

## **Faith in Action: Citizens of the Kingdom**

### **Lesson 2: In the World but Not of the World**

#### **Objectives**

1. Recognize the dual nature of our existence in two kingdoms.
2. Determine strategies for navigating life as citizens of the Kingdom of God.

**Text:** Nehemiah 1:1-2:10

#### **Historical Background**

The Jewish experience of exile forced them to adapt to life in two kingdoms. Assyria and Babylon aimed to assimilate the conquered people. When Northern Israel fell, the Assyrians deported the Israelites to Assyria in 722 BC (2 Kings 17:22-23), likely integrating them into Assyrian society. There is no record of these deportees returning to Israel. When Babylon destroyed Judah in 587 BC, the Judean exiles encountered a different fate. Jeremiah prophesied their eventual return and restoration by God (Jer 24:5-7). According to Jeremiah, the exiles were good figs. Unlike those deported to Assyria, the exiles in Babylon lived together in a community. They maintained their identity as God's chosen people, set apart from the rest of the world. Ezekiel spoke of God being their sanctuary in foreign lands, and upon return, they would remove detestable idols (Eze 11:16-20). The destruction of the Jerusalem Temple shifted Judaism's focus from sacrificial worship to the study of the Scriptures. In the absence of the temple, Judaism became a "religion of the Book." Babylon became the center of Judaism as Jews reformulated their theology in exile. The exilic experience led to a deepening of Jewish faith, with scholars suggesting much of the OT was compiled and transmitted during this time, culminating in Ezra's return with the Torah (Ezra 8).

Isaiah urged departure from oppressive regimes like Babylon: "Leave Babylon, flee from the Babylonians (Isa 48:20; 52:11). However, a different approach was necessary during the Persian Empire. Persia was more a benevolent empire than its predecessors. Notably, there is no direct criticism against Persia in the OT. As demonstrated in Ezra 1:2-4, the Edict of Cyrus marked a reversal of the Babylonian deportation policy, allowing Jews and other captives to return to their homeland and providing funding for the reconstruction of the temple. It is not surprising that Isaiah referred to Cyrus the Great, the first king of the Persian Empire, as God's "anoint" and servant (Isa 44:28, 45:1). With heavy taxes and tributes, Persia was still an empire with its best interest in mind even as it strengthened local economy and religion. Plenty of archaeological evidence exists as scholars work hard to shed light on Jewish activities under Persian rule. Under this new regime, God's people required a different mindset. Though they belonged to the Kingdom of God, they found themselves living within the Persian Empire. The Israelites were in Persia but not of Persia. Residing in dual realms, God's people needed wisdom to know when to accommodate the empire and when to resist it.

Nehemiah resided within the two kingdoms in the middle of the fifth century BC, requiring discerning judgment. As a political operator, he exhibited the wisdom and prudence of a wise player in imperial politics. During this time, Jerusalem remained small and in trouble and disgrace. The Jews became enslaved people in their land and were in great distress due to the foreign dominance and heavy taxation (Neh 9:35-36).

### **Lessons from Nehemiah**

1. **Nehemiah identified with Jerusalem's plight despite his prestigious position in Persia (1:2-4).**
  - a. Jews began their return to Jerusalem in 538 BC, yet their "problem and disgrace" persisted for about 100 years until Nehemiah's time.
  - b. Upon hearing the distressing report concerning Jerusalem, Nehemiah wept, fasted, and prayed.

### **Discussion Questions**

- c. How can we cultivate empathy for those suffering, such as those in Jerusalem in Nehemiah's time?
  - d. When should we take a moment to pause and engage in a prayer?
2. **Nehemiah confessed Israel's sins as his own (1:6-7).**
    - a. Confession of sin, in which the individual and the community blend together, is characteristic of Second Temple (after 516 BC) piety (Ezra 9:6-15; Neh 9:6-37; Dan 9:4-19).
    - b. He acknowledged that the desolation of Jerusalem was the outcome of God's punishment for the sins of Judah.
    - c. His theological belief was grounded in Deuteronomy 28 and 30, which outline a theology of retribution: obedience results in blessings from God. At the same time, disobedience leads to punishment, culminating in the loss of the land and the deportation of the Israelites.

