

Bible Reading Schedule The Golden Thread

June 19 – Ezra 9:1 – 10: 17

Building the temple was just the first step in once again bringing the worship of God to prominence in Israel. After all, what good is the temple if the people are going to continue to live in sin? As part of God's plan, after the temple is built God brings a priest with a backbone to come and confront the returning exiles about their sin. Before we go on, let's make sure we understand what the sin is that the returning exiles are guilty of. When God called Israel, and brought them into the Promised Land, He told them that they were to be holy and separate from the people who lived around them. The neighboring countries all worshipped idols, and the Israelites were called to worship only the true and living God. As the Israelites came into the Promised Land, God had put in place prohibitions against intermarrying with those from these nations that worshipped idols.

Deuteronomy 7:1-4 *When the LORD your God brings you into the land you are entering to possess and drives out before you many nations-- the Hittites, Girgashites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, seven nations larger and stronger than you-- ² and when the LORD your God has delivered them over to you and you have defeated them, then you must destroy them totally. Make no treaty with them, and show them no mercy. ³ Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.*

Now stop and consider what it was that got the Israelites into trouble and caused them to be carried off into exile? It was idol worship; idol worship that began to take root during Solomon's reign as he married foreign wives and began to worship their idols.

1 Kings 11:1-8 *King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter-- Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites. ² They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love. ³ He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray. ⁴ As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been. ⁵ He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. ⁶ So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD; he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had*

done. ⁷ On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites. ⁸ He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods.

This, by the way, is the same reason that in the New Testament Paul insists that believers should only marry other believers.

2 Corinthians 6:14-18 *Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ¹⁵ What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶ What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people." ¹⁷ "Therefore come out from them and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." ¹⁸ "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."*

Now as you consider this you can understand why Ezra was so distraught that the returning exiles had taken foreigners to be their wives. It was not about ethnicity, or race, it was about loving and serving the true and living God. But the action that Ezra demands the Israelites take still seems extreme to us. He makes them separate from their foreign wives. Why such an extreme measure? Because the Israelites were just now recovering from the punishment God had inflicted on them for doing the same thing in a previous generation. Ezra wants to remove anything that may cause the Israelites to fall back into idol worship. True repentance means that you work to separate yourself from the things that lead you to sin.

Matthew 5:29-32 *If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰ And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell. ³¹ "It has been said, 'Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.' ³² But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.*

The Bible clearly teaches that divorce is wrong, that why it is important to carefully consider who we will marry, but at the same time God demands our absolute obedience to Him, and anything that stands in the way of that must be set aside. Our number one allegiance must always to be to God.

Luke 14:26-27 *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-- yes, even his own life--*

he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ And anyone who does not carry his cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.

What Jesus is teaching us in these verses is the same thing Ezra was teaching the Israelites. Commitment to Jesus/God must come before all else. If we are not willing to forsake everything for the sake of the cross, we really aren't followers of Jesus.

June 20 – Nehemiah 1: 1 – 2: 6

The Book of Ezra focused on the efforts to rebuild the temple, but even after the temple was built Jerusalem still had problems. The wall surrounding the city had been torn down by the Babylonians and the debris was piled everywhere. The city is a disgrace (verse 3). Nehemiah is a Jew who has become an important person in the court of King Artaxerxes, the king of Persia. He is part of the king's inner circle. He is the cupbearer for the king. His job was to select the king's wine and make sure it was fit to drink. It's a good life, a comfortable life, a life that would be easy to just sit back and relax in, but as Nehemiah hears this news about his people it moves him to act.

You can see how much Nehemiah cares for his people in the way he reacts. Verse 4 tells us he wept and mourned over the situation in Jerusalem. You may recall Jesus did the same thing. Nehemiah wept over the destruction that had already come to Jerusalem as a result of the Babylonian invasion. Jesus wept over the destruction that was to come on Jerusalem as a result of the Roman invasion that came because the Jews rejected Jesus as messiah.

