

Restoration, Separation, and Reconstruction: Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 1

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16th Avenue Gospel Chapel

References: **Ezra 10**, Ezra 10:1; Ezra 10:2-3; Ezra 10:12-17; Ezra 10:18-19; Ezra 10:20-22; 2 Kings 23:1-3; 1 Thessalonians 1:9; Matthew 12:43-45; Galatians 6:14; 1 John 1:7; Ezra 1:1; Jeremiah 18:1-4; Jeremiah 25:11-12; Jeremiah 29:10-14; Romans 9:17; Nehemiah 1:1-3; Nehemiah 1:4

The Examination of the Pagan Marriages

Well, into the book of Ezra and the last chapter. We talked a little bit about this last chapter last time. It's not an easy chapter to comment on. It's not an easy chapter to deal with the issues. We're going to read just a couple of verses to give us a background, and then we'll make some comments. First, we'll go back as far as verse number 12:

[Ezra 10:12-17 NKJV]

¹² Then all the assembly answered and said with a loud voice, "Yes! As you have said, so we must do. ¹³ But there are many people; it is the season for heavy rain, and we are not able to stand outside. Nor is this the work of one or two days, for there are many of us who have transgressed in this matter. ¹⁴ Please, let the leaders of our entire assembly stand; and let all those in our cities who have taken pagan wives come at appointed times, together with the elders and judges of their cities, until the fierce wrath of our God is turned away from us in this matter." ¹⁵ Only Jonathan the son of Asahel and Jahaziah the son of Tikvah opposed this, and Meshullam and Shabbethai the Levite gave them support. ¹⁶ Then the descendants of the captivity did so. And Ezra the priest, with certain heads of the fathers' households, were set apart by the fathers' households, each of them by name; and they sat down on the first day of the tenth month to examine the matter. ¹⁷ By the first day of the first month they finished questioning all the men who had taken pagan wives.

And then to the end of the chapter, we get a list of those who were affected in one way or another by this.

So that's our thought for this evening. Again, welcome to those just joining us. Welcome to May and Jeet and Chaz and Soai. We're glad you're all here. We're glad we're all here tonight.

This was a very serious matter, and I give these brethren top points for dealing with it. I think it's marvelous that not only did they deal with it, but they dealt with it in a way that involved all the people. The objective to put away their strange wives and the children of their strange wives, that was a very, very serious situation. And instead of saying, "We want it all done by three o'clock this afternoon," they said, "No, no. We're going to deal with this very wisely."

They called in the elders. They called in the judges in each city. They reviewed each situation. They spent two months—first day of the tenth month to the first day—two months, three months? Yes, three months. First day of the tenth month to the first day of the first month of the next year, that's three months: ten, eleven, and twelve.

So do we dare do the math? How many people were there? You're saying, Eric, 114? About 114. I heard somebody else counted 113. Well, we're not going to quibble—114.

"I count 114."

Good for you; we believe you, Stella. But forget the 113 guy! Okay, so that's marvelous. And there were ninety days for 114 people. That's almost one a day. Even if you cut it down to five days a week, it's still not two people completely a day. They spent a lot of time. They took each case very literally. Good for them. And they could have as well—they were the elders and judges from each city, so some of those hearings were going on simultaneously. It wasn't just one judge and one jury; it was going on in the different cities, so it's possible more than one was going on at one time. Very good.

I guess I just get excited about that. I get excited also about verse number 17. It says, "By the first day of the first month." The first day of the first month is what? It's New Year's Day, isn't it? And basically, I think they planned ahead and said, "Listen, we're going to get this matter over with so that we can start the new year on a solid footing."

I think there's something in Scripture about the significance of New Year's Day. There's something in our life about the significance of a birthday. Many of you who have been born again in later life know precisely the day and the month. Often when you get to your second birth, you say, "I'm going to make a special deal out of this second birthday." I can't do that; I can't remember the day, the month, or the year. I can remember the time of day, I can

remember the details, but I just didn't record it anywhere, and I've got a bad memory for dates. But the first day of the new year is a big deal. We live in the world of New Year's resolutions, and I'm not sure that New Year's resolutions are a really bad idea. There's a whole lot more to it than that, but I think they took advantage of the fact: "We're going to start this new year right."

