apostasy and exile, and God's mercy (9:26-31), Yehovah was correct in all He did to our rebellious forefathers (9:32-35). So here we are, slaves in our own land, ruled over by other kings (9:36-37). And so we will make a vow of faithfulness to You. (To be continued in tomorrow's reading...)

INSIGHT

Why confess our sins to the Lord? Doesn't He already know what we've done? Yes. And we know what we've done. And yet, without confession, there is often a gulf between God and us as He waits for us to "come clean," not so He can scold us, but to draw near to heal our relationship with Him. As St. Augustine wrote, "In failing to confess, Lord, I would only hide You from myself, not myself from You." The Lord wants us to confess our sins against Him, so He can sweep them away by His Son's sacrifice and run to embrace us once again. That's a good Father.

May 11 : Scriptures Nehemiah 10-13

SUMMARY

In the previous chapter, we read the Jew's repentance and recommitment prayer, followed by a declaration, "In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement in writing on a sealed document containing the names of our leaders, Levites, and priests" (9:38).

In chapter 10, we get a list of those who sealed the documented vow. Just thinking here, if you want some suggestions for Hebrew baby names, you might want to start with these guys. Just sayin'.

Kidding aside, this is solemn business the leaders and the people are doing with Yehovah their God. They've confessed their sin and now make a vow to follow Yehovah's Torah commands strictly. And here, we find the core reason for the Jews to separate themselves from the non-Jews around them, and it wasn't because they were prejudiced or irrationally ethnocentric. They learned their lesson from the nations Assyrian and Babylonian destruction and exiles. God's punishment came because they committed idolatry, and idolatry entered Israel's national life because the people blended with the surrounding pagan peoples and adopted their religions, something Yehovah had explicitly told them not to do! He told them He was the only God (Exodus 20:2), and they were to recognize no others (Exodus 20:3). Period.

Intermarriage was the open door that led to national destruction and the Jewish leadership, especially Nehemiah, wanted no more of that! So they separate from the surrounding people to "join with their noble brothers and commit themselves with a sworn oath to follow the law of God given through God's servant Moses and to obey carefully all the commands, ordinances, and statutes of the Lord our Lord" (10:29).

The terms of the vow are simple. We'll obey everything the Lord says. More specifically, they list no intermarriage or commerce on the Sabbath, two things that brought down Israel. The "no commerce" clause is an offshoot of the "observe the Sabbath" principle. Doing commerce is business, something that should be done on a business day. Sabbath is for rest and recreation with the Lord. Some Torah-observant Christians follow this today as they won't buy anything on the Sabbath. But this isn't unknown to us Christians. Older folks remember the Sunday Blue laws when car dealerships and liquor stores weren't open on Sundays. Farther back, *all* stores would close on Sunday. It was necessary since, at that time, so many people would go to church and hang out afterward that it didn't make sense to keep a business's doors open. Now, not so much.

Both the intermarriage and Sabbath laws set the Jews apart from their neighbors. The vow further specifies donations to the Temple to keep it operating; silver, wood, tithes, and offerings.

And now, in chapter 11, we resume the resettling Jerusalem account that we left off in 7:73. I want to point out some interesting notes embedded in the list. Notice that the leaders stay in Jerusalem while a lottery selects *one in ten* people to live in Jerusalem while the rest live on their ancestral land allotments. So the people not only bring a tithe of their produce to the Temple, but a tithe of the people bring themselves to Jerusalem to live. Cool, huh?

Next, we read about “Mattaniah son of Mica, son of Zabdi, son of Asaph, the one who began the thanksgiving in prayer” (11:17). It’s fun that the guy who opens in prayer gets a credit. And then there’s this, “The temple servants lived on Ophel; Ziha and Gishpa supervised the temple servants” (11:21). What’s the Ophel? Jewishvirtuallibrary.org (a great resource to bookmark for Bible explanations) says the Ophel is “a rocky protuberance north of the city of David in Jerusalem.” In other words, Jerusalem sits on a broad ridge running north-south. The Kidron Valley is to the east, and the Mount of Olives rises next to that. The south end of the ridge is where the David built the City of David (currently under a lot of archeological excavation. It’s really fascinating!). The Ophel is north of David’s City, and the Temple Mount is north of the Ophel. Once again, an online search is helpful for visual learners.