Luke 19:41-44 *As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it ⁴² and said, "If you, even you, had only known on this day what would bring you peace-- but now it is hidden from your eyes. ⁴³ The days will come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment against you and encircle you and hem you in on every side. ⁴⁴ They will dash you to the ground, you and the children within your walls. They will not leave one stone on another, because you did not recognize the time of God's coming to you."*

But Nehemiah didn't just weep he also prayed and fasted for his people, and then he risked everything by going to the king and asking if he could go and help his people. Do you see a picture of Jesus in Nehemiah? Both left the courts of the King to go and bring healing and help to the people they loved. Nehemiah risked his place in the court to save the people of Jerusalem from their disgrace; Jesus risked everything to save us from the disgrace and shame of our sin.

Are you weeping for those who are lost who don't know Jesus as savior? Are you fasting and praying for their souls to be saved? Are you risking everything to bring the good news of the Gospel to their lives?

June 21 – Nehemiah 4

As we saw in the last reading, Nehemiah was sent by King Artaxerxes to repair the walls around Jerusalem, but even with the king's blessing Nehemiah still faced opposition to his work from the Arabs who had controlled this region prior to the return of the Jews. These Arabs opposed the rebuilding of the temple under Ezra and now they oppose Nehemiah. Just as the Palestinians of today are opposing the efforts of the Jews to rebuild Jerusalem, there was opposition from the Arabs to Nehemiah coming to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem—some things never change! They began their opposition by making fun of Nehemiah's efforts (verses 1 – 3), then they turned to the threat of direct attack (verses 12 – 20). This is very similar to the opposition Jesus would face as he began his own ministry 400 years later. You may recall that the Jews mocked Jesus for his claim to be the Son of God, and they even implied that Jesus was an illegitimate child

John 8:45-53 Yet because I tell the truth, you do not believe me! ⁴⁶ Can any of you prove me guilty of sin? If I am telling the truth, why don't you believe me? ⁴⁷ He who belongs to God hears what God says. The reason you do not hear is that you do not belong to God." ⁴⁸ The Jews answered him, "Aren't we right in saying that you are a Samaritan and demon-possessed?" ⁴⁹ "I am not possessed by a demon," said Jesus, "but I honor my Father and you dishonor me. ⁵⁰ I am not seeking glory for myself; but there is one who seeks it, and he is the judge. ⁵¹ I tell you the truth, if anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." ⁵² At this the Jews exclaimed, "Now we know that you are demon-possessed! Abraham died and so did the prophets, yet you say that if anyone keeps your word, he will never taste death. ⁵³ Are you greater than our father Abraham? He died, and so did the prophets. Who do you think you are?"

Just as the "world" hated Nehemiah's efforts to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and the "world" hated Jesus, Jesus tells us that we should expect the world to hate us as well.

John 15:18-21 "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. ¹⁹ If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. ²¹ They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.

Sometimes we can get so distracted by what the “world” thinks of us and thinks of what we are doing that we fail to carry out the mission that God has for us to do. Neither Nehemiah, nor Jesus, allowed the opinions and opposition of others to keep them from doing what God had called them to do.

1 John 2:15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.

Hebrews 12:2-3 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. ³ Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

June 22 – Nehemiah 5

Because everything was so unsettled as the Israelites returned to the Promised Land, there was more to do than just to rebuild the walls of the city. The economy was in a shambles as well. From these verses it sounds like people were in debt up to their eyeballs (sound familiar?), and there were some of their fellow countrymen who were taking advantage of them. In order to make ends meet, these people had to mortgage their fields and then when the debt came due they were unable to repay it because of the bad economic conditions. This resulted in their children being taken and sold into slavery. The Law of Moses forbade the charging of interest to a fellow Israelite.

Exodus 22:25-27 "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest. ²⁶ If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, ²⁷ because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.

So what the officials and nobles were doing was clearly wrong. Nehemiah stood up to them and confronted them over their sin. Think how much easier it would have been for Nehemiah to sit back and think, “Well these are important people and I better not ruffle their feathers. I feel bad for the poor, but there are so many other more pressing issues I can’t get sidetracked with this.”