Sometimes we say to ourselves, "By the grace of God, I'm going to start this new year right." Regardless of whether your new year comes on the first day of January or any other time, to start anew right is a good thing. I think this is just a gentle reminder to us of what was going on.

So I just give these men full points for saying, "This is a serious matter; we're going to deal with it." Precisely how they dealt with it, precisely how they minimized the trauma in the families, how they compensated the wives and the children that were set aside—we don't know those details. I presume we don't know those details because the Lord didn't tell us and didn't feel it necessary. But what we do know is that they did something. They recognized the issue was there, they dealt with it, and praise the Lord for that. So that's my simple summary until we get into the list of the 114 names.

There's no doubt it was a great injustice to those women that these men had taken as wives, probably poor, ignorant women and their children. If the children were not taken into Israel—we're not sure about that—they were wrongs that probably the councils tried to make right in every family. Those pagan women who were put away, who didn't convert to Jehovah, I might say again: there's only 114. They said earlier on, when they started to examine this thing, there were a great many that had taken pagan wives, but there were only 114 that are counted here that they actually put away.

So it would seem to leave the door open for our understanding that there were many of those pagan wives taken by the Jews who converted to Judaism; they converted to the worship of Jehovah. That's why there was probably a very special inquiry made on each situation and those that were involved. If not, the only option then was to put them away, but then to provide for them in some way: write them out a legal divorce so that they might remarry, and also provide for their futures in whatever way that the husband might be able to do.

And so it was done, I think, all very decently and in order, to try to minimize as much as possible those wrongs. But still, there would be heartbreak, and there would be much disappointment—years perhaps lost for women having to go back to their families now, maybe middle-aged or whatever. Those wrongs could never be made right this side of eternity. But we know that God is a gracious God, and He's a just judge.

And so, as Harold says, full credit to the careful inquiry that was made, and no doubt the provisions that were made as well as possible for these folks.

The Principles of Separation: Turning to God First

This also raises the principle of separation. If I might just make a few comments concerning it: the principles of separation are brought out here in broad strokes. It was costly, that separation.

The first principle of separation is a separation **to** God. And then the second principle is a separation **from** the things that offend God. If we reverse those two principles, we tend to get into what is called reformation. And that is not a permanent, nor is it a very good thing. Reformation may look good on the surface, but it will not hold.

We have an Old Testament example right here, where before the people of Israel separated themselves from their pagan wives, they first of all turned to the Lord. We read that in the early part of chapter 9, where there were some that trembled at the word. And then they came to Ezra, who was stretched out on the ground, crying to the Lord. His humility—this great man's humility and his shock at what had taken place among the people of God—provoked a revival among the people. In chapter 10, verse 1, it says:

[Ezra 10:1 NKJV]

Now while Ezra was praying, and while he was confessing, weeping, and bowing down before the house of God, a very large assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him from Israel; for the people wept very bitterly.

It was a turning of the heart of the people of God to the Lord. And that's the first principle of separation.

Then they make a covenant with the Lord there. Having turned to the Lord, that vow means something; it has power because it has the Spirit of God working in those who have made that covenant. It is God now who is working in the people.

We see this first principle of separation also in a number of places. One good example is Josiah when he came to the throne. He restores true worship first. They find the Book of the Law in the house of the Lord, and Hilkiah gives it to Shaphan to read to the king. The king hears this, tears his clothes, falls down before the Lord, and they begin to seek the Lord. And then we read in 2 Kings chapter 23:

[2 Kings 23:1-2 NKJV]

¹ Now the king sent them to gather all the elders of Judah and Jerusalem to him. ² The king went up to the house of the LORD with all the men of Judah, and with him all the inhabitants of Jerusalem--the priests and the prophets and all the people, both small and great. And he read in their hearing all the words of the Book of the Covenant which had been found in the house of the LORD.

Now, just stop there. I just want to make a few comments, because last Wednesday night—Hong, did you not ask us about the two pillars in the house of God? She asked us what they were used for, and we kind of struggled with that. Neither Harold, nor I, nor David Dunlap could really come up with an adequate answer, except that it was a testimony.

Well, here we find that:

[2 Kings 23:3 NKJV]

³ Then the king stood by a pillar and made a covenant before the LORD, to follow the LORD and to keep His commandments and His testimonies and His statutes, with all his heart and all his soul, to perform the words of this covenant that were written in this book. And all the people took a stand for the covenant.