Finally, I’m struck by how important the Levitical worship teams are to the Temple service. Since King David’s day, they have been under the king’s command and still are under Nehemiah (11:23).

Chapter 11 ends, but the list plows right through into chapter 12. We read more names and duties of the priestly families (12:1-26). But then we come to the grand dedication of Jerusalem’s wall! Two groups, one led by Ezra, the priest, and the other accompanied by Governor Nehemiah, gather on the wall and begin walking in opposite directions while singing praise to Yehovah and worshipping Him. They traverse around the entire wall and meet at the Temple for a huge, noisy celebration that was “heard far away” (12:43). Chapter 12 ends with a note that in the days of Zerubbabel and Nehemiah, the people responsibly and fully supported the priests and Levites as Kings David and Solomon specified.

The final chapter, Nehemiah 13, wraps up with a summary of the godly Governor’s reforms. At the time of the wall’s dedication, there was a public reading of Moses’ Law

(God's Torah) to the people. They must have read the part about not mixing with the foreigners (see the theme again?) because the next thing listed is a great dismissal of those of mixed descent from the families of Israel (13:3).

Yes, I get the whole "separate yourselves from the pagans" thing, but I'd like to point out a few examples where God uses "foreigners" to bless Israel. What about Ruth? She was King David's great-grandmother. What about Zelek the Ammonite, one of King David's Mighty Men, one of the Thirty (2 Samuel 23:37)? On the other hand, we saw that King Solomon's Ammonite wife(s) led him astray (1 Kings 11), and prideful, hot-head King Rehoboam's (Solomon's son) mom was Naamah (Ammonite). Here's my observation. This separation issue is the difference between a nation *as a whole* fighting Israel vs. individuals who *whole-heartedly* joined Israel. Just a thought.

Anyway, Nehemiah went back to Babylon to serve King Artaxerxes (13:6). Nehemiah had worked in Jerusalem for 12 years, likely from 445-432 B.C., during which he rebuilt the wall and reinstated Temple operations, and made social reforms. But when the cat's away, the mice will play.

During Nehemiah's absence, a priest name Eliashib sets up a room for Tobiah in the Temple complex (13:4-5). *This is a major problem!* Tobiah is an Ammonite, and he's not allowed among the Lord's people, much less the Lord's Temple. Furthermore, the irresponsible priest used an empty storeroom for Tobiah's residence *when it should have been storing provisions for the priests!* This also points to the more significant problem that the people of Jerusalem and Israel weren't following through with their vow to follow the Torah by supporting those who served the Temple.

The text doesn't say how long Nehemiah stayed in Babylon, but he requests a leave of absence to check on Jerusalem. When he returns and sees the situation, he throws out Tobiah and his stuff, purifies the room, stores God's things in it, and makes sure support for the Levites is restored, and the service is fully operational. After all this, I love his prayer, "Remember me for this, my God, and don't erase the deeds of faithful love I have done for the house of my God and for its services" (13:14).

Next on his reform list is locking down the Sabbath (literally) after its violations (13:19). Nehemiah's rebuke is spot on. Sabbath violations were a significant reason why Yehovah ejected His people from the land and into the Babylonian exile. For example, "But if you do not listen to me to keep the Sabbath day holy by not carrying a load while entering the gates of Jerusalem on the Sabbath day, I will set fire to its gates, and it will consume

the citadels of Jerusalem and not be extinguished" (Jeremiah 17:27) and (2 Chronicles 36:20-21). Nehemiah's simple solution? Shut the gates and make 'em wait (13:19)!

