

Two Year Bible Trek
Week 73
Nehemiah 1-7; Ezra 7-10

Key Concepts: The key concept is that God will fulfill God's promise to restore the people.

Stories: Nehemiah contains stories of Nehemiah's request to the King of Persia to return and rebuild Jerusalem, the King agrees, Nehemiah's inspection of the wall, his organizing the rebuilding of the wall, the opposition of enemies to the rebuilding, and finally the successful completion of the task. Ezra tells the story of Ezra's return to Jerusalem, his depression at the state of intermarriage among the Jews with foreigners, his demand that all Jews put away their foreign wives and the Jews' agreement to do so.

Brief Summary: As we look at these passages we need to put them in order so that the story of the Jews' return to the land can be seen in its appropriate phases. The initial phase took place under the leadership of Sheshbazzar, who began to rebuild the Temple (ca. 538) but could not complete it because of local opposition. The next group returned sometime between 538 and 522 BCE and was led by Zerubbabel and Jeshua. Though they too encountered opposition, they were encouraged by the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and were able to complete the Temple in 515 BCE. Even with the Temple completed the city of Jerusalem was largely uninhabited because its walls still lay in ruins.

The story of Nehemiah begins in 445 BCE. He is the cupbearer to the King of Persia, and hears news from Jerusalem about how dire were the circumstances of his fellow Jews. Though he understands the reasons for the destruction of Judah and Jerusalem (1:6-10) he still prays that God would grant him the opportunity to return and help reestablish the capital. He risks everything by asking permission of the King Artaxerxes to return and rebuild Jerusalem. Nehemiah is granted permission to return and rebuild which he proceeds to do, carrying with him letters from the king.

As with previous returnees his mission is opposed by the nations around him. Those opposed to his work of rebuilding the walls of the city plan attacks on the work, try to trick Nehemiah into meeting them outside the city so they can kill him, and then even conspire to assassinate him. None of these efforts are successful because Nehemiah is an extraordinarily wise man (which is shown by the fact that he had risen through the politics of the Persian court to serve the king). In the end the walls are rebuilt and Jerusalem is once again a place for Jews to feel safe.

The second half of the book of Ezra picks up the story at this point. Even though the people had a city and a Temple they were still rather unfaithful and were not being obedient to the Law in either their Temple worship or their daily lives. Ezra appears to be called by God in order to deal with these issues. Ezra is a scribe, a religious lawyer, who knows and obeys the Law. Ezra can take with him any of the priests or Levites who are still in Persia. He is also given permission to enforce the religious laws contained within the Torah, with permission to do whatever is necessary (death, banishment, confiscation or imprisonment) to enforce those laws. One of the great issues faced by Ezra was intermarriage. The people of God had married non-Jews and these marriages were causing Jews to worship other gods. For Ezra this is a shock because the Jews in exile had been careful to only marry within the faith in order to maintain their identity. Ezra calls the people together and the men pledge to divorce their wives (and abandon their children) who are non-Jewish. Though not all do so many comply with this demand.

1. Why do you believe that the Jews had such a longing to return to the Judah?
2. How would you describe Nehemiah and how does he exemplify a good leader?
3. What do you make of Ezra's focus on intermarriage? Where do you see that as a continuing issue within the Jewish community today?