

E91 Message Guide for Sept. 7, 2025
Storyteller- 5: Story in a Starved Land
(Nehemiah 8:1-12)
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We are in a series of messages called, Storyteller. In the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, we read the story of a priest named Ezra assembles the people and reads the Word of God aloud to them. In previous messages of this series, we have focused on the time of the exile when God punished his chosen people Israel for their disobedience. The people were living in exile under the Babylonians and Persians. Now we're going to shift our focus to the time after the Babylonian exile. This week and next week we'll look at what life was like, now that the exile was over and the Israelite remnant was back "home."

Historical Overview: The southern Kingdom of Judah was conquered and deported by the Babylonians into an exile that the prophet Jeremiah foretold would last 70 years.

Jeremiah writes to those in captivity:

"This is what the Lord says: When 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you", declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord, and will bring you back from captivity" (Jeremiah 29:10-13).

Verse 11 is more well known, "I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not harm you, ..."

1. If someone read this verse separate from the rest of the passage, what are some things that one might conclude? If you know this verse, how have you interpreted it to mean?

Many have taken this verse to mean that God promises prosperity for all believers, but that's not what God intended. God is not promising material blessing and favor on Christians but a return of his people from exile after 70 years and prosperity, if they seek him with their whole hearts.

Key dates in this exile saga:

- 605 BC: King Nebuchadnezzar invasion and 1st wave exiled to Babylon (Daniel)
- 586 BC: Fall of Jerusalem; Temple is destroyed
- 539 BC: Cyrus' decree that Jews may go home
- 516 BC: The Temple is completed
- [Extended Gap]
- 458 BC: Ezra arrives in Jerusalem
- 444 BC: Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem & Ezra reads the Law to the people.

How do we know these dates? Non-Biblical historians have fixed the dates and names of the rulers of the near eastern empires (Assyrian, Babylonian, Persians). There are all kinds of literature and archaeological records supporting this time period. The Bible not only includes references to these kings/rulers, but it also includes the word-for-word copies of several royal decrees and correspondence which allow us to fit all the pieces together. For example: Ezra 1:1 "In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia ... a proclamation was made that any Jew who wanted to return to Israel to

rebuild the Temple was allowed to go". Historians know that king Cyrus began his reign in 539 BC, so we know the earliest dates exiles were allowed to return to Israel was 539 BC.

Notice, there were actually 2 overlapping periods of 70 years; 70 years between the destruction of the Temple and its being rebuilt AND 70 years from the first exiles leaving the southern kingdom and the first returners.

Now it is important to know that the people of Judah did not all at one time, on one day, and head off to captivity. They went in waves. They also did they all set a clock for 70 years and wait for a bell to ring so they could all get up and go home, all at once. The story is more complex than that. In fact, some Jews never returned to Israel. Many grew old and died. Some assimilated into the Babylonian and Persian cultures, and we don't hear from them again.

But for those who did return, they also returned home in waves. It was around 160 years from when the first exiles left Judah until the events of today's passage in Neh 8. In today's terms, that is equivalent to the time between the end of the American Civil War in 1865 until today in 2025. That's a long time.

However, we know the trusted Scribes were maintaining the scrolls of the Law of Moses, and the history books of the people of Israel (Chronicles/Ezra/Neh/Ester/Daniel) were still being written. Based on these things we know, we can see the situation through the eyes Ezra the priest and scribe and Nehemiah, the governor. They recognize a huge need: The people are starving for godly direction. So much information has been lost, it's almost like starting over!

2. What does "spiritual starvation" look like today, even in a world where we have endless access to Bibles, sermons, and resources?

All of that is what brings us to our text today. Ezra reads the Law of Moses to the people. **Read Nehemiah 8:1-12.**

Some observations:

- Despite the destruction of the Temple, the Scribes faithfully copied and guarded the Word of God.
- While the Scribes and Priests were intimately familiar with the Word of God, the average person was not.
- There were no "pocket versions" of the Torah (Gen through Deuteronomy). The Scriptures were transmitted orally in every family where the parents are commanded to teach their children the truths of God.