Again, Nehemiah has to confront the intermarriage issue under his reforms. Some of his fellow Jews married women from Ashdod (Philistine), Moab, and Ammon. After repeatedly dealing with this situation, I don't fault Nehemiah's outrage. He takes harsh measures because the people already knew the Law and had made a vow to follow it! The intermarriage infection was already working its assimilation infection through the Jews, and their children were already influenced by speaking a foreign language and not knowing Hebrew. The language problem was just another indicator that the Jews were assimilating culturally and spiritually, which started Israel's decline under Solomon in the first place (13:26). The epitome of the intermarriage debacle was the High Priest's son, who married the daughter of Nehemiah's enemy Sanballat! Like the cartoon character Popeye, Nehemiah "has all he can stand, and he can't stand no more!" He summarily ejects the son from the community.

His concluding prayer is simple, "Remember me, my God, with favor."

INSIGHT

There's a beautiful lesson in the Wall Dedication ceremony. The Jews thanked Yehovah for helping them rebuild the wall and gates that were meant to protect them. But their ultimate source of protection is God alone. The Lord promised in His Torah to protect His people if they remained faithful to Him (Deuteronomy 23:14, 33: 29). Look how the Lord handled the threatening Assyrian army in King Hezekiah's day. He just wiped them out with a plague. But if His people were unfaithful, He would lift His hand, and no outward form of protection would stand in their enemy's way (see Babylon).

So we need two things to help us—our trust in the Lord and wisdom in self-protection. However, we can make all the preparations in this life, but they can all come crashing down if the Lord doesn't stand with us because we've walked away from Him. On the other hand, even if we're unprotected by material things, God's protection overrides all. And what material protection can we possibly have against death? Our only protection is Jesus.

May 12 : Scriptures Esther 1-4

SUMMARY

And now we come to the book of Esther. Even if you haven't read the book, you may know the story through numerous presentations like the movie, *A Night With The King* (1999), *Esther and the King* (1960), or *Esther, The Girl Who Became Queen* by the Veggie Tales group (and it's a hoot!). But now you have a chance to *Cruise Through It!*

Who wrote the book of Esther? We don't know. It's an amazing book because it doesn't mention God at all. The closest we come is Mordecai's memorable and oft-quoted declaration, "If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jewish people from another place, but you and your father's family will be destroyed. Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this" (4:14) which implies that God orchestrates the events like a grand maestro.

Esther's events occur during the Persian King Xerxes' (Heb. Ahasuerus') reign sometime between 486-465 B.C. To give you a little perspective, Ezra returned to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., and the Nehemiah events occurred between about 445-430 B.C.

The book of Nehemiah records the locals' persecution of the Jews. But Esther records an existential threat against the Jews throughout the Persian empire. Jewish people summarize the Jewish feasts with dark humor – "They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat!" That's true for Passover, Hannukah, and the feast that originates with Esther's story, Purim. While Esther and Mordecai are the party's stars, the real hero is God, more specifically, His divine providence. The account proves again that the Lord protected His people as He promised even when they were under His judgment in exile. In fact, God tells His people He went into exile *with them*, "Don't be afraid of the king of Babylon whom you now fear; don't be afraid of him' – this is the Lord's declaration – '*because I am with you to save you and rescue you from him*'" (Jeremiah 42:11). Although not stated, the timing of the events in Esther shout loudly that the Lord is indeed with His covenant people. And with that, let's dive into the story.

But first, a little fun. The Purim celebration (often in late February to early March) is about the events in this book. During Purim, people dress in fun, wild, and silly costumes, eat sweets and great food, sing and dance, and best of all, they tell Esther's story by reading through the book of Esther. Here's how the tradition goes. When the narrator reads King Xerxes' name, everyone vocalizes a fanfare. For Esther's name, everyone wolf-whistles. For Mordecai's name, everyone cheers. And for Haman's (boo!) name, everyone tries to

drown it out with “boos,” raspberries, and general sounds of disgust while spinning ratchets, called *graggers*. I'll prompt you with Haman (boo!)’s (boo!)name.