I haven't seen that before; that's interesting. It was by one of those pillars—a pillar of witness. I think we got that part right, didn't we? Yeah, and here this is really a confirmation of that, that he stood by one of those pillars. Those two pillars' names were Jachin, which means "He will establish," and Boaz, "In Him is strength." Josiah stood by one of those pillars and made a covenant there with the people: "He will establish," or "In Him is strength."

So at any rate, going back to the story of Josiah, it was then that he restored worship. They turned to the Lord, and then in the rest of the chapter, you can read it, they went out and began to cleanse the house of the Lord. They took all the idols that their fathers had brought, they went to the high places and burnt those down, they burned all the idols, and they even went into Israel—into the northern kingdom—and tore down idols as well.

The principles of separation in the Old Testament are very plain: first of all, a turning **to** God, and then a turning **from** the idols. That was what Paul commended the Thessalonians for:

[1 Thessalonians 1:9 NKJV]

For they themselves declare concerning us what manner of entry we had to you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,

So there are the principles of separation. Reformation is not enough; if they merely attempted to tear down those idols, they would not succeed.

Just a historical note: it's always amazed me when I read the New Testament and the Lord Jesus goes out to preach the gospel of the kingdom, how many times they encounter evil spirits. It seemed like the land was full of them. Well, in Matthew chapter 12, remember the parable the Lord spoke?

[Matthew 12:43-45 NKJV]

⁴³ "When an unclean spirit goes out of a man, he goes through dry places, seeking rest, and finds none. ⁴⁴ Then he says, 'I will return to my house from which I came.' And when he comes, he finds it empty, swept, and put in order. ⁴⁵ Then he goes and takes with him seven other spirits more wicked than himself, and they enter and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first. So shall it also be with this wicked generation."

Israel, under Ezra and Nehemiah, separated those that had taken strange wives—issues that would possibly tempt them to worship idols. It hadn't gotten to that point yet, it would seem, but by marrying pagans and combining your life with those that worship those things, they could have fallen back into the same sin that had brought them into captivity in the first place.

It would seem that the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah were successful, because the Jews never went back to idolatry. From Ezra's time on, to this very day, they do not worship false gods; they worship the one and true God.

Now, when Jesus came, what happened? There were these demons everywhere. The reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah had passed; they were now history. Time goes on, and the Jews continue down through the next four hundred years, but they leave the Lord. The written history of the Jews from the time of the Persians through the Greeks to the Romans is a time where they are zealous for the temple and zealous for the traditions, but they have left the true and living God. There's only a small remnant that's left.

And when Jesus comes, He finds that the house was swept clean of idolatry, but because every generation began to leave the living and true God, these demons then found a hiding place in the formalism, the ritualism, and the legalism of the Jews' religion. And so when Jesus came, what did they do? They killed their Messiah. And it was instigated by none other than the evil one himself, he that had the power of darkness.

So I was just meditating on these principles of separation and the historical effect that it had there. It would seem that this man Ezra had a profound future effect upon Israel—Ezra the scribe. We find scribes in the times of the Lord Jesus; we find that he set up schools, and the way he taught, those schools continued on right through. They became the rabbinical schools later on, though, of course, without true spiritual content.

Judgment Beginning at the House of God

Well, I'm going to try to restrain some of my comments on what Eric said to keep going in the passage we've got here. His comments were good. Let me remind you again that this is a most serious problem. And, praise the Lord, they started dealing with it.

Back now to verse 18:

[Ezra 10:18-19 NKJV]

¹⁸ And among the sons of the priests who had taken pagan wives the following were found of the sons of Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brothers: Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah. ¹⁹ And they gave their promise that they would put away their wives; and being guilty, they presented a ram of the flock as their trespass offering.

So the question is, who was guilty of all these things? The very first name that comes is Jeshua, the son of Jozadak. Who was Jeshua, the son of Jozadak? He was the man way back in the beginning chapters—chapter 3—who was there with Zerubbabel. He was the high priest! That's right. And so the high priest's family was involved. It would appear from the wording of verse 18 that it was four of his family: these four men, Maaseiah, Eliezer, Jarib, and Gedaliah.

