

I. Nehemiah in Biblical Perspective
The Memoirs of Nehemiah: Arise and Build
“Nehemiah–The Man and His Heart”
Nehemiah 1
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August 14, 2011 – Morning Sermon

We will start out by looking at Nehemiah 1:1-3 and then Nehemiah 2:17-18. We start this series to carry us through to the Advent season. Nehemiah 1:1-3, 2:17-18 says *1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital, 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. 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.” 2:17 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.” 18 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.*

The grass withers, the flower fades and God’s Word abides forever, by His grace and mercy may this His Word be preached for you.

We are starting our study in Nehemiah and I am really looking forward to it. Some are probably thinking that this acquisition of the new property, the youth ministry facility and the children’s ministry facility are all under the rubric of that verse “Let us arise up and build for the Lord our God will grant us success” and yes that is one of the reasons we are in Nehemiah but actually it’s more than that. I have three objectives that I want you to remember. It will be a little bit of a challenge for the frailties of this preacher to accomplish this. The three objectives are from this passage.

The first objective is I want us to use this as a road map during our ‘arise and build’ time. For coming generations we will arise and build. These are coming generations of new Christians – students coming to Christ, children coming to Christ – coming generations of pastors, missionaries and we are looking forward to that with great anticipation of how the Lord will take this coming generation ministry that is Christ centered, Gospel driven, Spirit filled ministry and see what the Lord is yet going to do in the future and how these facilities will yet to be used. So this study will be like a road map because in the book of Nehemiah facility acquisition and expansion was accomplished. How did Nehemiah lead the people to do that?

For instance, it is not the tithe. The tithe is used in the ministry through facilities but why is it sacrificial gifts beyond the tithe that are for facilities development? It is right here in the book of Nehemiah. Why do we make statements like, not equal gifts but equal sacrifice? The very road map of how to approach such ministry facility effectiveness, renovation, expansion and how to accomplish that is laid out in Nehemiah so we’ll take a look at it so we might arise and build for coming generations.

The second objective I want to do is I want to make sure that you see Christ in the book of Nehemiah. It says that Jesus, beginning with Moses and all the prophets

explained Himself in all the Scriptures and that would have been the Old Testament. Here is the challenge. Nehemiah is not directly quoted in the New Testament. We have been going through the Old Testament on Sunday nights and one of the things that is very helpful is seeing how Jesus is being expounded from the Old Testament by taking the trajectory of the Old Testament and how it lands in the New Testament or you look to the New Testament and see how it uses that Old Testament text. Nehemiah is not directly quoted or referenced so we don't get that help, but how is that going to be seen? I am looking forward with much anticipation at how we can look at this statement of how Nehemiah, this son of Judah, points us to Christ throughout the book of Nehemiah.

The third objective is this. We have heard phrases like 'culture war' and we're fully aware that we're not living in a post Christian era in our country. We are living in a significantly anti-Christian and that's not called to arms in that sense. It's just recognition of fact. All of the foundations are being challenged like the sanctity of life, the sanctity of marriage, the sanctity of sexuality within in the context of marriage, the sanctity of Biblical sexuality, etc. Some say it all went downhill when we took God out of school. I want you to know that God is not out of school. As long as there are algebra tests God will be in school. There will be prayer in school also. Here is what I want you to see. We are not in a culture war. We are in a spiritual war. It's a holy war with divinely fashioned weapons to win people and that's how nations are affected. We are going to see how Nehemiah engaged in such a holy war and that's the road map that is really on my heart. I want us to see how God's people from distress and shame carried the battle forward for the cause of God, for the glory of God, in a way that honored the Lord God.

So as we come to the book of Nehemiah, this best way to tackle this thirteen chapter memoir of Nehemiah is to simply look at how it is laid out for us. We just finished the book of Genesis and we took the outline of it right out of the book because it was made up of ten books and each book was introduced with "the generations of..." Nehemiah is a very simple outline. Nehemiah 1 through 7 is Nehemiah rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. The second part of the book, Nehemiah 8 through 13, is Nehemiah rebuilding the city itself, the people and the city itself. How does he rebuild the wall and then from rebuilding the wall how does he rebuild the city? That's the way the book falls out and that's the way we'll go through it.

