

Sept 24-30

Week 39

This is our last full week in the Old Testament. We are still in Act 2, scene 9, which is set in the period after the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon. This week watch for at least four key themes.

1. Esther, Malachi, Nehemiah, and Ezra each in his or her own way illustrates the importance of sound, God-honoring leadership. Watch for characteristics that make a great leader.
2. Malachi, Ezra, and Nehemiah especially emphasize a return to covenant faithfulness and a focus on God's laws.
3. Religious identity as God's special people serves as a prominent theme of each book. Notice the various ways this identity is expressed and guarded.
4. Undergirding each of these stories and Malachi's prophecy is a clear picture of God's sovereign care for his people when they are rightly related to him. The hand of God was with the main characters of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, and that made all the difference in the outcomes of the stories.

Watch for these themes as you read, reflecting on the implications for our lives today.

Day 1

Read Esther 6-10

Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 8

As you continue to read Esther today, you see more ironies. Mordecai was honored in place of Haman. Haman was killed on the gallows he intended for Mordecai. The edict condemning the Jews was reversed, and they became the victors over those who would have destroyed them. We see here the playing out of a very old holy war, and it helps put the story in a broader old-covenant context.

Haman was an Amalekite and was called an Agagite. The Amalekites were the first nation to oppose Israel after its exodus from Egypt. They came to represent arch opponents of Israel. Saul, the son of Kish, a Benjaminite, had failed to execute Agag, the king of the Amalekites. But now Mordecai, the son of Kish, a Benjaminite, succeeded.

Esther 8–10 should be read against the backdrop of conquering the land of Canaan (see Jos 1–24). As with that holy war (with a tragic exception, Jos 7:1), the Israelites of Esther's day did not touch the plunder of their enemies (see Dt 13:16). Yet those who had planned to devastate them were devastated instead. The heroes of this story are heroes because of their submission to and trust in God, who was the ultimate hero of the story.

Underlying the book of Esther is a clear picture of God's sovereign protection of his people. From what do you or those in your life need protection at present?

Day 2

Read Malachi; Psalm 50

Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 9

Malachi is not clearly dated, but the book seems to address the period just prior to the reforms brought by Ezra and Nehemiah (about 460 BC). It is organized around six disputes between Yahweh and his people, each of which began with Yahweh's raising an issue. The people then raised a question, challenging Yahweh. Then God showed the people the ways they had abandoned the covenant.

God's people had become spiritually lazy, playing fast and loose with the dictates of God's covenant. They accused God of not loving them, but he showed that it was they who had abandoned the love relationship. Watch for the various accusations the people brought against God and how God answered them.

Also look for a call to renewal, warning of coming judgment, and hope for the future, all prominent themes in the Prophets. The statements about God's coming to refine his temple and about the messenger Elijah, who would go before the Lord, anticipated the coming of Jesus. As God's Anointed One, Jesus was preceded by John the Baptist (whom Jesus called Elijah) and also cleansed the temple.

How does spiritual laziness manifest itself in your life? Repent from it today.

Day 3

Read Ezra 7-10

Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 10

Today we read the rest of the book of Ezra. First notice the descriptions of Ezra himself. He was a scribe and priest, an expert in the law of God, who “had determined in his heart to study the law of the Lord, obey it, and teach its statutes and ordinances in Israel” (7:10).

The Persian king commissioned Ezra to go back to Israel and put things right with the temple so that the people could worship God according to the law. However, when Ezra and the other leaders returned, they found that the Israelites in the land had intermarried with the pagans from the surrounding peoples—a direct violation of God’s law. The issue was not racial but religious. The conclusion of the book seems radical, as the Israelites determined to send away their foreign wives, but it communicates that nothing is more important than a right relationship with God.

How far will you go to follow the ways of God?

Day 4

Read Nehemiah 1-4

Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 11

Like its sister book, Ezra, which addresses the same time period, the book of Nehemiah has several key concerns. It begins with the crisis: the disarray of Jerusalem and its people. At the heart of the concern lies their identity as a people. The abandonment of God's law had led to the exile and dispersion of God's people, as the curses of the law had described in Deuteronomy. So watch for an emphasis on returning to God's Word, renewing a commitment to the covenant and law. This commitment to God's Word undergirds virtually all of the key decisions reflected in the book.

Rebuilding the walls was not only for protection from enemies but also an important identity marker, clearly identifying those within the city as a distinct group of people. The rebuilding also marked Jerusalem as being in a state of renewal and rebuilding.

How much of your identity as a person is grounded in a commitment to God's Word?

Day 5**Read Nehemiah 5-7****Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 12**

Continue noticing the emphasis on a renewal of commitment to God's law and covenant and on the identity of God's people. The economic and social crisis reflected in Nehemiah 5 was due to neglecting clear prohibition in the law against charging a fellow Israelite interest (see Deuteronomy 23:19-20).

In Nehemiah 6 also notice the various types of opposition to the work of rebuilding the wall and Nehemiah's stellar leadership during this time. The opponents tried to distract, intimidate, build coalitions, and ruin Nehemiah's reputation, but all to no avail.

The genealogical records of Nehemiah 7 established clear national identity and a pure commitment to the law (since priests had to be clearly identified; see vv. 63-65).

What opposition to God's work do you face? Follow Nehemiah's example in standing against intimidation and discouragement and in trusting the Lord.

Day 6

Read Nehemiah 8-10

Act 2 - Scene 9 - Reading 13

Nehemiah 8:1-12 presents a pivotal moment in the restoration of God's people as they listened, understood, and responded to the law. This happened in 445 BC, just five days after the wall had been finished. They rediscovered the practice of the Festival of Shelters (see 8:13-18) and had an extraordinary celebration. In addition, their exposure to God's Word brought about confession of sin, repentance, and renewed worship.

Notice that much of Nehemiah 9 consists of a prayer, a rehearsal of Israel's history, and the recitation of the pattern of God's blessings followed by Israel's rebellion. God was faithful; Israel's ancestors, wicked. So the people of Nehemiah's day renewed the covenant with God, a covenant involving separation from foreigners, observance of the Sabbath, and giving resources for temple worship, all of which had been prescribed in the law.

At times in our relationship with God we too need renewal, refocusing commitment to God's ways. What areas of your commitment need to be renewed today?

Day 7

Reading Summary for Week 39

We've read about Ezra's return to Judah with another wave of returning exiles. His passion was to help people understand and live according to God's law. Nehemiah's passion was to rebuild Jerusalem's walls, a project that had stalled for years. Afterward, the people joyfully recommitted themselves to live in the Lord's ways. God was now being worshiped in the Holy City at his temple, but no son of David would be welcomed there until Jesus arrived riding a donkey.

Prayer/Meditation

Lord, you delivered your people yet again from captivity, just as you delivered them earlier from the bondage of Egypt. Thank you for your grace in restoring them. Thank you for their concern for your glory as they worshiped at the temple and as they restored Jerusalem to a noble state. Thank you for raising up Nehemiah, a leader who showed that when God's people get organized and motivated, great deeds can be accomplished in a short time. Amen.