James 2:1-10 *My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. ² Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. ³ If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, "Here's a good seat for you," but say to the poor man, "You stand there" or "Sit on the*

floor by my feet," ⁴ have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? ⁵ Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him? ⁶ But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into court? ⁷ Are they not the ones who are slandering the noble name of him to whom you belong? ⁸ If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself," you are doing right. ⁹ But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. ¹⁰ For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

That would have been the easy way out, but it wasn't the way Nehemiah took, because he knew God was concerned for the poor, and he knew that if he did not speak up for them no one else would.

Proverbs 31:8-9 *"Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. ⁹ Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."*

Jesus calls us to remember the poor and to not be so in love with our stuff that we hold on to it tighter than we hold onto Jesus.

Luke 11:39-41 *Then the Lord said to him, "Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness. ⁴⁰ You foolish people! Did not the one who made the outside make the inside also? ⁴¹ But give what is inside the dish to the poor, and everything will be clean for you."*

The Pharisees were so consumed with outward righteousness and being religious that they overlooked the poor. What Jesus is saying to them in Luke 11 is that their failure to look out for the poor makes their religion worthless in God's eyes.

Luke 12:31-34 *But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well. ³² "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will not be exhausted, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

June 23 – Nehemiah 8

In this passage, the people are gathered to celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles. During this celebration the people are reminded of how God cared for their forefathers as they wandered in the desert on their Exodus from Egypt. But they are also reminded that during the exodus

God gave Moses the Law. As you read this passage, it is clear that the Israelites are filled with mixed emotions. On the one hand the people are joyfully praising God as they remember His greatness and that He provided for their forefathers, and yet on the other, as the Law is read to them and they are confronted with their sin, they wail and mourn. It seems to be an odd combination, but that is what happens as we see God for what He really is and we see ourselves for what we really are. When we see the greatness and glory of God we can't help but praise him, but as we see His greatness and His holiness we are also reminded of our sinfulness. This is exactly what needs to happen to us in order to understand and truly appreciate all that Jesus has done for us.

There is a very important lesson here for us. If we don't see the greatness of God and our own sinfulness, we will be tempted to think that somehow we are like Him and we don't need Him in our lives. That's why we constantly need to be led to worship God and see Him for what He is. We need to tell each other what God has done in our lives, so that His greatness isn't just some abstract thought, but instead is a concrete reality in our lives.

Psalm 145:2-7 *Every day I will praise you and extol your name for ever and ever. ³ Great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; his greatness no one can fathom. ⁴ One generation will commend your works to another; they will tell of your mighty acts. ⁵ They will speak of the glorious splendor of your majesty, and I will meditate on your wonderful works. ⁶ They will tell of the power of your awesome works, and I will proclaim your great deeds. ⁷ They will celebrate your abundant goodness and joyfully sing of your righteousness.*

But we also need to see and understand our sinfulness and that is where the Law comes into play.

Galatians 3:24 *So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith.*

The Law isn't the means by which we gain righteousness, but rather it is the means by which we gain Christ. Without the Law, we wouldn't know what sin was or how sinful we are. Without the Law we would not see our deep need for Jesus.

Galatians 2:16-17 *know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.*

Seeing God's glory and God's holiness, and seeing your sinfulness, where would you be without Jesus?

Romans 7:24-25 *What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God-- through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

June 24 – Nehemiah 9, 10: 28 - 39

In yesterday's reading we saw the Israelites being confronted with their sinfulness as they stood before a holy God and His law. There have been severe consequences for their sin. The Israelites have lost their land and been taken into exile. God has graciously allowed them to return to the land, and rebuild the temple and city, but the fact is they are still enslaved to foreign kings (verses 36 – 37). In today's reading, faced with this reality, the Israelites do the only thing they can do—they acknowledge who God is and admit their guilt and confess their sin and plead for God's mercy.

It is often so hard for us to have to admit that we are wrong, but that is the first thing that has to happen for us to have a restored relationship with God.

James 4:8-10 *Come near to God and he will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. ⁹ Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. ¹⁰ Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up.*

It is our unwillingness to confess our sins that causes our hearts to grow hard and cold. Rather than admitting our guilt we seek to blame others as Adam did with Eve in the Garden of Eden, or we accuse God of being unfair. In our pride we just don't want to admit our failures and our rebellion. But confession must be made for our sins if we want to once again be able to draw near to God.

