

Reading Schedule for May 28-June 3, 2018

We will transition from the Book of Ezra to Nehemiah. They follow each other historically. Nehemiah is the last recorded Old Testament book of history, even though Malachi will prophesy during the conclusion of this book. We will see the benefit of a strong leader through the life of Nehemiah.

May 28 - Ezra 9: "... and prayed, 'I am too ashamed and disgraced, my God, to lift up my face to you, because our sins are higher than our heads and our guilt has reached to the heavens.'" (v.6) I am impressed with the fact that Ezra connects himself to the sins of his people. We live in a very individualistic world. Someone else's sin is their problem. So it is noteworthy that Ezra grieves over the sins of his people and identifies with their sin. He expressed remorse for the sin, fear of the consequence and a desire for the people to come to their senses and repent. Not only is sin serious, but it also affects the lives of others. The New Testament describes the church as the body of Christ. That means we are interconnected. Our sins are not in isolation. They actually spill into the lives of the whole community. It is easy to view sin lightly in a world that sees sin as inconsequential and only affecting the life of the individual. But Ezra looks at sin differently. What message do you receive from this chapter on the consequences of sin?

May 29 - Ezra 10: "While Ezra was praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a large crowd of Israelites—men, women and children—gathered around him. They too wept bitterly." (v.1) The people repented. Ezra led the way. It is hard to get our mind around the fact that the men of Israel needed to sever their relationships with their pagan wives. This could be compared to a Christian marrying a devil-worshipper. Although a severe solution was necessary, it only involved 113 of approximately 29,000 families. This was a very strategic time in the life of God's people. They had been scattered for so long, and now they were reforming around the truth and principles of God. In approximately 400 years, the Messiah would arrive as a descendant of God's people around the worship of Yahweh. There is much more at stake than you might realize. What impresses you about this concluding chapter in Ezra?

May 30 - Nehemiah 1: "Then I said, 'Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments . . .'" (v.5) We are introduced to Nehemiah, who would be the leader that God's people needed. But what I noticed most about Nehemiah is his heart for God. You can learn a lot about someone through their prayer life. What do you learn about Nehemiah through his prayer? I am drawn to the way that Nehemiah prays as he honors God first and foremost. The prayers of the Bible do not quickly ask God to do things on their behalf, but first recognize the power and position of God as the creator of the whole world. Even as Jesus began the Lord's Prayer, he launched that prayer with the holiness of God as his Father. That's what I see in Nehemiah's prayer before he asked God to do anything. I want you to remember that the elements of effective prayer begin with worship, and then there is thanksgiving. Also included is repentance before one request is offered. Nehemiah's mind was shaped through his sincere prayer, and yours can be too. What do you learn about Nehemiah; what do you learn about prayer in this first chapter?

May 31 - Nehemiah 2: "... but I said to the king, 'May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?'" (v.3) This was a very risky moment in the life of Nehemiah. There was no guarantee how the king would respond to his honesty. The king responds in a favorable way, with a soft heart. This would not be expected, but was evidence that God was at work. Obviously, Nehemiah was humble before the king, and yet honest. He did not let his fear keep him from sharing his pain. What are you noticing about

Nehemiah? How do you respond to his entry into Jerusalem? He does not make a big show of himself, but surveys the situation. Nehemiah kept his mission a secret and took careful steps of planning with God's help to accomplish the mission the Lord had put on his heart. Nehemiah is a good example for us on how to proceed when God puts something on your heart. It is easy to be impressed with Nehemiah. He has much to teach us. What are you noticing about Nehemiah's life that will help you?

June 1 - Nehemiah 3: "The men of Jericho built the adjoining section, and Zakkur son of Imri built next to them." (v.2) This is a repeated statement throughout this chapter. You might think of this chapter as being boring, and not of much significance. However, Nehemiah got everyone involved. This definitely gives application to New Testament body life with each of us serving alongside one another. 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 comes to mind as one person is a hand and another is a foot, and so on. It is recognizable that Nehemiah enlisted communities of people to take ownership of a certain part of the wall. Each part of the wall was sort of dedicated to a number of people, who would take pride in their work. Everyone was an important contributing part of this project. This would strengthen the unity of God's people, and also be a very practical way of completing the project. There is no doubt that delegation is so essential to kingdom work. I am called to do certain things as the Pastor of the church, and yet if I am the only one doing it, it would be a very small aspect of what God wants for our entire body. I am motivated by Nehemiah's example, and I hope it stirs your heart to be involved. Are you doing your part?

June 2 - Nehemiah 4: "Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, 'The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.'" (v.10) There is no doubt that this was a huge project, and it is not surprising that it had laid dormant for so long. Two main factors are getting in the way of the project. People are opposing their efforts, as well as, the job was huge. Accomplishing any large task is tiring. There are always pressures that foster discouragement. The cure for fatigue and discouragement is focusing on God's purposes. Nehemiah reminded the workers of their calling, their goal and God's protection. Hard work, opposition, and tension among the ranks can create discouragement and halt something as exciting as accomplishing God's mission. It happens all the time. Are any of these factors challenging you in your endeavor to serve God? How?

June 3 - Nehemiah 5: "I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, 'You are charging your own people interest!' So I called together a large meeting to deal with them . . ." (v.7) The word "ponder" catches my attention. Nehemiah experienced anger, but he did not unleash his anger in a negative way. He contemplated what was happening and how to communicate his frustration and confrontation. The returning exiles were suffering at the hands of their rich countrymen. Left with no means to repay any loans they acquired, these exiles were forced to sell their children into slavery as the rich charged excessive interest. Nehemiah shows his compassion by being concerned for those who were poor. This is also God's heart. Nehemiah told the rich Jews to stop charging interest on the loans to their needy brothers. Nehemiah was an example of doing without to help others. This is an inspiring chapter. How might you apply it to your life?

PRAYER: Pray for the numerous people in our church family who work in education. Both public and private schools are represented by our church body. Pray for these educators during these concluding weeks of the school year.