

# Return and Rebuilding

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## Nehemiah 8:1-12

### - Introduction

- One of the ways in which the enemy tries to blind us as believers is to remind us of all the sins we've committed. At times I've found myself remaining in the guilt and shame of my own sin. It's one of those things where you feel convicted, you go to the altar and pray with the intention of leaving it at the altar, but in reality you've picked it back up again. There has to be a moment in a believer's life in when guilt and shame are diminished by the truth that there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ. When the Holy Spirit convicts, it's good to mourn over the sin being revealed...but don't stay there, because God is rejoicing over you through the work of Christ on the cross.

### - Discussion Questions

- Mourning is a Right Response to Understanding the Law of God
  - Why would the Israelites weep or mourn during the reading of the law? Should we today weep when we come to an understanding of the law?
  - How can we tell conviction from guilt over our sin, and how do we respond differently to each one? What does it look like to mourn rightly in the face of the law?
  - The People took initiative to bring about spiritual revival, how might we do the same in our personal lives and in the Church?
- The Lord is Our Strength
  - How do we balance conviction of sin and joy in Christ? How do we move past conviction and into joy?
  - The Israelites worshiped the Lord in accordance to Old Testament law. Are we in need of recovering the Old Testament law and rituals in the church today? Why or why not?
  - How do we rely on the joy of the Lord as our strength in mourning, or in joyless times? What does it look like?
- God Always Turns Mourning into Joy
  - What in the Christian experience is comparable to the reading of the law in the time of Nehemiah? What does this passage tell us about the church today?

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- Some things in life are so bad that it seems that no future circumstance would be able to make it right—for example, the horror of war, or losing a loved one; even if people are raised again, you still had to experience the violence and loss. What is our hope as Christians when things go irreparably wrong, or are incurably lost?
- Sometimes we feel as though we do not deserve joy or happiness in our lives because of who we are or what we've done. What do the Scriptures have to say to that kind of thought?
- Leader Prep Help
  - Nehemiah and Ezra were originally a single book, probably with the same author, kind of like Luke and Acts in the New Testament, so we can take those two books as a kind of continuous narrative, although there is obviously some overlap in the content of the two books. When the account opens, we find the people of God having been in exile first in Babylon, then Persia, for generations, but they still long for the fulfillment of the promises of God, to dwell in the land with their God forever, in peace. In that way, the return described in Ezra-Nehemiah is a long-awaited fulfillment of the promises of the Lord, a restoration of fortune, much like the resurrection and restoration of creation in which we, as Christians, place our faith. I would encourage you to see the return narrative as a promise that God will return and redeem our people in much the same way.
  - On the surface, we might want to praise the Persian emperor for allowing Israel to return and rebuild the capital city—it seems like a benevolent act—but most likely the emperor was concerned about ongoing struggle with Egypt, and he wanted Israel to serve as a kind of buffer between the two nations, putting Israel in an extremely dangerous position. Ezra's and Nehemiah's intentions in returning, though, are quite different. Their desire is for the restoration of the worship of the Lord back to rights, and the rebuilding of their city and people. We see this in the order in which they rebuild—first, an altar to offer sacrifices to God, then the wall. This shows a deep dependence upon God, even desperation for him, and ultimate concern for the restoration of relationship with him. This difference in motive between God's people and the empire typifies the differences in concerns of the world and people who seek the kingdom of God.
  - Interestingly, as Ezra and Nehemiah recover the law for their people, they are recovering it for us as well. As impossible as it sounds, many of the Scriptures predating this period were lost in the conquering and dispersion, and we may not have large portions of the Old Testament today were the people of God in this time period not so passionate about reading and keeping the law.

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- In reading the Bible, it's often helpful to attempt to explain what's said to someone else without using the actual language of Scripture—like how you aren't supposed to use a word in its own definition. This is especially helpful with popular passages, which we might hear over and over again. They may start to lose meaning in repetition. In this passage, for example, what does it mean that the joy of the Lord is our strength? Our strength for what—what do we need strength for, or why did the people in the passage need strength in that moment? And when we figure out why we need strength, begin to ask in what way is God that strength? How can God be strength for us?
- “Heaven, once attained, will work backwards and turn even agony into a glory”-C. S. Lewis