So you ask yourself the question: Jeshua, why didn't you deal with that?

Your mind, if it's like mine, goes back to another priest whose name was Eli. Eli had two sons, Hophni and Phinehas, and he had to be rebuked by the Lord because he knew that they had sinned; he just didn't deal with it.

Which raises a very awkward question: what do you do when there are those in the family who don't follow the Lord? It's a big problem in the assembly. Here's Mr. So-and-so; he knows better, but he didn't do that. What do we do with him? Here's Mr. So-and-so over here; what do you do with it? If you're the Apostle Paul, you write to the Corinthians, and you say, "Listen, you guys, you've done marvelous things, but what about this? What about that? What about the other thing?" And the whole of the Corinthian assembly goes up and down in big problems. But Paul dealt with it at Corinth. Eli didn't deal with it in his day, and Jeshua didn't deal with it. Now, Ezra dealt with it, but Jeshua didn't deal with it.

In these difficult days, what would you do if you had been in that country at that time? You say, "We've got a problem here." Some of them will say, "My problem is my boss." Some of them will say, "My problem is that man I work with." Or, "One of these people is my family, or my brother's family—what am I going to do?"

I just marvel, I thrill that these men dealt with the issue. That takes great courage. I don't know what else to use other than **courage**. It's a difficult thing to do, but they dealt with it. And that's why I say, more power to them! Right at the top, Jeshua's family did what was wrong. His name is the first name to be mentioned; he was not guilty himself, but his children and his family apparently were.

So you keep reading now:

[Ezra 10:20-22 NKJV]

²⁰ Also of the sons of Immer: Hanani and Zebadiah; ²¹ of the sons of Harim: Maaseiah, Elijah, Shemaiah, Jehiel, and Uziah; ²² of the sons of Pashhur: Elioenai, Maaseiah, Ishmael, Nethanel, Jozabad, and Elasah.

We don't know as much about them. I think this fellow Immer was a pretty significant man; many of his family came out of Babylon in the days of Ezra. You go back into the early chapters, Immer is mentioned. It seems that the first group that are dealt with are those in verses 18 through 22, and then you get the introductory line in verse 23: "Also of the Levites."

So the Lord deals with the priests first, and then He deals with the Levites. The sons of Immer were also in the priesthood, and the priesthood shouldn't have been the guilty ones.

You can understand the common people of Israel—verse 25, "and of Israel"—the common people, but the priests and the Levites, what were they doing?

And that really was the problem in the days of the Lord Jesus, wasn't it? Who killed Him? The priests, the scribes, and the Pharisees—those at the religious top. We've got to be very careful in our day. There are all kinds of people who call themselves Christians who are very false at the top. But what about the ordinary people like us? We've got to say, by the grace of God, we're going to be holy. And if there were a problem at the top, we would have to deal with it.

There is a sad story—I won't go into the details—of a number of assemblies scattered around the world. There was one man who sort of rose all the way to the top, and he wasn't a godly man. He basically had all these people reporting to him in one way or another, and he wasn't a good man. It broke the hearts and the lives of many. I was in an assembly once, and I asked who the people were; many of them had come out of that organization with broken hearts—half of their family over here, the other half of their family there. They said they couldn't stay there because this man at the top was not good.

There is a great responsibility upon us as the people of God to be what we ought to be. And so we pray. We don't just pray, "Lord, save Waldo." We pray, "Lord, preserve our brethren, and preserve me."

Again, I marvel at the grace of God in Ezra and those who were with him, but there were a lot of them with big problems. The priests first had a problem, the Levites had a problem, and then all the others had a problem. Why do you think there were so many after verse 25 of Israel? Answer: because I think they were encouraged and emboldened to go in the wrong direction because of what happened in the family of Jeshua, the high priest.

The Cost of Separation and the Call to the Cross

It is hard to go through all those names—114 minus the priests and the Levites. Other comments on those that were there?

