

Ezra Summons the People to Obey the Law

When the seventh month came—the people of Israel being settled in their towns— **8** ¹all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. ²Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding. This was on the first day of the seventh month. ³He read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the book of the law. ⁴The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose; and beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hash-baddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites,^[a] helped the people to understand the law, while the people remained in their

places. ⁸So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

⁹And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, "This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep." For all the people wept when they heard the words of the law. ¹⁰Then he said to them, "Go your way, eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions of them to those for whom nothing is prepared, for this day is holy to our LORD; and do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength." ¹¹So the Levites stilled all the people, saying, "Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved." ¹²And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.

The Beginning of the Galilean Ministry (follows the temptation story)

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

The Rejection of Jesus at Nazareth

¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” ²²All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth. They said, “Is not this Joseph’s son?” ²³He said to them, “Doubtless you will quote to me this proverb, ‘Doctor,

cure yourself!’ And you will say, ‘Do here also in your hometown the things that we have heard you did at Capernaum.’”²⁴ And he said, “Truly I tell you, no prophet is accepted in the prophet’s hometown.²⁵ But the truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land;²⁶ yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon.²⁷ There were also many lepers^[a] in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”²⁸ When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.²⁹ They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff.³⁰ But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way.

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Nehemiah 8:1-12; Luke 4: 14-30

“Looking Back to Know the Way Forward: Why History Matters”

Kerra Becker English

What can we do when it looks like the world is going to hell? Because sometimes the world is a scary place, and it seems like there's nothing we can do about it.

I hate that feeling. I know that feeling. And worst of all, I am painfully aware that my personal encounters with the world's mess are but the little end of what truly accounts for such hellish situations. I do not live in a war zone. I am not starving. I am not freezing. I am not getting sick from contaminated water. I can vote in my country's national elections, whether or not I want to is another story. My freedoms aren't very restricted, and my life is indeed quite comfortable.

And yet, the oppressive nature of the world's ills gets to us, it gets to me at least. I can be living a happy life and still get depressed by the onslaught of awful news, especially when it seems absolutely unchanging and unchangeable.

These two paired scripture readings may be helpful entry points into this conversation, though it took me some digging and a little reading in *Sojourners* magazine to get there. I had to look up the relevant history for the book of Nehemiah to remember what was going on in this

context. But in this Old Testament story, the people are returning to Jerusalem after having spent decades in Babylonian exile. Nehemiah, the governor, and Ezra, the priest, are quite concerned about getting their religion and politics right so that the people will remember and live into their history as God's chosen people. So as they stand by the rebuilt city gate, Ezra reads from the Torah. I liked imagining him reading from early morning to late afternoon, on his makeshift platform, for hours and hours, until the people are soaked in the words of their ancestors, until they remember God's delivery from slavery in Egypt, so that they can be fully renewed following this Exile. They had been strangers in a strange land before and were delivered. Here they are, doing it again. Ezra reads, and others interpret what the stories mean for them NOW. This staged reading makes no sense if they can't connect the Torah's story to their story and be renewed for life that lies ahead.

But then they have to be told – *Don't weep! This is the day of the Lord.* They had to be told because naturally they wept and mourned when they heard the Law read to them. Perhaps you can imagine a few reasons why. Maybe in Babylon they couldn't keep their traditions in public. Maybe they were ashamed of the times they had turned from its wisdom. Maybe they were refreshed to hear God's mercy and love after it felt like they had experienced God's turning away from them. It was an emotional time. Hearing of God's steadfastness and faithfulness when the world is so fickle makes us weep for all the lost possibilities.

But now Ezra, Nehemiah, and all the Levite priests tell the people to go home rejoicing. Drink wine. Eat good food. Celebrate that the dark times are behind us, at least for now.