However in this study all I want to do is just introduce Nehemiah to you and then we'll start moving toward those three objectives, the road map to how facilities are used to accomplish ministry, how they are put in a place that honors the Lord, how we can see Christ in the book of Nehemiah and how God's people enter into this spiritual war for the capturing of the souls of men and women and capturing every thought unto the obedience of Jesus Christ. I believe the first thing to do is to introduce you to the man.

First of all, Nehemiah was a man of God. That stands out pretty clearly because his very name has God's name in it. The "ah" at the end of Nehemiah is a part of the name Yahweh. Nehemiah wants to know about the city of God, the people of God and their condition. Hanani, his brother, basically says, "They are in distress, shame and the walls that Nebuchadnezzar destroyed over hundred years ago are still down. The gates are burned up, so they stand helpless, in shame and in distress." So what does Nehemiah do?

He doesn't sit down and make a plan. Nehemiah 1:4-11 says **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. 5* And I said, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, **6** *let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. 7* We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. **8** *Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, 9* but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.' **10** *They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. 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." Now I was cupbearer to the king. He is speaking of Artaxerxes the first where he was the cupbearer to the king.

Nehemiah is a man of God and as soon as he hears this he is overwhelmed. I really believe for you and I to see this as a road map for today, no matter what we are dealing with from the book of Nehemiah focused upon Christ with our eyes fixed on Jesus, we need to go back and understand what was happening then. We actually know the year Nehemiah is written when he mentions the year and the month. This book covers about seven months in total and it is written around the year 445 BC. I want to set the book of Nehemiah in its context and how it sits in your Bible.

In your Bible you have a flow of history that takes place. When we finished the book of Genesis God's people were in slavery in Egypt and they were going to be there for 430 years until they were ready to be used of God to take the Promised Land and bring judgment upon the Amorites. The book of Joshua is the occupation of that land. The book of Judges tells us how they are ruled through judges which do not accomplish what they need. They are constantly in need of revival. They constantly commit spiritual adultery and abandon the Lord. So they call for a king. They choose a king like the kings of this world. They choose a man by the name of Saul from the tribe of Benjamin. God replaces him by bringing to them the man He chooses to be king from the tribe of Judah in fulfillment of God's Word and that is David. After David comes David's son, Solomon but Solomon leads them astray. God told them that when they go astray which they did and they possibly even took place in child sacrifices. They worshipped Molech. They worshipped pagan gods and even brought pagan gods right into the temple.

God told them when they did that He would bring a nation that was not His nation to bring the discipline of His judgment to bring them to repentance. So He brings a kingdom called Assyria and they capture the ten tribes in northern Israel because the kingdom has now been divided. Now ten tribes have been taken off into captivity and intermarried with pagan nations and committing pagan worship. About one hundred years later the two southern tribes did the same thing. They also went into spiritual adultery, committed ungodliness, immorality and abandoned the true worship of God. So

God raised up another nation that defeated Assyria which was Babylon. The Babylonians come down in 605 BC and they take up a segment of the population off into exile, including men like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who are about the same age as our junior high students. These young men stand firm and fast for the Lord and we get books like Daniel and Jeremiah.

Jeremiah prophesies that this will only last 70 years. Nebuchadnezzar goes back in 597 BC and takes more people and destroys more of Jerusalem. He goes back in 586 BC and takes more and utterly destroys Jerusalem, including the walls and the gates. We know from the hand of Daniel that the grace of God came upon Nebuchadnezzar but he is then succeeded by other kings. Then the kingdom of Babylon is brought down by the hand of God in fulfillment of prophecy and God raises up a man whom He says is His servant. His name was Cyrus. The Medo-Persian Empire then takes over the Babylonian Empire. Cyrus then makes a decree to send the people back in the 70th year of their exile. They go back in 538 BC and they are led back to rebuild the temple and are given the temple furnishings.

We not only have this written in the Bible but we have this recorded in things outside the Bible, such as the Cyrus Cylinder that affirms that this very thing happened that the Bible records in fulfillment of prophecy. They are led back by a man named Zerubbabel who is in the line of Christ from the tribe of Judah and by a high priest named Joshua. They rebuild the temple through many trials and challenges and the people become discouraged and begin to fall away. So God sends a second wave of exiles back which is now under the rule of Artaxerxes and are led by a teacher named Ezra. He said the people are in disarray and they need to know God's Word. So Ezra set his heart to know the Word of God, study the Word of God, do the Word of God and teach the Word of God because he knew that God's people can't do what is pleasing to the Lord God unless they know the Word of God. You can know the Word of God and not live pleasing to the God of the Word but you can't live for the Lord of the Word without knowing His Word. Ezra even tried to rebuild the wall but they faltered.

