

## New Normals Are Messy: Conversations in Ezra and Nehemiah

### Week 7 – Nehemiah 10

As we return to sanctuaries and church activities after such a long time being apart from one another and having our routines and practices disrupted, we know that things won't just "go back to normal" overnight. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell the unique history of Israel's return to Jerusalem and the surrounding towns following around seventy years of exile in Babylon. The returning and rebuilding processes were messy, to say the least.

We're spending several weeks looking at these two books together, and seeing what the living Word has to teach us from their experiences for our situation today. Today we'll look at chapter 10 of Nehemiah, which lays out a covenant that God's people make to recommit themselves to God and the Law.

Why just one chapter this week? Chapter 10 is kind of a unit unto itself. Some scholars say that it was woven into the Ezra-Nehemiah story here to respond to the end of the Ezra episode in chapters 8-9, as the people's response to Ezra's prayer of repentance and the re-telling of the story of God's people. Some scholars say it is a response to the pre-Ezra section (chapter 7), as the people's response to the completion of the wall and the second wave of resettlement in Jerusalem and the surrounding towns. And still other experts say that it should follow Nehemiah 13, and be the very end of the book.

So, we'll look at chapter 10 by itself. Wherever it chronologically fit into the original Ezra-Nehemiah chronicle, this is where it is in our Bible today. And whatever it is responding to, there is no question that this covenant is a response, either to the national efforts of Nehemiah completing the wall and gates and keeping their enemies at bay in more ways than one, which allowed the people to keep building homes more securely; or to the religious efforts of Ezra to re-teach the Law, to repent of the people's sins, to praise God for God's faithfulness, and to be grounded once more in the identity as the chosen people of God among the nations. Or maybe it's a response to both – why not?!

Read 9:38 (the lead-in to the covenant of chapter 10). In the list that follows there are the governor and his crew; other leaders; priests; and Levites and their associates. In this list the two strains of Ezra and Nehemiah are indeed reintegrated

- Who would you like to see sign a covenant to work together? Personally or beyond?
- This verse starts with "Because of this..." What is God up to in your life that makes a "Because of this" response for you?

Read 10:28-31. With resettlement comes recommitment, re-assertion of identity as God's people and people of the Law. Now that the Israelites have returned from being scattered among other lands, they are seeking consolidation ethnically and spiritually. This passage references sabbath day law, sabbath year law, and marriage/purity laws.

- If people took a look at you, or walked into your home, how would they know that you were a Christian? (Or a Lutheran Christian for that matter.) What things would they see, hear, observe to tip them off? In what ways do you display or demonstrate your identity as a child of God, as a follower of Christ?

Read 10:32-39. This passage continues the rededication and reclaiming of identity, referencing worship practices, offerings, and festivals. Some of the statutes referenced are being interpreted differently than how they were originally put forth, but the end result is the same – God’s people will dedicate themselves to doing all the things that shape them as and show them to be God’s people.

- In what ways do your calendar/schedule/life structure/budget support and reinforce your identity as a child of God/follower of Christ? In what ways do those things contradict or resist that same identity?
- The last line of chapter 10 is: “We will not neglect the house of our God.” How do we interpret that promise for ourselves today? In light of the pandemic? In general?

New normals are messy, so sometimes we set concrete goals and make public promises to be accountable in the midst of the mess. What covenants have you made/could you make in the midst of the mess, in response to God’s covenants for you?

For next week, please read Nehemiah chapters 11-13 as we wrap up our study and conversation.

#### Sources

Achtemeier, Paul J., General Editor, *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*, Harper Collins, 1996, pp. 323-24, 747-748.  
Collins, John J., *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, Fortress Press, 2010, pp. 427-444.

Page, Jr., Hugh R., General Editor, *The Africana Bible*, Fortress Press, 2010, "Ezra and Nehemiah," Herbert Marbury, pp. 280-85.

*The HarperCollins Study Bible*, Harper Collins, 1993, "Ezra," David J. A. Clines, pp. 699 ff.