Chapter 1 begins with a *wild* six-month debauchery thinly veiled as a party. King Xerxes (because it's too laborious to keep typing Ahasuerus) uses the occasion to display his wealth and magnificent splendor (1:4). During the final week, Ol' King Xerxes throws a week-long, over-the-top bash where the wine flows freely, and by that, I mean a flood of wine. While drunk, he calls for his beautiful wife, Vashti, to make an appearance so that he can show off his trophy wife. Some rabbis suspect this was not just a beauty pageant but a “lightly clothed” one-person show. Vashti outright rejects her husband's call, which doesn't sit well with the old boy.

Now you'd think he'd let this pass, but pride being what it is, he consults with his advisors about what to do with such a rebellious wife. This act went way beyond simple rejection. This was a legal and justice matter because she had ignored the king's official request, “The king consulted the wise men who understood the times, for it was his normal procedure to confer with experts in law and justice” (1:13). Their verdict? “Kick her to the curb! Because if other wives hear how the queen snubbed you, O Mighty King, they'll disobey their husbands, and chaos will break out in the streets. Fire and brimstone coming down from the sky! Rivers and seas boiling! Forty years of darkness! Earthquakes, volcanoes. The dead rising from the grave! Human sacrifice, dogs and cats living together - MASS HYSTERIA!” (hat tip to *Ghostbusters*). Okay, that last part they didn't say. But they did tell King Xerxes to get rid of Vashti and find another queen. “And include a part that tells all the wives to submit to their husbands, the masters of their homes! Don't forget that!” (1:22).

Chapter 2 is beauty pageant time! After the king's rage cooled, King Xerxes' advisors suggest he hold a beauty pageant to replace the insolent queen Vashti. Young, beautiful virgins are to be rounded up and sent to the king's winter palace at Susan (aka Shushan), where they'll be beautified and prepped for vetting by the king himself. The cutie who pleases King Xerxes the most gets to be the new queen! Whoopee!

Now we meet our two protagonists – Esther and her Uncle Mordecai. Mordy was one of the exiled Jews from Jerusalem, and he was the official custodian for the exceedingly lovely Esther (aka Hadassah). Esther gets swept up in the edict and arrives in the official holding place of all queen wannabes. She garners “women-keeper” Hegai's attention and favor so much he spoils her! Now comes the critical point – Esther doesn't reveal her Jewishness. Apparently, antisemitism (Jew-hatred) is already percolating in the empire,

and Uncle Mordy tells her to keep mum. He checks up on her daily to make sure she's alright.

King Xerxes hosts each young woman for a night to determine if she pleases him or not. She's allowed to choose what to bring to him, presumably clothes, fragrance, or jewelry. After the night with the king, the woman is dismissed unless recalled (2:14). Esther's turn comes, and she wins the king's heart (How romantic!). She has gained his favor, and Esther is crowned queen, followed by a big banquet (there's a lot of banqueting going on in the Persian palace).

Meanwhile, Uncle Mordy learns of a plot to assassinate King Xerxes. But he has an "in" – his niece. Mordecai rats out the perps to Esther, who in turn tells the king, who in turn impales the perps. Mordecai isn't recognized for his service to the king, but the official court stenographers record his deed for posterity.

Chapter 3 turns dark. We meet the rotten antisemite, Haman (boo!). Sadly, he finds favor with King Xerxes, who elevates him to second in the kingdom. The king commands all the court officials to bow in homage to Haman (boo!), and all do, except Uncle Mordy (you gasped, didn't you?). Why did Mordecai refuse to bow? Doesn't Mordecai know that by refusing a direct command from Xerxes that he could earn himself a new post, as in impaled like the two guards Mordecai ratted out? There must be something about Haman (boo!) that makes Mordecai adamant about not bowing to him.

Oh! There it is, back in verse 1! It says, "After all this took place, King Ahasuerus honored Haman (boo!), son of Hammedatha *the Agagite*." There it is. Haman (boo!) is a descendant of Agag. Who's Agag, you ask? Do you remember the Amalekites? They were the tribe that sneak-attacked Israel back in Exodus 14. The Amalekites are Esau's descendants, Jacob's/Israel's brother. But Israel turned the battle and defeated the Amalekites with the Lord's help. And because of their vicious, underhanded attack, the Lord commanded Israel to destroy all of the Amalekites! "The Lord then said to Moses, "Write this down on a scroll as a reminder and recite it to Joshua: *I will completely blot out the memory of Amalek under heaven*" (Exodus 17:14).