Well, one comment we already talked about: this man Shechaniah in chapter 10, verse 2. His father, Jehiel—we read in verse 21 that Jehiel was one of the sons of Harim who had taken a strange wife. In his own family, Shechaniah's family was affected by it. But he was a brave man to speak up and say, "Look, all is not lost." He said to Ezra:

[Ezra 10:2-3 NKJV]

² And Shechaniah the son of Jehiel, one of the sons of Elam, spoke up and said to Ezra, "We have trespassed against our God, and have taken pagan wives from the peoples of the land; yet now there is hope in Israel in spite of this. ³ Now therefore, let us make a covenant with our God to put away all these wives and those who have been born to them, according to the advice of my master and of those who tremble at the commandment of our God; and let it be done according to the law.

Let everything be done decently. His advice was very good advice, even though his own family was affected by this, and it would affect very much his relationship to his family in suggesting such a thing. He was a very wise and courageous man to stand up and bolster, to strengthen Ezra and those that trembled at the word of God. A word of wisdom came forward from this man, Shechaniah.

The only other comment I would make on that list is that it's a very sad way to get your name written in the book of the Lord. I would rather my name be written down with one of David's mighty men than have my name listed among those! But these were repentant men. These were men that resolved truly, and at great personal cost, they followed the Lord.

In separation, there is a cost. The cross is what separates us from the world:

[Galatians 6:14 NKJV]

But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

There's a cost to it, and that cost is self—to deny self.

A truth that has been brought to me recently is this:

[1 John 1:7 NKJV]

But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

Amen! I am perfect before the Lord; I am justified freely from all things. But why was Jesus crucified on the cross? Why is the emphasis on the cross? The death of Christ was for my sin;

the cross was for my self. It was a place of shame. It was a place of ultimate separation from the world. If the world could give the lowest position in all the world, it would be the thief or the one that was crucified on the cross. That was the lowest death that could possibly be imagined in that Roman world, and that's where our self needs to end.

There's a big cost to it, but there is a great reward for that, isn't there? That is, of course, not only fellowship with the Lord, but glory as well—separated unto God through the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The Sovereignty of God: The Potter and the Clay

All right. Any other comments on the book of Ezra? It's been an interesting book. I must confess I had not studied it in any detail before; I say that to my shame, but I felt it was a beneficial study, and I learned a lot of important things there.

Yeah, I'd like to do, not a recap exactly, but we have been occupied in our study of the book of Ezra from the manward aspect of things. We've been looking at it from Zerubbabel, and Shealtiel, and Jeshua the high priest, and later on in chapters 7 to the end, Ezra, and how he and others with him affected the spiritual condition of the nation. But let's look at it for just a moment from God's point of view.

Who effected all this? Was it Zerubbabel, that faithful man? Was it Shealtiel? Was it Jeshua the high priest? Haggai? Zechariah? No. Really, God is all and in all. We want to look just for a brief moment at the sovereignty of God working among men in this whole return.

Go back to the first verse of our study of Ezra, just to refresh our memories:

[Ezra 1:1 NKJV]

Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and also put it in writing, saying,

When we look at this, who stirred up the spirit of the king of Persia? The Lord did. The Lord had named him 150 years before his birth; He had instigated this return.

Now, it was by the word of Jeremiah. If you go with me to Jeremiah chapter 25, verses 11 and 12:

[Jeremiah 25:11-12 NKJV]

¹¹ And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ¹² "Then it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, that I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity," says the LORD; "and I will make it a perpetual desolation.

It was carried out to the exact letter—a completely fulfilled prophecy, was it not? Jeremiah suffered a lot because of his testimony.

Turn over to chapter 29, and read from verse 10:

[Jeremiah 29:10 NKJV]

¹⁰ For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place.

There it is: the Lord brought them back. It's the Lord who initiated the whole thing, where He raised up men and women to return. Look at verse 11:

[Jeremiah 29:11-12 NKJV]

¹¹ For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you.

Daniel was one of those who prayed to Him with all his heart—Daniel in captivity all his life, serving under two great administrations, the Babylonians and the Persians.

[Jeremiah 29:13-14 NKJV]

¹³ And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have

driven you, says the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.

"I will bring you back." It was the Lord working.

Now also, we have a passage in Jeremiah where he speaks in a parable about God's working in Israel. That's in Jeremiah chapter 18, the well-known portion of the potter and the clay. This parable illustrates God's working through Israel in all their failure and all their rebellion:

[Jeremiah 18:1-2 NKJV]

¹ The word which came to Jeremiah from the LORD, saying: ² "Arise and go down to the potter's house, and there I will cause you to hear My words."

