

Two Year Bible Trek
Week 74
Nehemiah 8-13; Malachi

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

Stories: This section begins with the appearance of Ezra who is asked to read the Law to the people, the people understand, the people celebrate the Feast of Booths, make a communal confession, separate themselves from foreigners, Ezra retells the story of Abram, Moses, the people in the wilderness, the conquest of the land, the loss of the land, the nation's continuing sin, the making of a new covenant with God to support the Temple, census lists, dedication of the walls of Jerusalem, and actions taken during the second administration of Nehemiah. Malachi writes about the priests' unacceptable practices, God's desire for marital faithfulness, the coming messiah and day of judgment, God's blessing waiting for the return of the people and the salvation of true worshippers in the judgment.

Brief Summary: The second half of Nehemiah is the conclusion of both Ezra and Nehemiah. Here you find these leaders working together to direct the life of the people of God. The Temple has been rebuilt as have the walls of the city. It is time then for the people to reorient their lives to God and to God's Law. What we need to remember is that the people who had been left in the land during the Babylonian exile had only loosely followed the law. Additionally the priests who had returned to the land prior to Ezra's return were lax in the performance of their duties. For Ezra this was unacceptable.

Ezra, evidently with Nehemiah's blessing, gathers the people together in order to both read the Law and then to retell the great story of God's people. Each of these is critical to the future of the Jewish people. The Law matters because it is the set of regulations which will assist the people in maintaining not only appropriate worship but in maintaining their identity as a people. It will ensure that the Jewish people are not absorbed into the nations around them. The story matters because it first reminds the people of all that God has done for them, and second it reminds the people of why they find themselves in such a difficult situation. This story also serves as a warning as to what happens to those who do not obey the Law.

In response to these acts the people celebrate the Festival of Booths (one of the three great Jewish feasts) and commit themselves not only to be obedient to the Law but to supporting the Temple through their gifts. The Levites recommit themselves to the service of God. The conclusion of this book has Nehemiah driving out non-Israelites from the Temple area, insuring that the Levites get their appropriate pay, stopping Jews from working on the Sabbath, closing the city gates on the Sabbath so foreigners can't sell on the Sabbath and then trying to force Jews to cease marrying foreigners.

The prophet Malachi (though that may not be his actual name) served during this period of restoration. His concerns were similar to those of Ezra and Nehemiah. Malachi criticizes the priest for being lax in their observance of sacrificial regulations. He then places a curse on them if they do not return to appropriate practices. Malachi continues by reminding the people that marriage is to be held in honor (evidently men were divorcing their wives without cause). The prophet then offers a vision of a messenger of the covenant who will judge the people. This judgment will be like a refiner's fire. He will judge those who violate all aspects of the law including oppressing workers and mistreating orphans and widows. The people are then encouraged to return to God in order that they survive the judgment.

1. How might we as Christians maintain our identity separate from the culture around us?
2. How does the exclusiveness of Ezra/Nehemiah contrast with the inclusiveness of Abram being given the promise that through him all nations would be blessed?
3. How might you relate Jesus to Malachi's role as messenger of the covenant?