King Saul had an opportunity to do so when the Lord told him to attack the Amalekites and destroy everything, and He meant everything – human and animal (1 Samuel 15:3). But out of pride, King Saul spared the animals and, worst, the king of the Amalekites, *King Agag*! Yes, Samuel dispatches King Agag of the Amalekites, but evidently, he left some children behind that King Saul didn't get. The rotten Haman (boo!) of Esther comes from that family line, and he knows what the Amalekites did to the Israelites and what

the Israelites did to the Amalekites. Yes, there's *a lot* of bad blood between these two peoples, and this is why Mordecai, the Jew, refused to bow to Haman (boo!), the Amalekite. Upon learning of Mordecai's ethnicity (a Jew!), Haman (boo!) wanted to destroy Mordecai and take out every Jew in the Persian empire (3:6).

So, Haman (boo!) hatches his plot and uses his position to manipulate King Xerxes into a plan for Jewish genocide. Haman (boo!) uses *purim* (lots; a *pur* is a single lot) to set the date and then tells the king about an "ethnic group, scattered throughout the peoples in every province of your kingdom, keeping themselves separate. Their laws are different from everyone else's and they do not obey the king's laws. It is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them" (3:8). Further, Haman (boo!) entices the king with a promise to donate tons of silver to the royal treasury. Without knowing Haman (boo!) is talking about the Jews, the king foolishly gives Haman (boo!) the authority to draw up the order, and the Jews' fate is sealed. The letters are copied and sent, declaring open season on the Jews and their property on the established day. Of course, the Jews find out about this, and one of those Jews was Uncle Mordy.

In chapter 4, the Jews go into great mourning as they face their approaching doom. Mordecai grieves as well but can't go to see Esther as he's wearing sackcloth and crying out in grief (4:1). The Hebrew for crying out means "a heartbroken howl over an injustice." Mordecai can't get word to the king (he's shut up in his palace with his new drinking buddy, Haman (boo!)), but he can get word to Esther, who is even closer to King Xerxes. The Holman Christian Study Bible makes a fascinating connection. Evidently, mourners weren't allowed in a Persian king's presence. Nehemiah "had never been sad in (the king's) presence" (Nehemiah 2:1). Ergo, Uncle Mordy's inability to appeal directly to Xerxes.

When Esther finds out that Uncle Mordy is crying out in grief, she begins a "game" of mailman with her keeper, the eunuch Hathach (4:5). Hathach asks Mordy why he's crying, and Mordy tells all and asks Hathach to ask Esther to go to the king personally. Esther tells Hathach to tell Uncle Mordy she can't unless the king summons her or she'll be executed. Uncle Mordy tells Hathach to tell Esther that's the least of her worries. Her ethnicity isn't protected behind the palace walls, and she's under the same decree as he is.

And then comes Mordecai's astonishing declaration of faith, "If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jewish people from another place, but you and your father's family will be destroyed. Who knows, perhaps you have come to your royal position for such a time as this" (4:14). This does it. Esther is convinced. She tells

Hathach to tell Uncle Mordy to have the Jews fast and pray for her as she prepares to break Persian law to talk to her King Hubby.

INSIGHT

You may think you're of little consequence in this life. But how do you know how far your life's influence extends? God can use anything in your life to affect the lives of others to a great extent. Let's never let our insecurities, fears, or circumstances keep us from stepping up when the Lord calls. *You* may be just the person the world needs "at such a time as this."

May 13 : Scriptures Esther 5-7

SUMMARY

And so it begins. Chapter 5 finds Esther dressed and ready to see her husband, the King. The big question in front of her is not, "Will I be able to see him?" The big question is, "Will I live or die when I go to see him?"

