

BIBLE CHALLENGE

A 1 week study of the books of Nehemiah and Jonah

The story so far: A new challenge now faced the returned exiles. How would they maintain their sense of identity as God's chosen people in a land that was under foreign rule? The time of David and Solomon was long over; though they had been allowed to return to Jerusalem, those returning to Jerusalem were no longer a nation but a people ruled by a foreign power (Persia). The locals who already populated the area when the exiles returned no longer held to faith in the God of Israel and Judah, presenting a danger that God's people would be permanently assimilated into the surrounding culture through intermarriage. What would prevent them over time from losing their self-identity?

Ezra and Nehemiah set out to rebuild God's people just as certainly as they would rebuild the temple and the city. Last week we read of how the rebuilding of the temple began, but then faltered along the way. As we begin this week, the temple has been completed (Ezra 6:14-15). The year is 515 BC.

Monday:

Read: Nehemiah 2:1-6, 10-20, 4:6-9, 6:15-16

What to look for:

- It is now about 70 years after the completion of the new temple, about 445 BC.
- When we first come across Nehemiah, he is a servant in the Persian court, having not initially returned with the exiles to Jerusalem. Nehemiah hears of the difficult situation in Jerusalem and asks the Persian king for permission to go to his people with the goal of rebuilding the city walls. Upon returning Nehemiah surveys the ruined state of the wall and instigates its rebuilding.
- Opposition arises from local officials: Sanballat (2:10) is the regional governor. Their fear is that if the Jews were truly dependent upon Persia for their security they would need no city wall, however, if they are rebuilding the wall perhaps that meant that they might in the future attempt to engage in resistance to the Persian occupation.

Tuesday:

Read: Nehemiah 8:1-6, 9-10, 18, 9:1-3, 38, 10:29-32, 39b

What to look for:

- This scene takes place following the completion of Jerusalem's walls. Ezra is inviting the people to see that what will distinguish them from the people around them is that they will be people of the Law.

- The section from 9:5 to 10:37 is a confession of faith, recalling the manner in which over the centuries God has acted for his people.
- Upon hearing the Law read, the people pledge themselves to some specific responses: They will obey God's Law (10:29); avoid intermarriage with locals so as not to dilute their national identity (10:30); the Sabbath will receive special attention as a means for setting them apart from other people (10:31); and they will support the temple (10:32). The Law and the temple will now come to be the defining characteristics of God's people for centuries to come (into and beyond the New Testament).

Wednesday:

Read: Jonah 1

What to look for:

- Ezra and Nehemiah tried to give God's people a distinctive identity by defining them in exclusive terms, i.e. as people who followed the Law, observed the Sabbath, and did not intermarry with people outside of their own conclave. The book of Jonah, however, balances that impulse in that it is the story of a prophet who has a mission specifically *to* those who are not a part of God's people.
- In vs. 1-3 Jonah is told to go to Nineveh, which was the capital of Assyria. You remember them: Assyria was the empire that overthrew the northern kingdom and threatened the south – clearly not the most sympathetic characters. No wonder Jonah did not want to go to them. Jonah wants no part of God's desire to save these people who so obviously do not deserve his mercy. So Jonah heads for Tarshish which was probably on the coast of Spain...as far in the opposite direction as he could go.
- Note who is praying in vs. 3-5. Jonah goes to take a nap; it is the pagan sailors who turn to their gods.
- Note that in vs. 13 the sailors' first impulse is to try to save Jonah. Jonah still is not praying but in vs. 14 the sailors now pray to God and by vs. 16 they have converted to faith in God, all this despite the fact that Jonah has done nothing himself to facilitate it.

Thursday:

Read: Jonah 2:1-2, 10-3:10

What to look for:

- Finally Jonah begins to pray from inside the fish, a prayer of thanksgiving to God for having graciously delivered him.
- In chapter 3, Jonah obeys God, and once again makes a great number of converts despite his seeming lack of interest. The entire city comes to believe in God after a sermon from Jonah that is only a single sentence long. (3:4).
- Note how profoundly God wants to save and love these people (3:10) despite their wickedness.

Friday:

Read: Jonah 4

What to look for:

- In chapter 4 we get Jonah's reaction to God's mercy for Nineveh. After God saved Jonah he prayed a prayer of thanks (2:1ff), but note his response in 4:1 when God decides to save Nineveh. Jonah is angry because God is merciful to people whom Jonah believes do not deserve it. Jonah is also angry (4:2) because God is soft-hearted, i.e. "slow to anger" and "abounding in love".
- In 4:5-11 God provides Jonah an object lesson in the form of a bush that grows up to shelter Jonah from the intensity of a broiling sun, only to die leaving Jonah exposed to the sun once again. God's challenge to Jonah is how Jonah could be so worked up over the loss of a bush that offered him a little comfort and yet be so indifferent to the plight of an entire city.
- Note how the book ends – with a question. The question invites the reader to become involved with the meaning of the story: Is it right that others outside of God's chosen people, even those whose sin and evil and lack of faith in God has been as noteworthy as that of the Ninevites, to hear the word of the Lord? Should they be given the opportunity to come to faith? The book of Jonah serves as a reminder of the responsibility of God's people to invite others to come to know God. That was why God's people had been set apart in the first place way back in God's covenant with Abraham, that through them the whole world would be blessed.