

Re-Vision – What if things are not well?

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BIG IDEA - God wants us to rebuild, restore and re-vision

scripture focus - Nehemiah 1:1-4 NLT

“These are the memoirs of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In late autumn, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes’ reign, I was at the fortress of Susa. Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem. They said to me, **“Things are not going well for those who returned** to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire.” When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.”

Great stories start with big problems.

In the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, The white witch has frozen Narnia and Aslan is no where to be found. In The Lord of the Rings, Sauron is trying to take control of Middle-earth. In To Kill A Mockingbird, a town tolerates injustice towards Tom Robinson and Atticus and his two children, Scout and Jem, lose a sense of childhood innocence.

* **The reason great stories are about problems, and what this important pattern is telling us about ourselves, is that life is all about problems.**

Our lives, our world is filled with big and little problems! We have emotional problems, financial problems, health problems – and threats to our lives are everywhere. **All of the professions, in fact – doctor, lawyer, accountant, plumber, psychologist, therapist, mechanic, teacher, soldier, policeman, fireman, etc. are built around problem solving. They make their living solving problems for other people. Doctors make their living helping people solve medical problems, lawyers make their living helping people solve legal problems, plumbers make their living helping people solve plumbing problems, and politicians help us by making problems more complicated than necessary, so they can stay in office!**

What problems do storytellers solve? Well, great stories help people solve the most serious problem of all, **the problem of ignorance – ignorance concerning who we really are and who we were really meant to be.**

* ~ thoughts stolen from James Bonnet, storymaking.com

The Jewish people had a problem, a big problem, a historical, genetic disposition problem. Then on top of the problem is the fact that God put Israel in a 70 year timeout. And while they are in timeout, their entire city is looted and leveled and ransacked to rubble.

Before we get into the story, let me remind everyone. The “big C” Church has a problem, also a big problem. **It is not only in post pandemic mode but seriously in a post Christian era as well.** Things like “normal” and “used to” don’t exist anymore. It’s only what we do going forward that will make a difference. But, as we will see big problems mean a great story and we have a BIG God that is totally in control. This also means our church, our Candlewood gathering of people, have an opportunity ahead. **We get to rebuild and we get**

to re-vision. This series we will focus on a Biblical rebuild and someone casting a whole new vision. The repair work only took 52 days, but the new way of living took years. I believe there are some parallel patterns and wisdom in what this ancient governor was able to accomplish.

Ezra Fun Facts

While in Babylon, Ezra organized **a little over 40,000 Jews to return with him to the Land of Israel.** Out of a population of perhaps a half million Jews that number was not very impressive – only 8%. Worse, he could not conscript the caliber of Jews he wanted. **The greatest Torah scholars and the Levites stayed behind.**

When Ezra did arrive in the Land of Israel, he saw a **Jewish community that had broken down spiritually.** Some traditional sources that suggest the intermarriage rate was as high as 85-90%. The situation was so bad that the **High Priest — whom all the Jewish people looked to for spiritual leadership — had sons who married non-Jewish women.**

Ezra also saw that all **the Jewish-owned stores in Jerusalem were open on the Sabbath,** which was the market day. The non-Jews from the neighboring towns and villages would come into Jerusalem on the Sabbath to make purchases. The Jewish shop-owners told Ezra that they had found legal loopholes in Jewish law for doing so.

Ezra also had to deal with the political problem. They were not allowed to build the Temple and **the Samaritans dominated the scene – threatening with violence anyone who would oppose them.**
<https://www.jewishhistory.org/ezra-and-nehemiah/>

Timeline

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ezra%E2%80%93Nehemiah>

Interesting wikipedia quote, “**priestly circles who stressed Temple over Torah, transformed Ezra from scribe to priest,** and stressed the **primacy of the Babylonian returnees over those who had remained in the land.**”

Glenn: **These three tension points are carried forward 400 years and “stuck” in values and culture of religious leaders (Pharisees, Sadducees and Scribes) in Jesus’ time. 1. Temple over Torah, 2. Elevation of scribes to priests and 3. Radical racial tension between “pure-race” Jews versus “half-race” (Samaritan) Jews.**

Nehemiah 1:2-7 NLT

“Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem. They said to me, **“Things are not going well** for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire.” When I heard this, **I sat down and wept.** **In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.** Then I said, **“O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love** with those who love him and obey his commands, listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel. **I confess that we have sinned against you.** **Yes, even my own family and I have sinned!** We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses.”

