

Under The Fig Tree



WEEK 40

We are coming to the end of the Book of Nehemiah. Ezra read the Torah and gave understanding to God's teaching. Judah had been in Babylon for 70 long years and the remnant was now back in the Land, with the Temple rebuilt and the wall. There was still need to complete the rebuilding of the houses and settle fully into the order of life. What was in the heart of the people? Certainly a resolve to be begin again, and be restored to the best that they remembered from their history, going back to the Patriarchs and to the time of the good Kings. It was the time of Sukkot. Imagine all the temporary booths set up in Jerusalem to remind the Jews of the journey through the wilderness. Sukkot comes in the seventh month, the month of *Tishrei*, a word that means *New Beginning*.

Before completing our reading of Nehemiah, let us continue in the Psalms. This will help us to understand something of the situation of the Jews now back in their Land, and also allow us to complete our reading from the Book of Psalms. See what the Holy Spirit says to you through your reading of the Psalms in context of Judah's return from exile. The Psalms cover every aspect of life, from difficult times through to times of victory, from the valleys to the mountain-tops, as it were. They were sung in the Temple and in the home. They are still the foundation of the worship of God's people in all circumstances. As well as being relevant to our studies in Nehemiah, perhaps you will find points of meditation on Yeshua and the New Covenant, on the return of Israel to their Land in our day, and on the soon return of Yeshua to establish His Everlasting Kingdom.

Day 1

Psalms 81, 82, 83, 84.

Day 2

Psalms 85, 87, 88, 90. Psalm 90 was written by Moses.

Day 3

Psalms 91, 92, 93, 94. Psalm 92 was traditionally used on the Sabbath Day.

Day 4

Psalms 95, 97, 98, 99, 100.

Day 5

Psalms 102, 104, 106, 111.

Day 6

Let us now complete our study of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah Chapter 9. The life of God's people is based on a yearly cycle centred on the Feasts of the Lord. A main purpose of the Feasts is to remember what God has done. To look back in this way helps us to look forward with renewed faith. Looking back inevitably brings confession because we bring to mind those times when, despite God's faithfulness, we strayed from the path. We also take an overview of the past. As we go through each day of our lives we do not always appreciate clearly what God is doing. Only in hindsight can we assess the full picture. Therefore, it was appropriate for the Jews to end their celebration of the Feast of Sukkot with a reflection on all God had done through their history.

What would we put in our review today? The Christian Church, generally, only goes back in its memory to the time that Yeshua paid the price for our sins. We don't tend to go back further if we don't understand our grafting into the faithful remnant of Israel. Our foundations go back to the Creation, and also to the Covenants with Noah and Abraham. When Ruth said to Naomi, *your people shall be my people and your God, my God* (Ruth 1:17), she became a Jew. She was no longer a Moabitess. Christians are grafted into the Olive Tree of the Israel of God, those physical descendants of Abraham who live by faith through the atoning Blood of Yeshua. In this sense, we are part of the believing remnant that has emerged throughout Covenant history. This has spiritual connotations, of course. Nevertheless, grafting into a community of people means that we enter into their history. We are not grafted into the Jews of Ezra's day, but into the faithful remnant gathered for the Eternal Kingdom, which is illustrated through the 144,000 in Revelation 7. We might not say exactly the same words of remembrance that we find in Nehemiah 9 but, with a slight modification, this review of Covenant history is the beginning of our personal remembrance of the history of *our family of faith*.

How would we complete this review of our history as the grafted in Covenant branches? We would add what God did for us through Yeshua and the gift of the Holy Spirit, and how He has formed a people for Himself out of every nation, looking forward to His imminent return.

The Jews have added to *Simchat Torah* the Feast of Sukkot. This reminds us of the days when Ezra led the people to a review of God's faithfulness through history. *Simchat Torah* means *rejoicing over the Torah*. This celebration is held on the 23rd day of the month of *Tishrei*. The Torah Scroll is paraded around the Synagogue so that all might touch it as a symbolical act of remembrance and appreciation of God's great gift. The history of Israel is embedded in the Torah, and Yeshua is the living fulfillment of its intent and purpose. On 24th Day of Tishrei the cycle of Torah readings begins again for the year in Jewish communities. Each week a portion of Torah is read in Jewish homes and in the Synagogues, so that the Five Books of Moses are read through each year. This goes back to ancient times and it is thought that Ezra was the initiator of the tradition.

