

HISTORY OF JEWS SERIES – PROPHECY

“Compromise and Complacency” (Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13)

After the initial return from Exile, the problems of the Jews did not disappear. The devil does not give up that easily. There were three major returns. Zerubbabel first returned in 538 B.C. He was then followed by Ezra, who led the second return in 458 B.C. Nehemiah led the third return around 13 years later in 445 B.C. We gain insights from the book of Ezra and Nehemiah as to this period as well as the two prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah who both preached during Zerubbabel’s time. The Jews could sing: “Great is Thy Faithfulness” as they viewed the working of a Sovereign God in their lives.

EZRA (458 B.C.)

Compromise and complacency began to creep into the hearts of those in Judah and Jerusalem. Ezra was a Bible teacher who had a burden to teach God’s Word to the people there, “*For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach in Israel statutes and judgments.*” (Ezra 7:10) We read in the Book of Nehemiah that Ezra held public services for the people to be taught God’s Word from a pulpit,

And Ezra the priest brought the law before the congregation both of men and women, and all that could hear with understanding, upon the first day of the seventh month. And he read therein before the street that was before the water gate from the morning until midday, before the men and the women, and those that could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive unto the book of the law.....So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused them to understand the reading. (Neh. 8:2-3, 8)

When Ezra the priest arrived in Jerusalem he discovered many problems that had to be dealt with. One of the first was the intermarriage of the Jews with the pagan Gentiles around them,

Now when these things were done, the princes came to me, saying, The people of Israel, and the priests, and the Levites, have not separated themselves from the people of the lands, doing according to their abominations, even of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites. For they have taken of their daughters for themselves, and for their sons: so that the holy seed have mingled themselves with the people of those lands: yea, the hand of the princes and rulers hath been chief in this trespass. (Ezra 9:1-2)

Some of the Jewish men had even divorced their Jewish wives to marry pagan ones (cf. Mal. 2:10-16). The greatest tragedy was that many of the leaders of the Jews were involved in these intermarriages. They were leaders, but in the wrong direction! The total number listed in Ezra 10 was less than 1% of the Jewish men that had done this but Ezra could see the dangers ahead.

God's Word expressly forbids this intermarriage with pagans (cf. Exod. 34:15-16; Deut. 7:1-6). Ezra lamented, "*O LORD God of Israel, thou art righteous: for we remain yet escaped, as it is this day: behold, we are before thee in our trespasses: for we cannot stand before thee because of this.*" (Ezra 9:15) It posed a danger to destroying the distinctive character of the holy Jewish seed. As Moses warned, "*For they will turn away thy son from following me, that they may serve other gods: so will the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and destroy thee suddenly.*" (Deut. 7:4). A believer and an unbeliever think differently and act differently. Intermarriage will destroy that distinctiveness. It sows the seeds for continual conflict and family turmoil.

Ezra not only mourned over the sin of the Jews. He took decisive and immediate action to remedy the situation,

And Ezra the priest stood up, and said unto them, Ye have transgressed, and have taken strange wives, to increase the trespass of Israel. Now therefore make confession unto the LORD God of your fathers, and do his pleasure: and separate yourselves from the people of the land, and from the strange wives. (Ezra 10:10-11)

There was no easy solution. For those that refused to separate from their pagan spouses were warned that they would be cut off from God's people, "*And that whosoever would not come within three days, according to the counsel of the princes and the elders, all his substance should be forfeited, and himself separated from the congregation of those that had been carried away.*" (Ezra 10:8) This was a painful but necessary act of thorough separation. Doubtless, many thought Ezra too narrow minded, self-righteous or even unloving in his actions. But Ezra knew that it was the only way to keep the nation pure from moral contamination. To tolerate this would be to encourage others to follow suit. As Steve Cole wrote,

True repentance requires not only admitting our wrong to God and others, but also taking practical steps of obedience to correct our wrongs. With some sins, such as murdering or permanently injuring someone, we can never fix the wrong we committed. Some problems are so complex that they cannot be corrected instantly. But that should not be an excuse for not taking action at all. We should devise a plan that can lead us into full obedience to Christ. Repentance should take place as quickly as possible in light of the complexity of the problem.

Zerubbabel was used by God to rebuild the Temple and now Ezra was used to rebuild the spiritual character of the people, who had compromised. He did this by an emphasis on the Word of God. The Word of God is mentioned ten times in this book. Now, the Lord would use a man called Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Each man had a different but vital role in the work of God.

NEHEMIAH (445 B.C.)