They were going to be demonstrated with a picture of this man working at the potter's wheel:

[Jeremiah 18:3 NKJV]

³ Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel.

God is the potter; that's the parable here. Israel is the clay, and the wheel is history. We sometimes use that expression: "the wheel of history."

As an aside to that, Ezekiel saw a vision of the Lord, and one of the things he describes that neither Isaiah nor John in the book of Revelation describes when seeing the cherubim were these wheels—wheels within wheels. Those wheels within wheels are the sovereign governing principles of God in the universe itself. How complex it is that He can guide Sebastian's life to a tiny little bit, and at the same time, through our interaction, guide my life, and each one individually on the planet—eight billion people! He can keep track of everything that's going on; it's wheels within wheels. So that's just a little picture. The wheel really is history: round and round and round, with wheels within wheels where they interconnect.

[Jeremiah 18:4 NKJV]

⁴ And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make.

What was wrong with that clay? It did not conform to the hand. The little I know, my son Luke was a good potter, and sometimes clay, if it isn't prepared correctly, doesn't work properly. What you need to do is rework it: add more water, let it sit for a while, or drain it. These potters know the right consistency to make a pot. But somehow this clay was marred in the hand of the potter.

That's a picture of Israel. They were marred. God tried to form them into something, and they resisted; they rejected. The pot he's trying to make becomes misshapen and useless, so he takes it off the wheel, binds it together, and puts it aside. Then he can use it again: "So he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make."

That's a lovely thought, is it not?

Israel was called out in Abraham when the whole world had fallen into idolatry. God said, "I'm going to make you a great nation." That nation went down into Egypt, and what happened? It took on all the idols of Egypt; they were idolaters when they came out. Even though they were a redeemed people, they brought their idols with them, in their hearts at least. They were marred in the potter's hand.

So God redeems them, and at Sinai He attempts another vessel. He brings them into the Promised Land, and then they rebel; that vessel is marred again. At the exile, it's broken. But now the potter is working again! He's molding Israel again through Ezra, Zerubbabel, Jeshua the high priest, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, Nehemiah, and Mordecai. The Lord is working again to make a vessel.

Of course, when our Lord came, the vessel was marred. In 70 AD, they destroyed the temple, and they are dispersed to this day. But God is still going to make a vessel! When our Lord Jesus returns to this earth, they will be a vessel unto honor throughout all the millennial reign of Christ. He didn't throw that clay away; it can be reused if the clay behaves properly.

Clay in itself doesn't have a will, but certainly Israel has a will, and you and I have a will. The lesson there is very plain: when we fail, God does not cast us away. He'll take us, He'll rework the clay, He'll throw it back onto the wheel, and He'll make another pot—a pot for His glory, of beauty, honor, and usefulness. In our failure, He doesn't cast us away. He will make it again into another vessel. He doesn't give up on us! Isn't that lovely?

We were renewed at the cross. That's where we have our renewal: at the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we get away from Him and His cross, then we begin to live for self, and God cannot mold a vessel from self. It's got to be moldable clay that conforms to the hands of the potter.

You can call it an ESL lesson if you want, but it's an indication of the precision of Scripture. Verse 4 says: "And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter." The key phrase there is in the hand of the potter. Many people accuse God and say, "Who are You to tell me what to do? You made a big mistake, and You smash this down and build this again." Hang on a minute! The verse does not say the vessel was marred by the hands of the potter; it says the vessel was marred in the hands of the potter. The problem is not the potter; the problem is the clay.

We get to choose what kind of clay we're going to be. The key verse here is Pharaoh. The Lord says in Romans chapter 9:

[Romans 9:17 NKJV]

For the Scripture says to the Pharaoh, "For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I may show My power in you, and that My name may be declared in all the earth."

People say, "What a terrible God is that?" What was wrong with Pharaoh? He was marred! As clay, he said no. God said, "You're marred in My hand; I'm going to smash you down, and I'm going to put something else up."

Remember: God is good. If there's a problem, it's not God. He reserves the right to smash us down and put us back together the way He wants us. Don't be clay that is marred in the hands of the potter; be clay that is moldable by the hands of the potter.