So when it feels like the world is going to hell, or that you've been through hell, return and claim God's story as your story, because it is. Go back to that beloved history of deliverance, redemption, and renewal. Be reminded that Jesus' teaching and Christ's passion were both meant for you. Read it over and over again until it overwhelms you. Weep if you must. But go home rejoicing. This is precisely why this stuff was written down in the first place. That's why we are a people of the book. It's so we can remember. Re-learn, rejoice, repeat.

But we are also a people of logic. We know that this is but a temporary fix for us. We recall God's mercy pretty well when it's clearly seen by virtue of hindsight, but it's still like a thick fog going forward. Remembering seems ridiculous when nothing seems to change.

In the second story, things don't go quite so well, at least not for Jesus. He's just been through his own hell in the wilderness – being tempted by those things that are precisely THE most tempting for human beings – power, security, and fame. Then he finds himself afterward preaching at the synagogue in his hometown of Nazareth. He unrolls the scroll of Isaiah. He

speaks Isaiah's words, and he interprets them by applying them to himself. He is showing the very nature of God's mercy, the radical nature of God's mercy to show kindness to those who are the underprivileged and underrepresented in the world.

This time, the people don't weep, and they don't rejoice. They get furious. The other shoe drops. This time they are fully indicted by the hell that is of their own making, so they threaten to throw Jesus off a cliff to shut him up. They don't want true justice. Instead, they hunger for power, and they thirst for retribution. By this time, the once enslaved, once dispossessed Hebrew people have established themselves and their religious authority in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. They don't want to be told that God's mercy extends much further than their own recognized tribe. And Jesus is connecting those dots too closely. He mentions how the prophets before him had treated the stranger. Elijah – cares for a widow in Sidon. Elisha cleanses a Syrian leper. They helped the foreigners, the refugees, not their own kind. Jesus was claiming his own prophetic line in accord with these men of God.

Sometimes we have to look back in order to find a way forward. This is counter-intuitive for folks like us who have been taught that the latest is always the greatest. Whether it makes us weep, or leads us to rejoice, or really makes us mad, sometimes we need hit over the head with what we've done to our fellow human beings a thousand times before. Though some of the

technologies are new, the fears and hatred that we can stoke up remain quite the same. Whether we are the dispossessed or the powerful, it doesn't really matter, we need to be reminded of what's gone on before. This is less about the accuracy of our faith history than it is ultimately about the interpretation of it. How do we place ourselves in the trajectory of the divine story? Do we, can we still see God at work in our own crippled human situations? The temptation to give up on God's mercy has been there a million times before as well. Being occupied by the Babylonians was surely no picnic, and finally having authority and being reminded by some carpenter's son that the prophets of the faith were deeply involved in the lives of people not like us, those things are reminders that our interpretation of a world gone to hell may be accurate, but it surely isn't unique to us.

So what can we do when the world looks like it's falling apart? Look back – for a time. That's not the ONLY thing we should do to be sure. If that's all we do, shame on us. However, it may give us the lenses through which to see our own situation in a new light. We can refresh our understanding of God's never-ending love. We can renew our hope that justice is possible, and it's certainly the place where God wants to be standing with us. We can rejoice because it's really OK to have hope that the world is made up of good and bad, and it really is within our power to bear witness time and again to the good that succeeds beyond our wildest imaginations.

After all, in our story, death is not the final answer. Love is. Love conquers all – though it can take lifetimes upon lifetimes to see that Love in action. Amen.

The biblical notion of justice, beginning in the Hebrew Scriptures with the Jewish prophets--especially Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea--is quite different. If we read carefully and honestly, we will see that God's justice is *restorative*. (This term has only been around for about the last twenty-five years as human consciousness has evolved.) In each case, after the prophet chastises the Israelites for their transgressions against Yahweh, the prophet continues by saying, in effect, "And here's what Yahweh will do for you: God will now love you more than ever! God will love you into wholeness. God will pour upon you a gratuitous, unbelievable, unaccountable, irrefutable love that you will finally be unable to resist."