

Read Through the Bible

Week 24 June 14th – 19th

Readings: Ezra 1 – 10; Nehemiah 1 – 8; John 19:23 – 21; Acts 1 – 3

Reflections and Questions for Thought

By Sana Keller (Reviewing the New Testament readings first)

John 19:23 through the end of the Book of John is the gut-wrenching account of Jesus' crucifixion, death, burial which takes an unbelievable, joyful, hope-filled eternal twist in the story with His resurrection and appearances to Mary Magdalene and His disciples. The last verse (John 21:25) provides yet another powerful reminder of Christ's power and impact during His short life on earth: **Jesus also did many other things. If they were all written down, I suppose the whole world could not contain the books that would be written.** (NLT) Wow!!

Chapters 1 to 3 of Acts provide an account of Jesus' Ascension to the Father, the dramatic day of Pentecost with the empowering of the apostles by the Holy Spirit and Peter's powerful preaching to the crowd which resulted in more than 3,000 being baptized and added to the church that day. **"Save yourselves from this crooked generation!"** (Acts 2:40) was Peter's message then...and is still ours today.

The Book of Ezra is a story of hope and restoration—restoration of the **spiritual heart** of the Jewish people along with the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. The return of the Israelites to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the Temple parallel the life of Christians today who turn from their sin and rebellion against God and find in Him a loving, welcome home. No matter how long we have been away, God is ready to forgive us and receive us back into His family...and help us rebuild our lives in Him.

Nehemiah provides a picture of **sheer determination** in the face of opposition. Every step of Nehemiah's plan to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem involved **prayer**...with his ultimate purpose being to **bring honor to God**. Both Ezra and Nehemiah put the Word of God first, keeping The Word as their guide and strength. The word 'rebuild' refers to a **restoration** (not involving new materials). 'Repair' means to make

Introduction to Ezra

By Eugene Peterson, the *Message*

History had not treated the People of Israel well and they were in decline. A superpower military machine, Babylon, had battered them and then, leaving their city and temple a mound of rubble, hauled them off into exile. Now, 128 years later, a few Jews back in Jerusalem had been trying to put the pieces back

strong & firm, not a quick fix, rather a solid restoration. Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem all for the glory of God. Where is the relevance of this message for us today? Consider the world's view or image of Christianity today. The words *hypocrite, lack of integrity, all talk & no action, judgmental and lacking in love* may come to mind for more people than we would want to imagine. Are we up for the challenge...**to rebuild the world's image of Christianity**...by walking the 'Christian' walk each day...all for the glory of God?

Nehemiah and his builders experienced first-hand incredible opposition and challenges which often come when people step up to serve the Lord. This can be an opportunity for us to grow in our faith journey as we keep our eyes on God. Nehemiah and his workers held both tools & weapons (Neh. 4:17) realizing the need for a 'watch and pray' attitude. What is our attitude as we go through each day? How much more connected to God could we stay if we each maintained a 'watch and pray' attitude to keep us walking in His ways?

Nehemiah's words of encouragement (Neh. 4:19-20) were as great a comfort to the 'wall builders' then as they are to us today (paraphrasing): We are involved in a great work, serving a great God & rebuilding the image of Christianity, all for the glory of God. We're not working alone (even if we can't see our brothers & sisters in Christ at work)—and even more importantly, God is always with us and will come to our defense.

Are we willing to step up to the challenge and be modern-day Nehemiah's? Determination, prayer...and bringing honor to God--Let's roll!

Resources: Holman Old Testament Commentary & Nehemiah Old Testament Commentary by Warren Wiersbe

together decade after weary decade. But it was not going well at all. They were hanging on by their fingernails. And then Ezra arrived.

This is an extreme case of a familiar story, repeated with variations in most centuries and in most places in the world. Men and women who find their basic

identity in God, as God reveals himself in Israel and Messiah, don't find an easy time of it. They never have. They never will. Their identity is under constant challenge and threat—sometimes by hostile assault, at other times by subtle and smiling seductions. Whether by assault or seduction, the People of God have come perilously close to obliteration several times. We are never out of danger.

Because of Ezra, Israel made it through. God didn't leave Ezra to do this single-handedly; he gave him substantial and critical help in the rescue operation in the person of Nehemiah, whose work providentially converged with his. (Important details of the Ezra story are in the memoirs of Nehemiah, the book that follows

Introduction to Nehemiah

By Eugene Peterson, the *Message*

Separating life into distinct categories of "sacred" and "secular" damages, sometimes irreparably, any attempt to live a whole and satisfying life, a coherent life with meaning and purpose, a life lived to the glory of God. Nevertheless, the practice is widespread. But where did all these people come up with the habit of separating themselves and the world around them into these two camps? It surely wasn't from the Bible. The Holy Scriptures, from beginning to end, strenuously resist such a separation.

The damage to life is most obvious when the separation is applied to daily work. It is common for us to refer to the work of pastors, priests, and missionaries as "sacred," and that of lawyers, farmers, and engineers as "secular." It is also wrong. Work, by its very nature, is holy. The biblical story is dominated by people who

Introduction to Acts

By Eugene Peterson, the *Message*

Because the story of Jesus is so impressive—God among us! God speaking a language we can understand! God acting in ways that heal and help and save us!—there is a danger that we will be impressed, but only be impressed. As the spectacular dimensions of this story slowly (or suddenly) dawn upon us, we could easily become enthusiastic spectators, and then let it go at that—become admirers of Jesus, generous with our oohs and ahs, and in our better moments inspired to imitate him.

It is Luke's task to prevent that, to prevent us from becoming mere spectators to Jesus, fans of the Message. Of the original quartet of writers on Jesus, Luke alone continues to tell the story as the apostles

this one.) The People-of-God identity was recovered and preserved. Ezra used Worship and Text to do it. Ezra engaged them in the worship of God, the most all-absorbing, comprehensive act in which men and women can engage. This is how our God-formed identities become most deeply embedded in us. And Ezra led them into an obedient listening to the text of Scripture. Listening and following God's revelation are the primary ways in which we keep attentively obedient to the living presence of God among us.

Ezra made his mark: Worship and Text continue to be foundational for recovering and maintaining identity as the People of God.

have jobs in gardening, shepherding, the military, politics, carpentry, tent making, homemaking, fishing, and more.

Nehemiah is one of these. He started out as a government worker in the employ of a foreign king. Then he became—and this is the work he tells us of in these memoirs—a building contractor, called in to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. His coworker Ezra was a scholar and teacher, working with the Scriptures. Nehemiah worked with stones and mortar. The stories of the two men are interwoven in a seamless fabric of vocational holiness. Neither job was more or less important or holy than the other. Nehemiah needed Ezra; Ezra needed Nehemiah. God's people needed the work of both of them. We still do.

and disciples live it into the next generation. The remarkable thing is that it continues to be essentially the same story. Luke continues his narration with hardly a break, a pause perhaps to dip his pen in the inkwell, writing in the same style, using the same vocabulary.

The story of Jesus doesn't end with Jesus. It continues in the lives of those who believe in him. The supernatural does not stop with Jesus. Luke makes it clear that these Christians he wrote about were no more spectators of Jesus than Jesus was a spectator of God—they are *in* on the action of God, God acting *in* them, God living *in* them. Which also means, of course, in *us*.