Transition to Reconstruction: Nehemiah's Burden

Nehemiah chapter 1. We won't get far, but the first verses are interesting:

[Nehemiah 1:1-3 NKJV]

¹ The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. It came to pass in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the citadel, ² that Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews

who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. ³ And they said to me, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire."

You've just read the book of Ezra. Eric, can you tell us how many years it was between Ezra chapter 10 and Nehemiah chapter 1 according to your chronology?

"Well, it was about twelve years, something like that."

That's good. My chronology is more general; I would have said somewhere between ten and fifteen, so I guess we agree.

There was a marvelous work of God in Ezra chapter 10. Frankly, I would have assumed that the state in Jerusalem following that great movement of God would have been far better. What was the state twelve years after chapter 10? Pretty bad in Israel!

Here's the point that I want to make: God does great work. That particular temple that was constructed in the days of Ezra was modified, rebuilt, and beautified, but it was the same temple that our Lord entered hundreds of years later. Absolutely marvelous! But you know, it took a long time to build that temple. God does wonderful work, but we've got to be patient to recognize that He does His work on His schedule, not on mine. I go back to myself and say, "Harold, quit being impatient with God. He's doing a great work, but it'll take Him a while to get there."

I would have assumed that the enthusiasm that went through the nation as a result of Ezra chapter 10 would have meant that the wall and the gates would have been in great shape. What did they do in those last twelve years? I think a lot of them spent a lot of time trying to put their families back together again. The problem was great, and the fact that they dealt with it was wonderful, but just because you've dealt with the problem doesn't mean the implications are all going to go away.

It's true in our day today. The Lord's working in your life; the Lord's working in my life. Something happens today, and I say, "I expected the Lord would deliver me from this." And I say, "Hang on, Harold. God is doing His great work, and it's going to work out far more wonderfully than if He solved it yesterday afternoon." He may solve it in twenty years; He may solve it in fifty years; it may take Him five hundred years to solve it. He'll do the great work! Don't become impatient when problems arise.

A great solution comes up, you say "Hallelujah," and you get out of bed the next morning and say, "All right, Lord, I've got to go keep working on that." Nehemiah is going to come down, and they're going to rebuild that wall, but it took the grace of God to rebuild it and put the gates up. It's a big revival for the next phase, and the next phase, and the next phase. God isn't finished just because there was a great movement there.

It's especially true in family breakdown and assembly breakdown. To rebuild is not always easy. Some people say, "Oh, well, I'll just do this, and everything will be fine." Hang on! In families, you can do this, but everything won't be fine immediately. Do you have stories in your family? Because we have stories in our family—disasters that came, and you think everything's solved, and it isn't solved. Especially that's true in a spiritual sense. The assembly can fall apart, and individuals in the assembly can be terribly hurt by situations that shouldn't have happened in the first place. Even though they were dealt with, the heartache and the repercussion go on.

What do you do? You don't say, "We'll give up on it." You say, "Lord, would You please keep working? Would You restore this person, that person, this family, that family, this work, that work? Lord, keep working." Praise the Lord for blessing yesterday, but there's more to be done today.

Nehemiah says there's more to be done. I think he was disappointed. He probably had heard good things about what happened in the days of Ezra, and along comes Hanani, one of his brethren, with several others from Jerusalem. He asks them, and they tell him: "The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach."

It's like going to the doctor. The doctor gives you some pills; you say, "Thank you, doctor," and for two days you feel really great. Then you've got something else! You go back to the doctor again, and he says, "Well, what you have is this. We cured that, but there's another implication." After a while, you say, "I never should have gotten myself into trouble in the first place!"

So what is Nehemiah going to do about it?

[Nehemiah 1:4 NKJV]

So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

You read that, and you say, "Hallelujah!" That's what Ezra did. When he heard the problem, he did the same thing. Do you think Nehemiah knew what to do because Ezra had laid a

precedent for him? Nehemiah would have heard what Ezra did. And so when the problem comes, he says, "This is what Ezra did; I think that's what I'm going to do."

This great and wonderful man Nehemiah heard about it and wept. Others heard about it and may have said all kinds of things; Nehemiah heard about it and wept, and he mourned for days. Is it possible that our repentance is too short? Is it possible that our prayer life is too short? Is it possible that we say, "Lord, that hurts; I expect You to cure it by tomorrow morning"?

