

## Rebuilt, but Not Finished

### *Nehemiah Review*

**Introduction:** We come to the end of our study of both Ezra and Nehemiah, two books that covered three returns to Jerusalem from a people who had left the land defeated, rebellious, and hopeless. The first **return** was under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua, where God **stirred the spirit** of Cyrus, king of Persia (Ezra 1:1), and stirred the spirit of over 50,000 Israelites to return to a land they had never seen or visited. This return saw the restoration of the altar and Temple (Ezra 3:10; 6:16) despite constant opposition. Great rejoicing ensued, but though the edifice was finished, true worship and unity was not. This led to the return of Ezra 57 years later, and he was able to help **restore** the study of God's Word, the priestly order, and corporate worship, including the confession of sin. However, the group of worshippers were weak in the culture, never able to complete the task, left unprotected from a hostile society around them. This led to a leader in **Nehemiah** who came back 13 years later to finish what no one else could, a protective wall around Jerusalem and the Temple, affording the nation freedom of worship and corporate identity. Under his leadership, the wall was **rebuilt** in 52 days, an astonishing accomplishment for any government official. This culminated in a revived commitment to God's Word, confession of sin, and self-obligation to keep the Law with renewed vigor. The wall was dedicated, 12 years went by with Nehemiah returning to Persia for a time before returning once again. What he found was disturbing with the people drifting back once again to old, sinful habits of non-separation and Sabbath violation.

The book of Nehemiah ends without a clear close, an unfinished story with a people in process, still flailing, searching for consistency, contentment, and leadership. This sets the stage for the revelation of Jesus 400 years after the close of the OT, and reminds us all of our true need. This morning we want to look back at what we learned through Nehemiah, particularly in terms of **personal worship, leadership, and revival**, before looking forward to what this book anticipated.

#### **A Focus on Personal Worship:**

We were created to worship. Sin corrupted worship. Missions exists because worship does not. Worship recognizes God's greatness, our weakness and depravity, and lives to glorify Him. Worship is restored through Jesus' death, forgiveness, and reconciliation to the Father. Worship is made up of many parts, some of which we clearly see in Nehemiah's life.

#### **Prayer**

**1:4** As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, **and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven**

**1:11** O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and **give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."**

Upon hearing a report of the trouble and shame that his people in Jerusalem, Nehemiah set out to do the most effective, powerful, and strategic thing he could: **he prayed**. He prayed for almost 4 months. He prayed according to God's character, His promises, and confessed personal and corporate sin. We saw that **prayer led to vision that led to risk taking faith**. Clear and focused prayer gave a clear understanding of next steps, which allowed him to risk his life, reputation, and comfort before the king. He followed this prayer up with more prayer (2:4; 4:4; 6:9).

Often we do not engage in risk because we do not see something worth risking for, and we will never have that kind of clarity without first seeking the face of God, seeking to understand His will. There is no

true worship without prayer, both personal and corporate. *Is our life characterized by continual prayer, or do we feel like we are too busy to pray? Prayerlessness is a declaration of independence from God, showing that we believe we do not need nor do we treasure Him.*

### Providence

**2:8** and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." **And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.**

**2:12** Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. **And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.** There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode.

**2:20** Then I replied to them, "**The God of heaven will make us prosper,** and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."

God's sovereign hand is in control over all things, but His invisible hand is what works all things out according to His will, which is called Providence. In other words, God usually does not work in the realm of **miraculous** (in fact, we often overuse the term miracle - and instead should define things in terms of providence). As Nehemiah prayed for God to lead, to clarify, and to move He understood that God did not function in signs and wonders typically, but in unseen ways taken by faith. We saw this from the **stirring of God on the spirit of man, "the good hand of my God was upon me"**, and "*God had put into my heart.*" We understand, as Nehemiah, that worship in life is functioning by faith in everything, since "**without faith it is impossible to please God.**" (Heb. 11:6). We have been given the Spirit, the Word, and the mind of Christ to make decisions, to figure out what to do next, and to give glory to Him for all that happens. Trusting in God's providence means we want Him to guide and lead in all things, and we seek to give Him credit and glory for everything.

### Pioneering

**1:3** And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived **the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.**"

**1:11** Now I was cupbearer to the king.

**2:5** And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, **that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it.**"

This last week I spent time with men and women in Atlanta who united together for the express purpose of helping bring the knowledge of God through the gospel to the least reached, those areas with the lowest percentage of a population who know Christ as their Savior and Lord. This group has a *pioneering mindset*, willing to go where others have not or will not go. That same mindset was seen in Nehemiah as he sought to honor the Lord. His worship of God through prayer, His trust in His providential care, led Nehemiah, a cupbearer of the king (not a bad job, but not a superhero) to do something he had never done before, and quite frankly, something no one had done before. The cumulative effect of worship is the willingness to pioneer: a willingness to be the first, to do what no one around is willing to do. This looks like all the right kinds of counter-cultural and counter-intuitive actions, from missions to service, sacrifice, and risk. True worship will set us apart from the culture around, even sometimes the church culture around. We are willing to leave the comfort of Simi Valley for a place like Rancho Cucamonga, willing to reach out to new families who are different than us,

willing to serve in areas that make us uncomfortable. This can only happen when we are committed to God in worship, with prayer that leads to vision that leads to pioneering type of faith.

