

“Tears and Ashes; Trumpets and Dreams”; Series: Nehemiah

Nehemiah 8

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Back in January, at the worship symposium in Grand Rapids, I experienced a one day retreat with the former chaplain of Calvin College – Dale Cooper. This retreat was structured around four simple words: Tears, Ashes, Trumpets, and Dreams.



Throughout the day, we had times of solitude where we prayed and wrote about our tears (the griefs we experienced because of loss or because of the ways that people had hurt us), our ashes (the ashes of repentance, confessing our dark disobediences), our trumpets (the times of celebration and gratitude), and our dreams (what we have to look forward to... what kingdom flourishing God has placed in our hearts for what's to come.)

And I thought, as I dwelt with this chapter this week, that these four simple words were true for the returned exiles living in Jerusalem as well... and, of course, they were, because these words came from Dale Cooper's reading of the Jewish Scriptures, and particularly the psalms.

The returned exiles had tears of sadness because of what they had lost. Though we don't see those kind of tears so much in this chapter, we know they were there in their recent memory. In their captivity, they wept for what they had lost (Psalm 137):

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
when we remembered Zion.

² There on the poplars

we hung our harps,

³ for there our captors asked us for songs,

our tormentors demanded songs of joy;
they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
⁴How can we sing the songs of the Lord
while in a foreign land?

And even when they returned to Jerusalem, when they saw the foundation of the temple being rebuilt, they wept (Ezra 3:12), because this temple was not as grand and glorious as the former temple. There was loss... The loss of how they thought things were supposed to turn out.

And you, too, have loss like this. We have leaned into that loss a bit this morning already with the ringing of the bell (toll for All Saints Day)... remembering people who have died. And there are other tears... tears when things don't turn out quite the way you thought they would. Tears over the loss of abilities, opportunities, friendships... Tears over the losses our world experiences day in and day out.

And then there are the ashes... the ashes of repentance. This is the grief that we see here in chapter 8 more specifically... The tears in Nehemiah 8 are the tears of recognition of sin. In Nehemiah 9, these tears are mixed with ash: "On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads" (9:1). When the Torah was read, the Israelites gathered there saw the vision of the way it was supposed to be. They saw how they had failed to live in accordance with the dream and vision of God.

Ashes are such an apt symbol for repentance – for grief because of our sin. Think about the last time you missed the mark – and you solidly missed it... the last time you bold-faced lied, full-on yelled, straight-up cheated, willfully ignored the tug of the Spirit. Do you remember how it felt when the Holy Spirit held up the truth of God's vision and shalom in front of you and you realized how far afield you had drifted from it? It feels like a part of you inside turns to ash... dead, feathery, unsubstantial, burned, see-through, found out, ashamed. (The first three letters of ASHAMED... are ASH.)

When the tears and ash of guilt rippled through the crowd of people who had gathered that day in the square before the Water Gate, the people were told: "This day is holy to the Lord your God. Do not mourn or weep" (v. 9)... And in verse 10, Nehemiah said, "Do not grieve,

for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (v. 10). And then in verse 11 (and this is probably my favourite because the word that is translated calm, in the Hebrew, is *chusha*... Hush... “The Levites [hushed] all the people saying, “Hush, for this is a holy day. Do not grieve.”

The author of Ecclesiastes says that there is a time and a season for every activity under heaven (Ecclesiastes 3:1-8). There *is certainly* a time for tears and for crying... for covering oneself in ashes to reflect the awareness of sin. We must never jump too soon to hush the one who grieves or to collapse the tension someone feels when proper guilt is doing its work to turn someone around... On the other hand, there is clearly a time to hush the tears, and those who had been reading and interpreting the Scriptures for the returned exiles named this time, this day, this occasion, as a time, not for tears, but for joy.

This day was, as we read, the first day of the 7th month. And in Leviticus, the first day of the seventh month was a day of complete rest – in fact it was called in Leviticus, the Festival of Trumpets (Lev 23:24), which was to be commemorated with trumpet blasts. So, this holy day was not a time for tears and ashes... this was a time for celebration. And folks, there is A LOT to celebrate in this text... there is a lot to blow trumpets about in this text... and it can be summarized in a phrase that shows up 10x in these verses: *Col-Ha’am* – all the people. This is an ALL THE PEOPLE chapter. Here’s why this is so awesome.