But Yehovah gives Esther, her peoples' representative, favor. King Xeres is in a good mood when Esther appears in the courtyard, and he bids her approach. And what an offer he extends to her – "Whatever you want, even to half the kingdom, will be given to you" (5:3)! "Okay," Esther probably thinks, "Here we go!"

Esther's request is simple – "Will you and Haman (boo!) come today to the banquet I've prepared?" Now, what do you think King Xerxes is going to say? No? After all – banquet! Have we seen Xerxes turn down a banquet yet?

So, Queen Esther fetes King Xerxes and Haman (boo!). And, of course, there's wine. (There's always wine!) In good spirits, the king offers to grant Esther another request. *Another opening* thinks Esther. She says she'll make her request after another banquet the next day if the king and Haman (boo!) attend.

Haman (boo!) heads home after the banquet and sees Mordecai, who again refuses to bow before him. This snub torques him off – a lot! When Haman (boo!) arrives home, he admires himself for how well he's done. Haman (boo!) brags about his wealth, sons, and collector's edition of all the Star Wars characters in unopened boxes. But one thing gnaws at him – that *JEW* Mordecai. At his family's urging, Haman (boo!) erects gallows upon which to hang/impale his nemesis.

Chapter 6 shows Yehovah's hand working in the background. King Xerxes can't sleep, so he asks for the Chronicles of the Persian Kings brought to him so he can review his glorious reign. (Nothing like reading one's glory days to drop your eyelids!) He realizes his debt to Mordecai for saving his life (6:2), and nothing's been done to show the king's gratitude. He calls in Haman and asks, "What should be done for the man the king wants to honor?" Haman (boo!) thinks the king is talking about him (Haman (boo!) is still high on the banquet opportunities) and lays it on thick. "Good!" says King Xerxes. "Do it for Mordecai!" Ooooooh! That *really* fries Haman (boo!). Not only does Uncle Mordy get the king's highest honor, but Haman (boo!) has to lead the horse himself!

Haman (boo!) runs home and tells everyone what happened, and this is what they say, "Since Mordecai is Jewish, and you have begun to fall before him, you won't overcome him, because your downfall is certain" (6:13). Really? You all couldn't have warned Haman (boo!) earlier? Seriously? *NOW* you say this after Haman (boo!) planned Mordecai's downfall? *The table is starting to turn.* And the king's eunuchs arrive to escort Haman to his ill-fated banquet.

Chapter 7 – the climax! The banquet begins, the wine is poured (of course!), and the king asks for Esther's request.

Esther asks for her people's lives and reveals the ugly, mean, rotten, despicable, reprehensible Haman (boo!) as the perpetrator of the genocidal scheme! King Xerxes is shocked and leaves the room. Haman (boo!) reaches toward Esther to beg for his life and falls on her just as Xerxes returns. "You snake," Xerxes shouts. "You'd try to rape my wife while I'm in the house? Of all da noive!" Haman (boo!) is arrested and, with poetic justice, hanged on the gallows he built for Mordecai! End of story, right? Wrong!

INSIGHT

One of the most beautiful lessons from the book of Esther is knowing the Lord is at work on behalf of His people. A chess master can determine the end of the match based on his opening moves alone. Lately, I've watched a couple of movies and TV shows that showcase chess lately as part of the plot. There come moments when the hero looks at the villain and declares, "Checkmate in 12 moves," and no matter how hard the villain tries to wiggle out of the total loss, there's no hope. The hero has covered all the possible angles, and the end is inevitable.

As the Supreme Strategist, the Lord is so far ahead of the game, He had the end worked out before He even created Creation. The biggest one for all human beings is His plan to save us from being eternally separated from Him because of sin. Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection to eliminate sin and neutralize death were in place far before the game of life was ever started. "All who dwell on the earth will worship him (the Antichrist), whose names have not been written in the Book of Life *of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world*" (Revelation 13:8, NKJV). God knew it was coming and set His plan in motion before Satan was even created.

Of course, Jesus is already at work in your life. Everything you encounter, He's already worked on it. And don't worry. Even if evil people aren't punished in this life, their comeuppance is inevitable.