So here they are with the temple, the altar and false worship is taking place. Less than fifty years after they had been sent back from exile had begun to intermarry outside of the covenant and had begun to engage in pagan worship and idolatry as well as all types of sexual immorality. So Ezra comes back to teach them and call them to repentance. They have faltered again so God sends a third leader from the Persian Empire and his name is Nehemiah. There are three Nehemiahs mentioned in your Bible but there is no Nehemiah like this Nehemiah. This is the one that we are going to look at. Nehemiah hears the condition of the people and he comes back right in the middle of Ezra's ministry. Ezra becomes the teacher and preacher and Nehemiah becomes the leader to rebuild the wall so that the people will worship and serve the true and living God.

There are about seven books in your Bible that are around this period of time. There is I and II Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai and Zechariah. There are some key books of the Bible to help you understand what happens here but the book of Nehemiah is not like the book of Ezra that has this length of time. The book of Nehemiah only focuses on one year of Nehemiah's ministry there and specifically focuses on the 52 days it took to rebuild the wall itself.

The book of Nehemiah begins to give us some dynamics and some lessons. We see first of all that God sent a leader and this leader was a man of God. He was an aggressive man of God and a true leader. He would stay the course and be persistent. He was a passionate man of God. When he hears the condition of the people he sits down, weeps, repents of his own sin and calls the people to repent. No matter what the enmity is against him he stays the course with passion and persistence. He is a rough man of God, he's imperfect and we'll see a time when he fell into a little cursing. More than that when he got upset with one leader and do you know what he did to him? When I was growing up my daddy used to say to me when I was acting up, "Son, if you don't straighten up I'm going to snatch you bald headed!" That's pretty much what Nehemiah did to this man when he got upset with him. So he's not a perfect leader. He has some rough edges but he's a man of God, who loves God, desires to serve God and so that's how we see him in this book.

By the way, Ezra and Nehemiah were once one book. In fact, I and II Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah were one book. Then they put out I and II Chronicles to give you the foundation of God's blessing, then Ezra and how he brought the Word of God to the people of God and then Nehemiah becomes this focuses area where they began to teach all about Him.

So we have Nehemiah who is a man of God and a leader. Let me tell you how he is a leader. Number one his father is Hacaliah but we don't know anything about him. We know Nehemiah is a leader because he is a cupbearer to the king. It does not mean he had a napkin over his arm and brought the cup in for the king to drink. The cupbearer was responsible for the life of the king. He was the third most important man in the kingdom. It is interesting to note how a man of God can serve and be desirable in a pagan empire as a leader. So he is a leader who is a statesman. Secondly, he becomes the governor of the province between Persia and Egypt who were then trying to take over Persia. He is even allowed to rebuild their walls with no fear of what he will do. He is trustworthy. Thirdly, he is leader in what we could see as the church in the Old Testament. He becomes a leader of God's people. To be a leader of God's people he doesn't disengage from the people of the world to have an impact for God there and he doesn't sell out to the world as he ministers to the world. He is faithfully leading the people of God into the world for the glory of God. He is really an interesting guy with unbelievable dimensions.

He also has a heart for God that is absolutely passionate. Nehemiah has such a heart for God that his leadership is not a matter of going to a leadership conference to get the techniques. Sixteen times Nehemiah says "My God..." He is not only a man of God but he has a heart for God. He is my God. This heart for God just comes through in powerful ways as he engages in devotion to the Lord, in the discipline of serving the Lord, and here's the key. Nehemiah's leadership flows from his relationship with God. In other words, his leadership is an overflow of his fellowship with God therefore his leadership doesn't bring people to him but moves people to worship God. So where are we headed with this?

I want to give you three takeaways in conclusion for this study. The first takeaway is that as we go through the book of Nehemiah we want to go through it with great anticipation because as we look at these roadmaps, how do we as the people of God engage the opposition in this world in a way that we are winning people and spreading

the Kingdom of God? What can we learn from this and what is the roadmap that takes us through the whole issue of the property, facilities and coming generations to put into place facilities that facilitate ministry?