### **A Commitment to Godly Leadership**

Perhaps one of the most clear studies in Scripture on leadership, we looked at how Nehemiah was able to mobilize, motivate, and move a group of people to accomplish the unthinkable: building a wall that had failed for decades in just 52 days. We are reminded that the church and the home live and die with leadership, from both men and women, and that we are committed to training up, equipping, and sending not just workers, but *leaders*, into the world.

#### **Formed out of Deep Conviction**

**2:17-18** Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." <sup>18</sup> **And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good**, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "**Let us rise up and build.**" **So they strengthened their hands for the good work.**

**5:10-11** Moreover, I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. **Let us abandon this exacting of interest.** <sup>11</sup> **Return to them this very day their fields**, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the percentage of money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them."

**6:8-9** Then I sent to him, saying, "No such things as you say have been done, for you are inventing them out of your own mind." <sup>9</sup> **For they all wanted to frighten us, thinking, "Their hands will drop from the work, and it will not be done."** But now, O God, strengthen my hands.

Nehemiah led with boldness and courage. He came into a largely unknown situation, leading people he did not know, and faced an enemy of unknown strength and resolve. His leadership was in part because of how God made Him, as all leaders will. God has given us gifts, abilities and even personalities that help in our leadership and life overall, but those are NOT the driving qualities of exemplary leadership. What set Nehemiah apart was the **deep conviction** that he was doing something right, ordained by God, and ultimately for His glory. This meant that he could operate with **fearlessness**, that he was quick to call out the sin of the most powerful of his own people, and could blaze a trail for those who were longing for someone they could follow.

Conviction can only come from the Lord, only come from a personal understanding and interaction with God and His Word, and can only be born out of a personal, experiential relationship with God. We used to joke with our college students while playing Ultimate Frisbee, "I can't teach you desire." It is the same with conviction. It cannot be told, it must be attained. When we actually attain it through coming to grips with the promises of God through Scripture, we move from fearful and indecisive to bold and courageous: "**I will never leave you nor forsake you.**" (Heb. 13:5, Josh. 1:5), "Behold, I am with you always to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:20); and "**I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.**" (Matt. 16:18). Because of this we are free to "Make disciples of all nations" (Matt. 28:19) and proclaim forgiveness and repentance to all nations (Luke 24:47). When we are convinced that God means what He says, we can lead out of conviction, not conformity.

#### **Embracing the Realities of Risk**

**2:4** Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Nehemiah had prayed, planned, and prepared for a plan to go to Jerusalem to re-build the wall, but that did not mean it would be easy. In fact, right before he asked the king for permission, the text informs us that we was **much afraid**. Yet, because he was convinced, he was willing to risk. Risk is not the absence of fear nor that certainty of the short-term outcome, but it is assured of what God has promised overall and is willing to hazard life to get there. We are continually desiring to adopt a mindset of proper risk here, since it is NOT OUR DEFAULT setting, nor is anything great accomplished without it. Leadership requires risk in all shapes and sizes, out of a ragged trust in the purpose of God.

#### **Standing Firm through Opposition**

**4:9** And we **prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection** against them day and night.

**4:14** And I looked and arose and said to the nobles and to the officials and to the rest of the people, "**Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your homes.**"

**4:17** who were building on the wall. Those who carried burdens were loaded in such a way that each labored on the work with one hand and held his weapon with the other.<sup>18</sup> **And each of the builders had his sword strapped at his side while he built.** The man who sounded the trumpet was beside me.

Leaders will face opposition, from outside and from inside, from enemies and supposed friends. Nehemiah trusted the Lord with his life, and also prepared for battle. He trusted in God's protection and also carried a sword. This did not mean he was looking for a fight, but he knew the battle was raging around him. We pray and prepare for the fight we are in which happens in the spiritual realm and makes landfall in physical. We know that we are going to be opposed if we seek to follow the Lord's will. Some will leave California, but we need people to stay as our government continues to change, with growing opposition to what we believe the Bible teaches. We will face regulatory opposition, financial, and even legal attacks since our fight is not against flesh and blood but against principalities and powers (Eph. 6:12). But in the midst of it all, we remember the Lord, who is great and awesome! Our fight is not against those who oppose us, since we are called to love and reach those. But we also prepare ourselves the best we can to operate within the culture we've been placed.