The Lord said, "Nehemiah, this is a big problem." Nehemiah wept, he fasted, and he prayed. Ezra had fasted. I think Nehemiah learned a lot from Ezra, and he took it seriously.

The book of Ezra is a book of restoration. The book of Nehemiah we could call the book of reconstruction. When we open up the book of Nehemiah, we see a lot of opposition. We find Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab—these three enemies of the work of God who seem to have a tremendous amount of power.

Over the dozen years or so since Ezra, the spiritual foundation had already been laid by Ezra. The same people that were affected by the reforms of Ezra were those that picked up the hammer and trowel with Nehemiah. The reforms under Ezra were a reform of the heart for the people of God. And now when Nehemiah gives them a call to build, the people rise up: "Let us rise up and build," they say.

Ezra laid the spiritual foundation. Nehemiah is a very practical man; he sees the fact that Israel needs to be protected from the outside, that they were exposed. They needed physical separation—a place where their center of worship and their gatherings together could be secure.

When Hanani came with men from Judah, he gave a full report on the restoration that had taken place under Ezra, but also that they were in great distress. It would seem there had been a growing opposition from Satan to try and squelch this restoration. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem—these pagans knew about the 114 pagan wives that had been sent back, and they were none too pleased about the situation. They began to pressure the people there.

Nehemiah, farsighted as he was, was a different man altogether than Ezra. God uses all kinds of vessels, and He needs all kinds of vessels. There was only one man that ever lived that was a jack of all trades and a master of them all, and that was our Lord Jesus Christ. Each of us has our gifts, and so we build upon each other's work.

Under Ezra, they fell on their faces, tore their clothes, wept, and were restored, separated unto God. Then under Nehemiah, they can rise up and build. As in 1 Thessalonians: you turn

to God from idols to serve the living and true God. In Ezra, they turned to God from their idols; in Nehemiah, they serve the living and true God.

The rest of Nehemiah chapter 1 is about the prayer of Nehemiah. It's interesting that the prayer of Nehemiah is very like the prayer of Ezra, and very like the prayer of Daniel. All three of them were written from the great distress of the children of Israel, from the background of the punishment of the people of God under the Lord's hand and the restoration therefrom.

Ezra prays that the Lord will enable them to accomplish something, and that's what happens. Nehemiah prays that the Lord will do something. Daniel prays, and the Lord reveals to him the prophecies of the history of the world in the end times. All three of these men saw the problem and cried to the Lord, and the Lord gave each of them a different vision to lay the foundation for that which one day is going to be very great.

Do you ever get discouraged? You look around and say, "Wow, there's great affliction and reproach here." What are you going to do? Nehemiah saw that, Ezra saw that, Daniel saw that, and they prayed and prayed. God answered all their prayers in different ways, but He answered all their prayers. What are we going to do? We're going to keep on praying, and the Lord is going to answer all our prayers.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father, we thank You so much for Your love to us. We thank You for just how good You are to us, how faithful, and Your everlasting mercy to us. We praise You for this time that we've had tonight in Your Word and all that You've shown us and encouraged us in. We're grateful.

We just ask that You be with us this week as we go. We think of those conferences, Lord—be with that conference, be with all who go, be with the speakers, and do a great work that week. And the conference at North Surrey, Lord, the same thing: prepare it, bring people, and speak in a mighty way, especially to the youth. Bring the young people, revive them, and do an amazing work in their lives for You.

We thank You again for all the work that You do, all the ministries here that You do. As we come into September and things start up again, we just ask that You would do a work that we've never seen before. We ask that You protect each of Your ministries, protect each one involved, encourage each one, and overflow the doors with people to come and hear Your Word and be saved.

All of the ministries, Lord—with ESL coming up, provide the teachers, be with each one of them, and do a great work where You will be seen and all the glory goes to You.

We think of our youth and praise You for them. We ask that You protect them as they go to school on Tuesday for their first week back in school. Protect all ages, and we think especially of the ones who are going to be in their first year of university, Lord, with the shock and the difference and the ways that the university tries to take them. Protect them, and do a great work in all of the lives of our youth.

We praise You as we've heard that You're the Potter, and that You don't give up on us—that You continue to work and build as seems good to You. Your will be done with us. Keep us as we go, protect us, and draw us close to You.

In Jesus' name, amen.