As we anticipate this, I believe we are going to see five things that will be very helpful. Number one we'll learn about leadership. How does leadership flow from fellowship with God and what does it flow to? We will learn basic, Biblical principles by looking at Nehemiah, the man of God with a heart for God.

Secondly, we'll see the sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man and his moral agency are not two contradictory poles that we have to sell out to one or the other but that they are actually two threads woven into the fabric of life. Nehemiah 2 said "God will give us success, so they strengthened their hands for the work." Their confidence in the sovereignty of God did not lead to passivity and carelessness but their effort in strengthening their hands was not what they depended upon. They depended upon God and His strength upon them. It was His strength that strengthened them. We will continually see how the sovereignty of God was foundational and their response to God was operational. The two will work together. In the name of being confident in God it doesn't lead you to passivity and carelessness. He says, "God will give us the victory, now each one of you bring a sword to the wall." Their trust was "God give the victory, now pick up your sword." They understood that the same God who has ordained the end has ordained the means. So I embrace the means and my trust is that God will bring it to the proper end - Man proposes God disposes.

The third thing we're going to learn is the priority of prayer and fasting. When Nehemiah finds out that God's people are in distress, they have shame, the walls are down and the gates are burned he doesn't come up with a plan, he goes to his knees. He engages not simply in prayer but in prayer and fasting. Question – when was the last time you and I fasted? You don't need to announce it because basically it is a private matter but I'm not sure if this is one of the most neglected means in Christianity. I'm not talking about a health technique or dieting but I'm talking about being so moved by the impact of sin that we go to our knees and say "God, even the necessities of life have no taste for me, I'm seeking You." Nehemiah was moved to prayer and fasting.

Fourthly we are going to see the primacy of preaching and teaching God's Word. Nehemiah's whole point will be to support Ezra, the teacher. When the wall is built Ezra comes forth to teach where God's Word is right at the core. They are holding fast to the Word of God. It's being preached and taught, even to the point that they love God's Word. God willing, we try to from a true heart to imitate that but it's here in the book of Nehemiah that gives us our tradition that when the Word is preached it is first read. Nehemiah tells us that when they opened the Word of God the people stood for they knew they were about to hear God – this is His Word. It's the truth.

Then fifthly we will see the pinnacle of worship. Why did God make me? Why did God save me? Why do I still breathe now? Why is my heart beating? It is to the praise and the glory of His grace. The pinnacle of life is the worship of God and Nehemiah will teach them something that we need to grasp. I know that we need to connect to the culture and speak the language of the culture but there is something about worship in the Bible that's holy other than culture. That's why He said "Take my people out for three days" and Pharaoh said "We'll let them worship here." He said, "Three days out, get them here." There is something sacred and different. It is not a Starbucks

moment. It's not one more dial on the entertainment calendar of my life. It is this special moment when God's people have assembled out of their love for Christ and one another, inviting any and all who desire to come in, but we have come before Him to give Him praise that He might be exalted. We desire to do so in spirit and in truth. Our reverence is totally saturated with our joy. Our joy doesn't lead us to triviality and our reverence doesn't lead us to morbidity. It is the joy and reverence of God's people where they are married in the moment of blessing the Lord saying "Bless the Lord O my soul" and they encourage one another as the day draws near. It is assembling together for the praise of God. That gives me the anticipation of some of the themes we will look at but now let me give you a second takeaway.

The second takeaway is for you and I to understand the real objective. The objective of Nehemiah is not simply to build a wall, not to hang a gate but to secure the worship of God by the people of God. You can see his objective in the outline of the book of Nehemiah. In the first half of Nehemiah he rebuilds the wall but in the last half of the book he rebuilds the city. He rebuilds the wall to rebuild the city and he is using the moment to rebuild the wall to rebuild the people, to rebuild the city. The wall is not the end or the objective. It is a wonderful thing to have. It facilitates God's protection upon them. His objective is to rebuild a people to rebuild a city that they might worship God. In the middle of the book of Nehemiah, in Nehemiah 7 it says three different times "the wall was rebuilt" and in Nehemiah 8 the people who had been so affected in the process assembled and shouted "Amen!" They read the Word, sung praises to God, fell upon their knees with prayer and the whole purpose was to bring them to the pinnacle of worship as the city of God.