Chapters 10 to 13. Ezra, the Scribe, taught the people: Nehemiah organized the community. Complete your reading of the Book, noting how Nehemiah established order in every area the community. The Covenant was renewed (Chapter 10, Verse 29), remembering Moses' instructions that Torah was to be known *and* understood. The Hebrew word for *know* is *yada*. The meaning is more than head knowledge: relationship is implied. It is the same word that associated with the intimate relationship between a man and his wife. Torah was to be internalized, therefore, its outworking being a result of intimate relationship between the Torah and the character of a person. This was a shadow of the New Covenant relationship with God through the Holy Spirit, who writes the Torah on our hearts.

The idea of *halakhah*, thought to go back to Ezra, is whereby the Torah is studied and then *walked out* in life. It was the nature of the new commitment made in Nehemiah 10:29, restating also the curse and blessing of the law, according to Deuteronomy 28. This, we now know, led to further trouble for the Jews when the Torah was broken in later days, showing, once more, the need of the New Covenant. Nevertheless, at the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, the renewal of the Covenant took place in a serious and meaningful way by those who signed the document. The principle of *halakhah* has given rise, in Judaism, to a large volume of books, especially the *Mishnah* and the *Talmud*. In their efforts to maintain the resolve of their forefathers at the time of Ezra, the Jews have carefully codified practical application of Torah. The result has been to bring a legal dryness rather than the life of the Spirit. Even so, we must recognize the great efforts that have been made to please God following the sad exile that took place in those days. We must have all this in mind as we consider the work of Ezra and Nehemiah. The wall was dedicated, the Temple restored and matters of discipline enforced so that Judah might have a blessed start to their life in the Promised Land. The discipline was enforced as firmly as when Nehemiah plucked out the hair some of those who had married outside the community (Chapter 13, Verse 25) and ejected Tobiah from the room in the Temple (Chapter 13, Verse 8). All this was done with humility towards God, expressed in Nehemiah's prayer: *Remember me, O my God, for good!* (Chapter 13, Verse 30). Can you sense the heartfelt sigh of Nehemiah, as he accomplished these difficult tasks?

Day 7

A Day for Rest and Further Reflection

We have completed our reading of the Tanach (Old Testament). Spend some time reflecting on the vast scope of what we have studied. This is the milieu from which Yeshua came, and out of which came the New Covenant. The New Covenant does not replace the promises given to Abraham, nor does it replace Torah. Instead, it enables the Covenant with Abraham and fulfills the meaning of Torah. We completed our study of the Tanach with Ezra and Nehemiah. In addition to the historical accounts, we see shadows pointing to our day and to the days ahead. Ezra and Nehemiah are types of Yeshua, who will establish Jerusalem perfectly on His return. We wait to see the manner in which this will be done. Our study of the return from exile is also relevant to the return of the Jews in our day. The reestablishment of Jerusalem in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah was not permanent, as we understand from the Gospels and their history since then. Ezra and Nehemiah went back to Jerusalem with gifts and provisions from the Persian Empire. They were never free of control from the prominent empires of the world. Greece followed Persia and Rome followed Greece. In our day there is still dependence by Israel on the gifts and good will of the powerful nations of the world.

Jerusalem will not be finally established until there is dependence on God alone. This will not happen until the return of Yeshua. Peter spoke of Yeshua in this way (Acts 3:21): *whom heaven must receive until the time of restoration of all things, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began*. The return from exile in Ezra's day is part of God's continuing teaching concerning an even greater event that is necessary, and will one day happen – the return of Yeshua. We cannot establish Jerusalem nor indeed any world system without Him. We will not Christianize the world nor completely establish Jerusalem. For the Kingdom to come in fully, the King must return. This will be the true climax of the ages: the true hope of Israel and all who have faith in the God of Israel through Yeshua's sacrifice for us.

Read again the Prophecy of Malachi. We read it before in a different context. Let us now review it in our present context prior to our fuller study of the New Testament. Malachi was the last of the Old Testament Prophets. His Prophecy was in approximately 433 BC, only 12 years after the return of Nehemiah. Already corruption had come into the Priesthood. They were maintaining Temple rituals but without a heart response to God. Blemished tithes and offerings were a symptom of coldness towards God. As a consequence, family life was also breaking down in the nation. The same heart that divorces a man from God is manifest in his divorce from his wife. Malachi, once more, brought stern warnings to Judah. He also prophesied the coming of Yeshua, both at the time of the Romans and in the end times, called the *Day of the Lord*, by several of the Prophets. The Greek Empire rose soon after the time of Malachi, followed by the Roman Empire - which was the context of Yeshua's first coming to earth.