Things we should know about Nehemiah:

- His name means “God comforts or has compassion.”
- He was born in Babylon and raised in exile.

He tells us, “I was the king’s cup-bearer.” Now, you maybe thinking, “what a cushy job!” He hangs out with King Darius and brings his cup of wine, sipping it first to see if it may be poisoned. The King’s cup bearer was far more than that. Nehemiah had risen to the top position as the **chief of the butlers, overseeing the entire supply chain**

from grape to wine, from seed to sandwich, from steer to steak or fresh caught fish to filets. He provided and protected every bit and morsel of food and drink from inception to the King's lips. **Remember when Chipotle had an issue with one of their new produce suppliers and found that there was salmonella in the tomatoes?** If the King got sick or was poisoned it would be Nehemiah's fault! **This guy was smart and very capable of coordinating massive systems and supply lines.**

Five Simple Observations:

1. Someone has to **see the reality of the situation**, Nehemiah asked the question and Hanani, shared the truth.
2. Someone has to **grieve the loss** and let go of what used to be. Nehemiah sat down and wept. It was far more than just a demolished temple and city wall.
3. Someone **has to do something about it**. Nehemiah faced a situation he knew he could not solve by himself. But he also knew that with God all things are possible ¹ **Nehemiah thought his job was to repair and rebuild the wall, but really his job was to rebuild a people who would believe in the vision to not only rebuild a wall, but rebuild a culture of behaving like the people of God.**
4. Someone **has to recognize their part of the problem**. Nehemiah's prayer of confession of the sins of the people of Israel, Nehemiah included himself. **"The Jewish people had been slaves in Babylon for seventy years, but before that they been slaves to fake gods."**

"Please remember what you told your servant Moses: 'If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.' "The people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are your servants. O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who

delight in honoring you. **Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me.**” In those days I was the king’s cup-bearer.”

Nehemiah 1:8-11 NLT

5. Someone has to **ask God for help**. Nehemiah asked God to grant me success by giving him favor!

In Nehemiah’s day it is an actual wall of protection and defense. The wall not only protects the community, it also protects Israel’s beloved temple, a spiritual meeting place with God. **God did not live there and God did not even visit there*** (<https://messiahfactor.com/the-second-temple-the-ark-of-the-covenant-and-the-glory-of-god/>), but it was a symbolic place.

But even as we read the story with this huge problem, we can already see that it’s NOT just a wall.

The wall is a type, a representation, an object lesson of a complete and utter destruction, a picture of a community that just decided to give up and “put up with” the fact that everything in their past, in in their culture and spiritual life was GONE. Hope was buried in rubble everywhere they looked.

This makes me think of the enormous change and disruption in our country and in our own culture. Look around, you’ll see a lot of rubble of walls that one stood to protect us and allow us to thrive.

I believe we need to rebuild a wall ourselves and I believe that wall is NOT to keep people out, but to keep folks safe and able to rediscover hope in God.

I believe our wall is unity among our church family and I’m asking every person, every family to pitch in and help. We’ve gone through nine weeks taking about replenishing ourselves in God. Now as we head into the fall of 2022, I want to lead us into rebuilding and a re-visioning for our church.

As we come to the sacrament, the command to regularly come together for communion, I would ask that we reflect on these four observations from Nehemiah. We would: **see reality, grieve the loss, decide to do something about it and recognize our part of the problem.**

Together, in the months ahead, we'll be asking for God's help!

