
Day 284 - October 11

Period of Restoration (535-425 BCE)

Law and Covenant

Readings: *Nehemiah 8:1-10:39*

Reflections:

- This section of Nehemiah (8:1-10:39) is very similar to the account of the tabernacle being first put in place as well as Solomon's temple being opened. There is great excitement, passion and a sincere desire to worship and obey God. We see Nehemiah and Ezra in full partnership, the two leadership branches working together. We see humble worship as people bow with their faces to the ground. We see an intense commitment expressed to God throughout. Yet, for the reader of the divine drama, we can't help but think, "Yes, but we have seen this all before and it never lasted!"
- The celebrations are important to note. There is a lot for the people to mourn about as they look back on their failure, brokenness and sin. Yet, the spiritual leadership continues to call the people into celebration. "Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength." As we will see with the coming of Christ, God's heart is not ultimately for a community that is permanently stuck in "sad because I have messed up mode" but desires a family that is full of joy, peace and grace. Jesus' new community will be characterized by great parties and the celebration of God, life and relationship.
- The celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles was a time for the people to remember their journey in the wilderness, their deliverance from slavery, and their covenant with God. Here we see in this final phase of Israel's story within the Old Testament that the people are again in slavery, living as a remnant, and seeking to come to terms with the covenant they have failed to keep. This celebration must have caused at least some of them to think, "Here we are again living in a desert experience, in homes that are like tents, and just struggling to survive. We are far from that vision of a secure, prosperous nation. We are back to being slaves who are just struggling to survive but we have a God who is our rescuer!"
- The confession of the people demonstrates to us again the keen awareness the people had of the divine drama. The confession is basically again recounting in prayer everything that happened and how they as a nation have failed consistently through

every generation. As you read and reflect on this final confession in the Old Testament, it is clear that this is the story of “what doesn’t work to change the human heart.”

- Over and over again God saves them, yet the people remain stubbornly stuck in their failure and sin.
 - We see an outlining of the four basic things that they thought would change their hearts: “Give me the rules, give me my space, give me strong leaders and hold me accountable when I mess up.”
 - God’s Spirit is present through the leaders but it is not within their hearts to enable them to live righteous lives. God’s Spirit through the leaders externally points them towards truth but does not internally move them to live love and truth. We also see God’s incredible grace and desire to live in relationship with Israel.
- We see a sad conclusion to this Act of the Divine Drama: “But see, we are slaves today...we are in great distress.” They are in physical slavery but even worse, they are in spiritual slavery to hearts that are bent to self-centeredness (whether it is self-indulgence or self-centeredness). They are completely stuck.
 - Before Nehemiah 10 ends, they make this huge recommitment to God and seal it in writing with all of their names attached. It feels like an addict saying, “This is now the last time I am going to give in! Here watch me put it in writing for everyone to see!” They write down everything they are going to do from that point on to honor God and to live a God-centered life. They are unified, they are committed to obey the Torah and they are committed to giving God their first and their best. They end this big show of recommitment with this final bold declaration: WE WILL NOT NEGLECT THE HOUSE OF OUR GOD!” Now they have their temple back, their walls around the city secure, their city of peace restored. NOW they will finally do what God wants them to do!
 - By Nehemiah 13, just over ten years later, what will we discover? Every single commitment they have made on this glorious day has been completely broken and forgotten. The story of “what doesn’t work” could not make God’s point any clearer: Unless God changes your heart from the inside out, you don’t have a chance. None of the external stuff will ever change your heart. That is the point of the story of Israel, the story of human struggle. Thankfully as the Act comes to a “crash and burn” close, we have another Act that will begin after the very long intermission: The story of Jesus and “what does work to change the human heart!”