While the text says Ezra read the Book of the Law of Moses, to read all 5 books (Genesis - Deuteronomy), it would take 15-20 hours. Because of that, there is good reason to believe that Ezra only read the book of Deuteronomy, which would have taken 3-4 hours.

Deuteronomy summarizes the failure of Israel to trust God when they sent spies to survey the promised land. It also summarizes their 40 years of wandering in the desert as a punishment. Finally, Deuteronomy is formatted as a treaty between God and his people. He promises blessings if they obey him and curses if they don't. The purpose of the book was to call the Israelites to faithful obedience to God; Deuteronomy clearly articulated what it meant to be God's people living in and among a hostile culture.

These themes were again particularly relevant now that the exiles had returned from captivity. The response of the people to the reading (their weeping) would be a typical response if the people are

hearing God's requirements, seemingly for the first time, and they know they are not living up to God's standards.

To help lead us to some application, let's answer these three questions: What was the condition of the people? What was the cause of their condition? And to what did the leaders call them?

What was the condition of the Israelites?

- They were re-established in Israel—settled in their towns.
- They were still a subjected people. They lived under the extended rule of the Persians.
- Although they were God's people, and they had some access to God's word, they did not understand what was required of them.
- The Israelites' condition was spiritual starvation. The average person had lost the thread of connection to God's heart.

3. How would you assess your current spiritual condition?

What was the cause of the Israelites' condition?

We see from the text that the cause of their spiritual starvation was a lack of understanding. Although they had heard scripture before, and they knew the stories of what God had done in the past, they didn't truly understand what God expected of them. In a system of temple sacrifices, rituals, and lots and lots of rules, they had learned to get along without internalizing the intent of the sacrifices, rituals, and rules. So many years had gone by that the people had lost the key point that To BE God's people meant being in an active, obedient relationship with Him. God promised "You will seek me and find me WHEN you seek me with all your heart."

4. If you have been in the past or currently finding yourself in a mode of spiritual starvation, what is the cause?

Maybe the cause of your spiritual condition is that you take your cues from the wrong source. Is your source social media and playing the comparison game or the "American culture" and its promised dream of a house with a picket fence, a harmonious, healthy family, and a good job? Or maybe the cause of your spiritual condition is your lack of focus on the Word of God and its direction for your life. Is it possible to have a Bible in your home, to be surrounded by all the information in the world—and it's only a click away—and yet you don't feel like there is a true guide that will point you away from starvation to fulfillment?

The Israelites' condition was spiritual starvation, and the cause was a lack of understanding; The third question:

To what did Ezra and Nehemiah call the people?

- The people were called to worship. As Ezra began the reading, the people stood up, and he Praised the Lord. The people recognized the Book of the Law as the very Word of God, and they responded in worship.
- As the people heard (and finally understood the law), they were cut to the hearts and began to weep. They responded in grief and repentance because they knew they weren't living the right way.
- The people are crying, but then the leaders called the people to stop crying and start celebrating. "Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength!"

God is a God of Joy, and he gives that joy to believers. And God's joy is our strength. We may repent in weeping, but we thank God and celebrate in joy! "Then all the people went away to eat and

drink, to send portions of food and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them” (Verse 12). The people were called to worship and celebration!

5. What about you? What is God calling you to?

Maybe like the Israelites, you are called to worship. What other response is appropriate when you consider how God through Jesus Christ has forgiven and saved you, blessed you, cared for you, and led you? Maybe you’re called to worship.

Maybe you are called to get off the fence and fully take God at his word.

Or maybe you find yourself like the Israelites, starving for spiritual direction. If that’s the case, your call is to return to God’s Word and then take God at his Word. Listen to these promises from the Word of God:

- Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.” If you’re tired of going it alone. If you’re depressed, dejected, exhausted, and lonely. There is good news!
- Jesus said, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” If you don’t know which way to turn. If you don’t know what is true anymore. If you are worried about the future. There is good news!
- Jesus said, “I am way, and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” When you are starving for direction, the place to start is God’s Word. It challenges and comforts; It give hope and promises a future; It’s alive and active, yet it never changes. And it all points to Jesus.

Whatever the cause of your current spiritual condition, you can choose today to turn to the Word of God for direction.