#### **An Expectancy of Revival**

Finally, we looked at the reality of revival, both in corporate senses and individual. Revival counters the normal drift that can happen in each of our hearts. We get out of rhythm, routine, and since we do not feel the consequence right away, the discipline that it takes to continually walk by the Spirit. Revival then, is a continual area that we strive for, knowing the battle we have in our flesh.

#### **Scripture is Understood and Authoritative**

**8:1-2** And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. **And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel.**<sup>2</sup> So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month.

**8:8** They read **from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.**

**8:12** And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because **they had understood the words that were declared to them.**

Revival begins and ends with Scripture. When Scripture is central, when it is authoritative and the sufficient means by which we live, upward growth will happen. When Scripture takes a secondary role, when it is less than primary, opinions, feelings, and our flesh rules. How do we know truth? Through His Word? How are we sanctified? Through the Word. How do we consistently find hope in the midst of sorrow, peace in pain, and strength in weakness? Through the all sufficient Word of God. When the Word was central, Israel thrived. When the Word is central in our home, we move forward in health.

### Confession of Sin is Normative

**9:3** And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day; for another quarter of **it they made confession and worshiped the LORD their God.**

The church should be a safe space, a place that we all can come with the same foundational reality: *we are all sinners, we all struggle with sin, and all are in need of love, forgiveness and grace.* Twice in Ezra and Nehemiah the nation was driven to confession, and both times it was met with rejoicing on the other side. The pathway to joy must cross through the gateway of confession. If salvation requires faith given repentance, then our life in Christ must be characterized by ongoing and continual confession and repentance. We should be more shocked here when someone is not in need of confession of sin and forgiveness than someone who seemingly has it all together and has nothing to work on.

### Reformation is Continual

**9:38** "Because of all this **we make a firm covenant** in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests."

**13:9** Then I gave orders, **and they cleansed the chambers**, and I brought back there the vessels of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.

**13:19** As soon as it began to grow dark at the gates of Jerusalem before the Sabbath, **I commanded that the doors should be shut and gave orders that they should not be opened until after the Sabbath.** And I stationed some of my servants at the gates, that no load might be brought in on the Sabbath day.

**13:25** And I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves."

We are always reforming. Nehemiah returned after a short hiatus to find the people had drifted back from their commitments. Eliashib the high priest had welcomed Tobiah, an enemy of Israel, to stay and live in a room in the Temple reserved for the storage of tithes (13:4-9). The people had not only begun to work on the Sabbath, they allowed outsiders to conduct business in Jerusalem on the holy day (13:10-14). And the people began to intermarry once again, even with one of the priests sons marrying into the family of Sanballat, the enemy of Israel. Nehemiah came back and made swift changes and kicked Tobiah out, shut the doors of the city on the Sabbath, and chased out the son-in-law of Sanballat. He reformed because that is what a leader does.

But then the book ends, and with it, the historical narrative of the OT. Its strange that it leaves us hanging, without resolution. Things are **rebuilt, but not right. Things are rebuilt but it does not seem peaceful. Things are rebuilt but there is still dissonance.** There is a good reason for this: its because the story is not done.

The rest of the 400 year history was a mixture of unsettled religious practice, seemingly strong political revival, and ultimate subjugation. Persia continued its rule and allowed Israel to worship for another 100 years, but Israel was never strong. This gave way to the rule of Greece, through the Ptolemies (301-

198 B.C) and the Seleucids (198-143) in Judah, which through Hellenism brought religious freedom but economic oppression. This was marked in 167 B.C when Antiochus Epihanes IV sacrificed a pig on the altar in Jerusalem and put up a statue of Zeus on the Temple mount. This led to a revolt by the Maccabees, a family of the Hasmoneans. These fought the Greeks for political and religious freedom, but it simply created instability until the Romans took control in 63 B.C, giving Herod the Great authority over the region in 37 B.C. It was during this time of history that the Pharisee's, Sadducees, and Essenes were formed, as well as worship in the Synagogue. But never again did Israel regain the strength and unity they once had when they were committed to following God's commands, His Law, His way in the united Monarchy under David.

What do we learn from all of this? 1) OT Israel was longing for a Savior to come. They were unsettled because the king they desired was the King of Judah, the Promised One who would lead them to peace and joy by becoming the Atonement for them, taking their sin on Himself. 2) They still refused to bow to Him since they were looking for a political king, one they had built up in their own mind 3) God had not forgotten nor was He slack in fulfilling His promises. By the time Rome had taken over, there was relative peace in the world (Pax Romana), a common language, interconnecting roads, and people who were open to different religions. In other words, God will always fulfill His promises, and did so through His Son, giving us the opportunity to come to Him by faith and find peace.

So the story is not over. We continue to live in same realities, except we live on the other end of history knowing that Jesus did come, He did die, and He will reign forever.