NOTES

Links

[Who is Nehemiah?](#)

More Ezra Facts

"In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, **the Lord fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah. He stirred the heart of Cyrus to put this proclamation in writing and to send it throughout his kingdom: "This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.** Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. And may your God be with you! Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbors contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver and gold, supplies for the journey, and livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem."

Ezra 1:1-4 NLT

Three Priest families almost lost everything...

"**Three families of priests—Hobaiah, Hakkoz, and Barzillai**—also returned. (This Barzillai had married a woman who was a descendant of Barzillai of Gilead, and he had taken her family name.) **They searched for their names in the genealogical records, but they were not found, so they were disqualified from serving as priests.** The governor told them not to eat the priests' share of food from the sacrifices until **a priest could consult the Lord about the matter by using the Urim and Thummim—the sacred lots.**" Ezra 2:61-63 NLT

"But **many of the older priests, Levites, and other leaders who had seen the first Temple wept aloud** when they saw the new Temple's foundation. The **others, however, were shouting for joy.**" Ezra 3:12 NLT

"This **Ezra was a scribe who was well versed in the Law of Moses**, which the Lord, the God of Israel, had given to the people of Israel. He came up to Jerusalem

from Babylon, and the king gave him everything he asked for, because the gracious hand of the Lord his God was on him." Ezra 7:6 NLT

"He had arranged to leave Babylon on April 8, the first day of the new year, and he arrived at Jerusalem on August 4, for **the gracious hand of his God was on him. This was because Ezra had determined to study and obey the Law of the Lord and to teach those decrees and regulations to the people of Israel.**" Ezra 7:9-10 NLT

King Artaxerxes gave full authority to Ezra to use the specified money for the temple, but also the extra could be used for whatever they wanted.

"We also commission you to take with you silver and gold, which we are freely presenting as an offering to the God of Israel who lives in Jerusalem.

"Furthermore, you are to take any silver and gold that you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the voluntary offerings of the people and the priests that are presented for the Temple of their God in Jerusalem. These donations are to be used specifically for the purchase of bulls, rams, male lambs, and the appropriate grain offerings and liquid offerings, all of which will be offered on the altar of the Temple of your God in Jerusalem. **Any silver and gold that is left over may be used in whatever way you and your colleagues feel is the will of your God.**" Ezra 7:15-18 NLT

But did Ezra go to far...

"When these things had been done, the Jewish leaders came to me and said, **"Many of the people of Israel, and even some of the priests and Levites, have not kept themselves separate from the other peoples living in the land. They have taken up the detestable practices of the Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians, and Amorites. For the men of Israel have married women from these people and have taken them as wives for their sons. So the holy race has become polluted by these mixed marriages.** Worse yet, the leaders and officials have led the way in this outrage." When I heard this, I tore my cloak and my shirt, pulled hair from my head and beard, and sat down utterly shocked. Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel came and sat with me because of this outrage committed by the returned exiles. And I sat there utterly appalled until the time of the evening sacrifice." Ezra 9:1-4 NLT

Ezra said the prophets commanded them...

"Your servants **the prophets warned us when they said, 'The land you are entering to possess is totally defiled by the detestable practices of the people living there.** From one end to the other, the land is filled with corruption. **Don't let your daughters marry their sons! Don't take their daughters as wives for your sons. Don't ever promote the peace and prosperity of those nations.** If you follow

these instructions, you will be strong and will enjoy the good things the land produces, and you will leave this prosperity to your children forever.'" Ezra 9:11-12 NLT

Ezra, being a serious student of the Torah, pulled from the original text given to Moses including Lv. 18; 19:19; Dt. 7:1–4 and 20:10–18. These are all references to God commanding the original structure of how He wanted Israel to become a unique people group. These passages and concepts from Ezra have been used to convince people to never inter-marry with another race. And, this in no way was connected to Paul's command in 2 Corinthians 6:14, where he writes of being bound to an unbeliever. Many churches taught that Christians were in sin when they married someone from another race!

They set about divorcing their wives...

