

DO-OVER

Remember when you were a child and there was this magical thing called a “do-over”? You messed up so much that you could not fix it. No, what you have to do is call for a “do-over”. You’ve struck out; you’ve had your three attempts at bat. The rules are pretty clear; you’re out. Ah, but not if you are allowed a “do-over”. Magically, you get to begin at the beginning; to start over. Or, let’s say that you’re wrestling your brother and he has you pinned. There is nothing you can do. No matter how much you kick, arch your back, squirm, or flail, you are pinned and the match is over. Ah, but not if your brother gives you a do-over. Do-overs are these magical moments where you get to start over. They are magical because we all need them, don’t we? We have all been completely defeated by our mistakes. There is nothing for it. You have to start over or you are done.

We are going to begin a journey through the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Now, this brings up a valid question: why? What connection can we find this ancient culture? Can we find inspiration in the rigid priest who arrives on the scene to disrupt families? One popular speaker recently said, “Personally, I think Ezra got a little carried away.” And let’s be honest, he does seem a tad rigid; a bit unreachable; a little self-righteous. But I still have difficulty with conveniently denouncing a book in the Bible as an account of a self-appointed, carried away, fanatic. It seems too easy. It absolves me of the responsibility of wrestling with the text. It may also be an attempt to view an ancient world through my modern eyes. You see, I may just as well say that Peter was a bit rigid when he cursed Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), or that he got carried away. I mean, they were struck dead because they lied about how much they sold their land for. Seems extreme to me. I think we are intended to wrestle with these passages.

Okay, so why Ezra and Nehemiah? Because, I want to wrestle with God through these accounts. I don’t want to just avoid what seems harsh or extreme to my modern ears. I believe that every passage has a relevant message for us. I believe that if we work hard and discover the intended message to the original readers, we will find ourselves being shaped by the Holy Word of God. And I must admit that I have never actually studied these books in depth. It is time. And maybe, most of all, these books are about a divine do-over. The Israelites had messed up. They had consistently flirted with other gods; they had rebelliously committed adultery even after God had given them warning after warning. In 722 BC the northern kingdom had been carted off by the Assyrians. Between 605-586 BC, the Babylonians nearly depopulated Jerusalem. Ezra takes place after Cyrus defeats the Babylonians (539 BC) and allows the Israelites to return to Jerusalem. There was no fixing this. What they needed was a do-over. And that is exactly what God gave them. We can choose to focus on the rigid racial purity at the end of the book, or we can see a God who gives his people another chance. And this time they want to get it right.

We’ll wrestle with it later, but for now, let me suggest that the racial purity is really about religious purity. And in our “everyone is okay no matter what they do or believe” society, religious purity may be a message that we need to hear. It may seem extreme to our tolerant ears, but it may be exactly what is necessary

as we are given a new start. You see, a new start is an epic fail if I decide to take the same path I took before. It is kind of like one of my computers at my office (at a state run institution). I can reboot that thing all day long and it still comes back as a painfully slow and sluggish computer. Nothing has changed. Some use their do-overs like that. They are given this brand new start and they travel the exact same path.

As we begin this journey through an ancient text, may we be renewed by God's loving do-over. I want to be shaped by the text; to be molded by the Word; to be called ever upward. Ezra may have been rigid, but that was probably exactly what God willed in this atmosphere of new beginnings. The people had rebooted and then began down the same path that got them punished by God in the first place. Maybe instead of accusing Ezra of being too rigid, we may need to consider that we are not rigid enough; that our religion is as motivating as cuddly kitten. It may inspire a lot of "oohs" and "ahs" but leads to no real action. I want my do-over to count for something. I want to be renewed by a pure and undefiled religion; a religion that is all consuming; a religion that moves me to the core of my soul. Don't you?

Article by: Walter Clark