So I would like to say in anticipation that as much as I am looking forward to seeing those thousands of kids in that barn, the children's worship center, the adult education space and all of those things that is not the objective. The objective is as you walk through this you as the people of God will have great joy in being a part of what God is doing and seeing what God does in you and your family. It's not only facilitating ministry but it's facilitating the growth of the people who are engaged in providing the facilities. The people in Nehemiah 1 are in distress and shame. Nehemiah says after prayer and fasting "We'll hang the gates, rebuild the wall to deal with the distress and shame so that no longer the shame of their sin, corruption and unfaithfulness is their focus but they now have arisen to obedience in the Lord and serve Him. Now they will want to worship and praise the Lord who has rebuilt them that the city would stand and the city of God comes together to give praise to God."

The real objective is a people who are able to have their shame shed because of the intervention of God and His divine protection as He grows them to the praise of the glory of His grace. When they assemble they praise Him. When they disassemble they praise Him. Whether they eat or drink or whatsoever they do they do all to the glory of God.

The third takeaway is the clear and present danger that is before us. The clear and present danger that is before us is that we exist in a post-Christian or more rightly said anti-Christian culture at the moment and it's very clear that the assault is on whether it's the sanctity of life, marriage, sexuality or all of those things that God in His redeeming grace has through His common grace planted in our culture that has blessed us and that is all around us. As we exist in that situation the clear and present danger is to look to the

wrong place for the answer. I want God to give this country continually Godly leaders – presidents, senators, governors, etc – but that’s not the answer. I want us to have Godly laws but that’s not the answer. I’d love to have some Godly media communication, some Godly entertainment that honors what is right, virtuous and excellent but I know those things very seldom precede the answer. They follow what is really the answer.

Nehemiah understood something. The problem with the people was their shame, distress and unfaithfulness. That’s why C.S. Lewis said when asked ‘what is the problem with the world,’ he answered “It is simple. The problem with the world is me.” I expect the world to act like the world but the problem today is the church is acting like the world. I know we are in the world and I don’t want us to leave it but I don’t want it in us. That’s why Nehemiah went to prayer, confession, repentance, before he went to anything else. He understood the distress and shame of the people is what had rendered them impotent and had given courage to all the enemies. They were an exiled people that God had delivered but less than a hundred years after that deliverance their condition was right back into the place that had caused them to be exiled.

So Nehemiah takes this wall, rebuilds it but his bigger aim was not contiguous property or youth facilities or a children’s worship center, it is that God’s people will grow in the process and then God’s Word will so impact His people that they will deal with the grace of God and know what the grace of God does that takes you just where you are but refuse to let you stay where you are, who blesses you freely and then transforms you gloriously. So something changes and the world is attracted to not how much like them we are but how much we love them and what God’s grace does in someone’s life. That is what attracts and Nehemiah understood that.

Nehemiah was of the tribe of Judah and certainly a type of Christ but praise the Lord he is pointing us beyond himself and that is to Christ. Here is Nehemiah a cupbearer, the third powerful, everything is comfortable, has the king’s ear and he left it all to deliver a people who were in shame and distress. He is only a faint reflection pointing us to the glorious Savior who left the riches of eternity, humbled Himself to come and save us in our distress and shame. He is the Wall of our deliverance. He is the One who saves us. He is the One who delivers us from our shame and his corruption by the work of the cross, the glory of the resurrection, His present intercession and the claims of His crown upon us for He is Lord.

Take a few moments to listen to the Holy Spirit. Ask Him to help us go through this book and not be the same by God’s grace, to take the current season of this church and as we embrace what He has called us to, we would have the greater objectives of growing in grace, and loving to give Him praise for the glory of His grace. Pray that God would revive and rebuild His church again that a nation and all the nations might see the transforming power of Christ. You might be reading this today and in distress and shame you come not to Nehemiah but to the One who came for you on the cross and say “Christ to You I come just as I am.” Would you put your trust in Him? Let’s pray.

Prayer:

O Father, as we journey through this book by Your Spirit, even in this day, make us men and women of God with hearts for God, for the praise, the glory and worship of our God, I ask this in Jesus’ Name, Amen.