Verse 1 – ALL THE PEOPLE came together as one in the square. Coming together as one – diverse people coming together as one... (Behold how good and pleasant it is when people come together in unity! Psalm 133)

And check this out – it wasn’t Ezra or Nehemiah gathering the people together to read to them the word of God, it was ALL THE PEOPLE who initiated this whole festival. ALL THE PEOPLE – *they* told Ezra to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses.

And Verse 2 – ALL THE PEOPLE – were made up not just of men, but women as well... and not just adults, but *all who were able to understand* – the children as well.

And Verse 3 – what did ALL THE PEOPLE do? Did they take a nap because they realized that six hours was a really long time to hear the book of the law read (day break til noon)? No... ALL THE PEOPLE listened attentively.

Then in verse 4 we see that it is not just Ezra standing up on this wooden platform, but there were people standing next to him... not priests – otherwise it would have said so... laypeople. So, yes, Ezra was standing up high so people could see, but he was not ‘above them’ in a morally superior way... no, he had laypeople standing with him... and when he stood up to read... Verse 5 – ALL THE PEOPLE STOOD UP. And verse 6, when Ezra praised the Lord, ALL THE PEOPLE lifted their hands and said AMEN! AMEN! And they bowed down and worshiped.

And it doesn’t stop there. In verse 7 and 8, we’ve got Levites who were going around instructing and interpreting, making sure ALL THE PEOPLE could understand what was being read.

And *then* in verse 10, Nehemiah tells the people go enjoy not just food and drink, but choice food and sweet drink... and guess what, we find out that ALL THE PEOPLE is even bigger than what we thought. There’s ALL THE PEOPLE that gathered in the square in front of the Water Gate, and there’s the bigger circle of *ALL THE PEOPLE* who had nothing prepared. Check out verse 12, “then ALL THE PEOPLE went away to eat and drink, to *send portions of food* [to that bigger circle] and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.”

It seems to me that a major point of the words that had been spoken to them in that six hours of listening to Scripture was that they were God’s chosen people, wholly and dearly loved and that they were blessed to be a blessing. They were ALL GOD’S CHILDREN who were being empowered to be a blessing to ALL GOD’S CHILDREN. Cue #allthetrumpets

But now on to the last simple word: DREAMS. In verses 13 to 18 we read about the Feast of Booths or the Feast of Tabernacles which happened after the Feast of Trumpets. During this feast, people were to construct tents or booths and live out of doors – in their yards or on their roofs. This festival had two significances... it was a celebration of the harvest, but it was also a reminder of the life of the Israelite people during their time of wandering in the wilderness for 40 years before they got to the promised land... a time when they lived in tents, and when God’s temple was a tent.

So, here’s the significance that some scholars see in why they were instructed to celebrate this now – why it’s so important that we hear about this at this time in their story.

The exiles had been brought back to Jerusalem. The temple had been rebuilt. The walls had been rebuilt. Their homes had been rebuilt. There was a sense of permanence and accomplishment in this... their dreams had come true. But this experience of living outside in temporary shelters was a reminder of something... it was a reminder that no matter how far we've come and what we've completed, we are all wanderers in the wilderness depending on God for everything.

And I think this has everything to do with dreaming. You see, when we finish something and accomplish something and get settled we can stop dreaming... we stop longing... we stop wondering and being curious. But sleeping at night with your family in a temporary shelter – nothing but myrtles and palm leaves between you and the sky – well that's a place to dream and wonder about what's next... to wonder and imagine where God is leading you. To remember and believe that God is living and active and even if you don't realize it yet, God has dreams for you – and dreams for this world – that are bigger than you could ever dream... and that it's not only that you HAVE to depend on him for everything, you GET to depend on him...

I wonder if the returned exiles ever dreamed what was coming next... Could they have dreamed of the redemption on the horizon...? Could they have dreamed that God loved ALL THE PEOPLE so much that he would send his one and only Son? Not only to dry our tears, but to weep with us at the brokenness in the world... And not only to forgive our sins, but to take our sins upon himself... And not only to die for us, but to rise for us. Up from the grave, he arose! Cue the trumpets!... And not just to live triumphantly, but to plant in us through the Holy Spirit the dream of the world made new...