### **Discussion Questions**

1. How can we share Nehemiah's deep sense of sin and a profound conviction to remove it?
  2. How can we confess our nation's sins as our own?
3. **He petitioned God to honor His promise of forgiveness (1:8-11).**
    - a. He paraphrased God's promise found in Deuteronomy 30:1-10.
    - b. His prayer takes the form of lament psalms. Lament psalms shift power dynamics. The imperative "remember" in Nehemiah's prayer emphasizes taking proactive action. It is not that God forgets, but rather that God desires human initiative. Only someone with a mature faith and/or experiencing severe distress could adopt such a position. It looks like God did not intervene on behalf of Jerusalem until Nehemiah's time.

- c. Lament psalms provide numerous reasons motivating God to deliver the psalmist. An appeal to God reputation is one reason (Ps 25:11).
- d. Moses illustrated this well. When Israel rebelled, God contemplated destroying Israel on two occasions (Exodus 32:7-14; Numbers 14:11-20). Each time, Moses interceded on their behalf, persuading God to relent for “His reputation.” God relented on both occasions!

### **Discussion Question**

- e. How can we “motivate” God to right the wrongs in the world?

### **4. Nehemiah embarked on a mission to rebuild Jerusalem despite facing numerous challenges.**

- a. His prayer indicates that he wanted to approach Artaxerxes, King of Persia, because of Jerusalem’s plight (1:11).
- b. As cupbearer to the Persian king, he had the option to stay in Susa and merely relish his position as one of the most powerful and resourceful individuals in Persia, but he chose instead to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the wall and fortify the Jewish community.
- c. The rest of the book illustrates the perils associated with this journey, including a plot to assassinate him. Yet, Nehemiah was successful in his mission.
- d. However, Israel remained as the Jehudah province in the Persian Empire until the late 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, necessitating further prayers and journeys akin to Nehemiah’s.
- e. Following the Persian rule (538-333 BC), the Greeks ruled Israel (333-166 BC). Subsequently, the Jews experienced a brief period of independence under the Maccabees for approximately a century (166-66 BC). However, Rome seized control of Israel in 66 BC, subjecting the Jews to foreign rule until 1948. Throughout these centuries of foreign dominance, Jews understood the dual nature of existence in two kingdoms. They persevered their distinctive identity within God’s Kingdom, necessitating wisdom to discern when to accommodate the occupying empire and when to oppose it, for their ultimate allegiance lay with the Kingdom of God.

### **Discussion Questions**

- a. Do Christians have a dual nature of existence in two kingdoms?
- b. Just as John says, we are in the world but not of the world (17:14, 16). How then do we live as citizens of the Kingdom of God?

### **Action Steps**

1. Take a moment to pause and engage in an intercessory prayer.
2. Reflect on the sins of our nation and pray for repentance and restoration, following Nehemiah’s example.

\*Addendum for Teachers

**Two Different Accounts of the Edict of Cyrus**

Cyrus Cylinder (Babylonian version)	Ezra 1:2-4
“[Nabonidus] did away with the worship of Marduk, the king of the gods... [Marduk] searched everywhere and then he took a righteous king, his favorite, by the hand, he called out his name: Cyrus, king of Anshan ...He made him enter his city Babylon without fighting or battle; he saved Babylon from hardship. He delivered Nabonidus, the king who did not revere him, into his hands. All the people of Babylon, all the land of Sumer and Akkad, princes and governors, bowed to him and kissed his feet. They rejoiced at his kingship and their faces shone...I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, mighty king...I returned the images of the gods, who had resided there, to their places and I let them dwell in eternal abodes. I gathered all their inhabitants and returned to them their dwellings.”	“This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: ‘The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you — may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.’”

\*The Cyrus Cylinder, a Babylonian rendition of the Edict of Cyrus, is currently housed in the British Museum. Nabonidus was the last king of Babylon, primarily known for his conversion to the worship of Sin, the Moon god, and his prolonged absence from Babylon. His extended stay away from the city caused unrest, particularly during the annual Enkitu Festival, which required the king’s presence, whose role was the high priest. This cylinder indicates the Marduk priests, feeling betrayed by Nabonidus, welcomed King Cyrus, the enemy king, as a devotee of their supreme god Marduk.