May 14 : Scriptures Esther 8-10

SUMMARY

And now (as the late great radio star Paul Harvey often said) the rest of the story.

Queen Esther gets Haman's (boo!) estate, and Mordecai gets Haman's (boo!) position as second in the kingdom. Haman (boo!) is gone, but the edict against the Jews is not. In chapter 8, we read, "A document written in the king's name and sealed with the royal signet ring cannot be revoked" (8:8). In chapter 3, we recall Haman (boo!) used the king's signet ring to seal the deal against the Jews, "The king removed his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews" (3:10). Therefore, a second proclamation must be made to counter the irrevocable first proclamation.

Whereas Haman (boo!) wrote the first decree, now Mordecai writes the second (8:9-10). But since Jew Genocide Day is approaching (albeit nine months away), Mordecai sends out the decree to all parts of the empire via the fastest couriers. The decree is simple, on Adar 13, the same day as Haman's (boo!) designated Jewish genocide (12th month, Adar 13), "The king's edict gave the Jews in each and every city *the right to assemble and defend themselves, to destroy, kill, and annihilate every ethnic and provincial army hostile to them, including women and children, and to take their possessions as spoils of war*" (8:11)

Where once was grief and fear in the Jewish people, joy erupts! The threat is there, but at least they can legally defend themselves. And isn't it interesting how the fear switches from the Jewish side to the Gentile side (8:17)? So much so that some Gentiles convert to Judaism for fear of the Jews (not for the right reason, in my opinion. But, hey! If it keeps the Jew alive...).

And the table turns entirely! Haman (boo!) is gone, and the Gentile attackers are routed. Mordecai *the Jew* is respected for his powerful position. Even Haman's (boo!) ten sons are dispatched. But the Jews show restraint. They don't seize any plunder (9:10) because it is about self-preservation, not vengeance. But there were still Gentile attacker holdouts in Susa, Persia. Also, Queen Esther requests the bodies of Haman's (boo!) ten sons be impaled as a public warning. Man, who wants to mess with Queen Esther now?

After the conflict, the Jews rest and celebrate. The rural Jews celebrate on the 14th, and the city Jews celebrate on the 15th. Therefore, under Uncle Mordy's, I mean Prime Minister Mordecai's command, Purim is to be celebrated every Adar 14-15 (9:21). "These days are remembered and celebrated by every generation, family, province, and city, so that these

days of Purim will not lose their significance in Jewish life[h] and their memory will not fade from their descendants" (9:28). Today, the Jewish community observes Purim (Lots) on Adar 14 with wild, silly parties and gift-giving.

Chapter 10 closes out the book with an homage to Mordecai, one of the Jews' most esteemed persons!

INSIGHT

To show you how God has orchestrated everything, let me share with you a rather chilling "turning of the table" ala Purim and the book of Esther. It comes from www.thetorah.com/article/purimfest-1946-the-nuremberg-trials-and-the-ten-sons-of-haman.

There is an astounding connection between the Nazis and Purim. The same murderous, antisemitic spirit that drove Haman drove the Nazis and many who followed them. You can read for yourself the amazing parallels in the above link. I want to highlight that there were originally 12 Nazis condemned to die at the Nuremberg Trials. "Of these twelve, Martin Bormann was tried in absentia, and Herman Goering committed suicide before he could be executed. Given their military status, the ten men asked for the firing squad, but to underscore that their crimes went beyond mere military offenses, the court decided on the more common death by hanging" (*Purimfest 1946: The Nuremberg Trials and the Ten Sons of Haman*, thetorah.com).

"Julius Streicher (1885–1946) was an early member of the Nazi Party. In 1923, he founded the virulently antisemitic and racist newspaper, *Der Stürmer*" (www.encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/julius-streicher). Just before he died by hanging, Streicher yelled out, "Purim Fest 1946!"

Hmm, ten men, filled with Jew-hatred, were hanged because of their plans and work to eliminate the Jewish people. One of them even refers to the book of Esther.

A coincidence? I think not.