"Then Shecaniah son of Jehiel, a descendant of Elam, said to Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to our God, for we have married these pagan women of the land. But in spite of this there is hope for Israel. **Let us now make a covenant with our God to divorce our pagan wives and to send them away with their children.** We will follow the advice given by you and by the others who respect the commands of our God. Let it be done according to the Law of God. Get up, for it is your duty to tell us how to proceed in setting things straight. **We are behind you, so be strong and take action.**" Ezra 10:2-4 NLT

"Each of these men had a pagan wife, and some even had children by these wives." Ezra 10:44 NLT

The Lexham Bible Commentary

Ezra's Response to Reports of Intermarriage

Ezra demonstrates how the Law functions in the Judaeian community, specifically in his response to intermarriage (Ezra 9–10). When officials report to Ezra that "the holy race has mixed itself with the peoples of the lands. And in this faithlessness the hand of the officials and chief men has been foremost" (Ezra 9:2), Ezra grieves and confesses before God (Ezra 9:3–15). An assembly gathers to weep and confess (Ezra 9:4; 10:1–2), and the people make a covenant to "put away" foreign wives, and remedy the situation within two months (Ezra 10:3–17). **Probably only the descendants of Jeshua actually divorced their foreign wives** (Ezra 10:18–44; Eskenazi, "Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah," 515). This scene establishes communal norms and future expectations. It does not attempt to retroactively implement the Law (Eskenazi, "Missions of Ezra and Nehemiah," 515–16).

Both the prohibition of intermarriage and "putting away" are rooted in the Law (Ezra 9:14; 10:3), yet neither is expressed in the Pentateuch. Exodus 34:11–16

prohibits making any covenant with the nations residing in the land. Deuteronomy 7:1–5 dooms those who make this covenant to destruction. In both passages, **intermarriage is only one expression of making a covenant—the prohibition prevents idolatry. Ezra 9–10 prohibits intermarriage because it affects inheritance (Ezra 9:11–12).** If intermarriage was remedied “according to the Law”, the wives and their offspring would be killed (Deut 7:1–5), not “put away.” **Ezra uses various theological and legal concepts from the Pentateuch to provide a homiletic interpretation** (Japhet, From the Rivers of Babylon, 142–51). He uses the Law’s concepts to define the problem, develop a solution, and affect change instead of attempting a literal adherence (Japhet, From the Rivers of Babylon, 151). In this sense, his decisions are done “according to the Law” (Ezra 9:14; 10:3).

The prophet Jeremiah had told Israel a very different command.

“This is what the **Lord of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, says to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: “Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food they produce. Marry and have children. Then find spouses for them so that you may have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away!** And work for the peace and prosperity of the city where I sent you into exile. Pray to the Lord for it, for its welfare will determine your welfare.” **Jeremiah 29:4-7 NLT**

So, the question is... who was right, Ezra or Nehemiah? Or both?

Scriptures

Nehemiah 1:2-7 NLT

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Nehemiah 1:8-11 NLT

“Please remember what you told your servant Moses: ‘If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.’ “The people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are your servants. O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. **Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me.**” In those days I was the king’s cup-bearer.”

Questions

Q: How do you think it felt, as a Jewish person, to go back into exile and lose all cultural and spiritual identity?

Q: The Jewish people thought things were “good” before being taken as slaves, but they were not. Can you name some ways they had abandoned or drifted away from God?

Q: Do you have habits and ways of doing life that don’t work? How can we corporately QUIT doing them?

Q: What does it look like to be a part of community that builds a relationship with God together?

Q: In what ways can a solid, unified community be a protection to singles and families in the church?

COMMENTARY REFERENCES

According to Jewish teaching, the 2nd temple lacked 5 things present in the first temple.

1. Ark of covenant,
2. Sacred fire falling from heaven on the sacrifices,
3. **The Shekinah, the glory cloud,**
4. The Urim and Thummim (on High Priest’s garments, by which the will of God was discerned)
5. The spirit of prophecy.