In 445 B.C. Nehemiah led another group of Exiles back to Jerusalem. The Bible does not tell us how many people returned with Nehemiah, but it was likely not a very large group. At this point the temple had been rebuilt but the walls of the city were still in ruins. Nehemiah inspired the people by his words and example to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He faced bitter opposition from within and without Israel to this work. But with continual prayer and watchfulness, he was

successful in his mission to rebuild the walls (Neh. 6:15). This brought great thanksgiving and joy to the Jews,

And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites out of all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem, to keep the dedication with gladness, both with thanksgivings, and with singing, with cymbals, psalteries, and with harps. (Neh. 12:27)

The people also entered into solemn oaths to uphold the covenant of God's Word in Jewish life. They explicitly swore,

They clave to their brethren, their nobles, and entered into a curse, and into an oath, to walk in God's law, which was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord, and his judgments and his statutes; And that we would not give our daughters unto the people of the land, nor take their daughters for our sons: And if the people of the land bring ware or any victuals on the sabbath day to sell, that we would not buy it of them on the sabbath, or on the holy day: and that we would leave the seventh year, and the exaction of every debt. (Neh. 10:29-31)

Despite these noble words, the people did not live up to them. Backsliding began to take root in the hearts of the people. The spiritual fervor that burned in the hearts of the nation when Ezra first came had died down. Compromise again began to emerge. Although Nehemiah came to be governor of Jerusalem 13 years after Ezra separated the pagan spouses from the Jewish people, the same sin had reappeared. We read that the Israelite men had started to marry the surrounding nations' daughters,

In those days also saw I Jews that had married wives of Ashdod, of Ammon, and of Moab: And their children spake half in the speech of Ashdod, and could not speak in the Jews' language, but according to the language of each people. (Neh. 13:23-24)

This was not a racial problem but a religious one. It has far reaching consequences in subsequent generations. Israel was now just one generation away from assimilation and ultimate destruction. This corruption had occurred in the days of Balaam and Solomon in their history. The confusion of languages among the children was not only a symptom of the problem but a threat to the future. Indeed, one of the Ammonites called Tobiah was even living in the temple area (Neh. 13:4-9) and the High Priest's relatives had married Sanballat's daughter (Neh. 13:28). This man Tobiah was a particular enemy of Nehemiah and the work of God (Neh. 2:10, 19; 4:3, 7-8). Kidner points out the consequence of this compromise,

...it meant a steady erosion of Israelite identity at the level of all thinking and expression, and a loss of access to the Word of God which would effectively paganize them. A single generation's compromise could undo the work of centuries.

Nehemiah got them to make an oath to change their actions, *“And I contended with them, and cursed them, and smote certain of them, and plucked off their hair, and made them swear by God, saying, Ye shall not give your daughters unto their sons, nor take their daughters unto your sons, or for yourselves.”* (Neh. 13:25) He also removed all traces of pagan association from the temple,

And I came to Jerusalem, and understood of the evil that Eliashib did for Tobiah, in preparing him a chamber in the courts of the house of God. And it grieved me sore: therefore I cast forth all the household stuff to Tobiah out of the chamber. Then I commanded, and they cleansed the chambers: and thither brought I again the vessels of the house of God, with the meat offering and the frankincense. (Neh. 13:7-9)

Other sins were now emerging in public life. Sabbath desecration was prevalent as materialism took hold of the hearts of the Jews,

In those days saw I in Judah some treading wine presses on the sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and lading asses; as also wine, grapes, and figs, and all manner of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the sabbath day: and I testified against them in the day wherein they sold victuals. There dwelt men of Tyre also therein, which brought fish, and all manner of ware, and sold on the sabbath unto the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem. (Neh. 13:15-16)

Nehemiah was equally robust in speaking out against this sin, *“Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said unto them, What evil thing is this that ye do, and profane the sabbath day? Did not your fathers thus, and did not our God bring all this evil upon us, and upon this city? yet ye bring more wrath upon Israel by profaning the Sabbath.”* (Neh. 13:17-18) He also took corrective action to close off the opportunities for the people to sin, *“And it came to pass, that when the gates of Jerusalem began to be dark before the sabbath, I commanded that the gates should be shut, and charged that they should not be opened till after the sabbath: and some of my servants set I at the gates, that there should no burden be brought in on the sabbath day.”* (Neh. 13:19) By doing this, Nehemiah was emphasizing the need for true worship for the Jewish people.

Another failure was the neglect of paying their tithes and offerings. This resulted in many of the priests having to work outside the temple to make ends meet for their families. Probably this was a reason why the room was let out to Tobiah. The Jews previously swore, *“we will not forsake the house of our God.”* (Neh. 10:39b) They had not lived up to this promise. Nehemiah rebuked this theft from God’s work, *“Then contended I with the rulers, and said, Why is the house of God forsaken?”* (Neh. 13:11a) He then took decisive action to re-organise this so the work of God was properly supported,

And I gathered them together, and set them in their place. Then brought all Judah the tithe of the corn and the new wine and the oil unto the treasuries. And I made treasurers over the treasuries, Shelemiah the priest, and Zadok the scribe, and of the Levites, Pedaiah: and next to them was Hanan the son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah: for they were counted faithful, and their office was to distribute unto their brethren. (Neh. 13:11b-13)

Nehemiah not only rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem but he also rebuilt many of the spiritual foundations of the nation that had been allowed to decay. A lesser man would have been tempted to give up such an enormous task but Nehemiah was made of sterner stuff. His patriotism is coupled with his evident piety. Nehemiah did not just get upset because of the compromise of the Jews, he also did something about it! He was one of the great spiritual leaders of the Bible.

*Outside the camp unto Thy dear Name,
Lord, may I here be found;
Weaned from the world, with its pomp and its fame;
Resting on holy ground.
Outside the camp in Thy presence till
Earth's little day be done;
Then face to face, all Thy mercies to trace,
Inside the veil with Thee.*

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