1 John 1:8-10 *If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. ¹⁰ If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*

In the midst of all of the unrest the Israelites experienced as they returned to the land, there was one thing they could count on—that God was still the same. They knew that in spite of their sin, and in spite of the fact that God had allowed them to become slaves to other nations, that God was a loving God who keeps His covenant promises even when we don't keep ours. They knew that if they confessed and truly

repented of their sins that God would be faithful and just to forgive their sins and cleanse them from all their unrighteousness. The Old Testament Israelites only had the sacrifice of a lamb to remind them of God's love and mercy. How much more do we have to remind us of God's love? We have Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. It is his death on the cross that purifies us from our sins and unrighteousness and allows us to draw near to God with sincere hearts.

Hebrews 10:19-23 *Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*

One final note on this passage, look at chapter 10 and notice how the Israelites didn't just say they were sorry, but they actually took the concrete step of making a binding agreement to change the way that they lived. If you are struggling with sinful patterns in your life, be assured that God will forgive you through Christ no matter how many times you stumble and fall, but we also be willing to take concrete steps to break those patterns. Make a binding agreement with a trusted friend to be accountable to them for the way you live your life. Have them pray for you and encourage you to walk faithfully before the Lord.

June 25 – Nehemiah 13

King Artaxerxes had only allowed Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem for a period of time to oversee the rebuilding of the city wall. After Nehemiah had been in Jerusalem for 12 years, he went back to King Artaxerxes and resumed his position as cupbearer. While Nehemiah was with the Israelites they turned to God, but once he went back to Persia, the Israelites returned to their old sinful ways. The temple was desecrated by allowing an unclean person to take up residence in it (verses 4 – 9). The people stopped giving their tithes and offerings to support the priests and the work of the temple (verses 10 – 13). They violated the Sabbath (verses 15 – 22), and they once again went back to their practices of marrying foreign women who would lead them into idolatry (verses 23 – 28). So Nehemiah came back from Persia and once again confronted the evil and the sin and set things right again.

It's amazing how quickly the Israelites fell away from God without a strong leader to guide them. In a sense there is pretty good picture of Jesus and the church in these verses. Jesus came and set things right, and made a way for us to be forgiven for our sins. He set us free from our slavery to sin. But then Jesus returned to heaven, and left us to carry on the work. How faithful are we in doing that? Aren't we at least sometimes behaving like the Israelites caving into the pressures of the world and conforming to the world's pattern rather than the pattern Jesus set for us? There are a lot of passages about the end times in the Bible and the second coming of Jesus, but the main theme of every one of those passages is that we should be living each day of our lives as if it would be the day he returns. In other words, each one of us, if we knew Jesus was coming today, would be living very different lives wouldn't we? If we knew Jesus was coming again today, wouldn't we be sure to be doing the things that he has told us to do.

Matthew 24:36-51 *"No one knows about that day or hour, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. ³⁷ As it was in the days of Noah, so it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ³⁸ For in the days before the flood, people were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; ³⁹ and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away. That is how it will be at the coming of the Son of Man. ⁴⁰ Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴¹ Two women will be grinding with a hand mill; one will be taken and the other left. ⁴² "Therefore keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come. ⁴³ But understand this: If the owner of the house had known at what time of night the thief was coming, he would have kept watch and would not have let his house be broken into. ⁴⁴ So you also must be ready, because the Son of Man will come at an hour when you do not expect him. ⁴⁵ "Who then is the faithful and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time? ⁴⁶ It will be good for that servant whose master finds him doing so when he returns. ⁴⁷ I tell you the truth, he will put him in charge of all his possessions. ⁴⁸ But suppose that servant is wicked and says to himself, 'My master is staying away a long time,' ⁴⁹ and he then begins to beat his fellow servants and to eat and drink with drunkards. ⁵⁰ The master of that servant will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour he is not aware of. ⁵¹ He will cut him to pieces and assign him a place with the hypocrites, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

Ask God to help you through the power of the Holy Spirit to live today and each day of your life as if it may be the day when Jesus comes again.