

“To Be Continued”

Nehemiah 6:15-16

Well, this morning you may want to keep your Bibles open as well, because we're going to be looking through several passages throughout both Ezra and Nehemiah. You know, in our Bibles, they are given to us as two separate books. But when they were originally given, they were one scroll. And we're going to try to take an overview of that one scroll to help us see what God would have for us this morning.

And we're going to begin with Nehemiah chapter six, beginning with verse 15 and 16, just two verses to begin our time in God's Word.

So the wall was finished on the 25th day of the month, Elul, in 52 days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid, and fell greatly in their own esteem. And they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

This is God's holy and inspired word. By his grace and mercy may it now be preached for you. Please be seated.

Well, the passage in Nehemiah this morning opened simply by telling us that God did an incredible work through his people, and he did it in record time. The walls of safety, which used to surround Jerusalem, had long since lay in rubble. The people in Jerusalem, as meager as they were, were vulnerable to any enemy attack that would come from the outside in.

So without these walls, the vulnerability was obvious. But now, under Nehemiah's leadership, the walls have been restored. In only 52 days. This was such an astounding feat that the surrounding nations took notice. They couldn't help us see that this work could be done in record time. And they realized, in fact, we are told that they had a sudden inferiority complex come over them.

They were told that they shook with fear and they fell in their own esteem. Seeing that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God. But where did this work actually begin? To answer this question, we have to turn back away in our Bibles. If you're familiar with the narrative of Ezra and Nehemiah, you know that we're turning back now to Ezra chapter one.

We're going back in history another 100 years before the wall was rebuilt. And if you are tracking with the narrative, you know that we have just done something this morning in this sermon that many of you would never do. When you get a new book, you know, the book you get the one you've been waiting for. Amazon was delivered, took delay, finally got delivered.

You've been dying to read it. And what we just did is we looked to the last chapter to see how it ended before we read through all the details, to see how it began. Well, this morning, as we look through the word, we're going to find out that we've done this on purpose, because there is a truth that we need to understand.

The truth is simply this the work of God is seamless and ongoing. He has ordained the end from the beginning, and he will accomplish everything that he has planned to do. Sometimes it may look like his plan gets a bit interrupted. There are stops and starts that kind of dot. The path along the way. Other times these words pop up, words I used to hate as a kid watching my favorite TV series.

Some of you might remember it. Fugitive. You knew he was on the run. And the and the tension just kept mounting. And the last episode was on. And you know what that last episode ended with? To be continued. I wanted to scream. I wanted to do. I wanted to hurl something at the TV, but I had to wait.

I'm going to have to find some other season or some other way to find out. How did it finally end? Well, the great news this morning is whenever God lets us see that his work is to be continued. It is something that is reassuring and gives us confidence. You see, God's work is ongoing. Still. It is never slowed down.

It has never wavered left or right. It has never missed a single fulfillment of what God before creation planned to do. His work is perfect and his work will end well, since we already know the end of our story, so to speak, this morning, knowing how the wall gets built in record time, I might as well do something else a little bit different as well.

I want to go ahead and give you our three takeaways on the front end of the sermon. That's different, right? We'll keep we'll be in keeping with the way we're approaching it, but it also provides for us the three points of our outline.

So in the opening of Ezra, it becomes clear that the proper worship of God is foundational for all of life. Then in the second half of the book, beginning with chapter seven, go into the end of the book, we begin to see how that being grounded in God's Word is foundational for daily living. Then, as we realize that God's worship and God's Word are fundamental for how we live our lives. You know what that does? It transforms our lives, and it brings us to a place of unified purpose, which is foundational for life giving ministry.

So that's where we'll be going together as we look at these three truths. They're important, I think, for each one of us individually, and they are important for us collectively. As a church. This morning. So look at me now. There's three chapter one, verses one through three, where we see that the proper worship of God is foundational for all of life.

We're told in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, that the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled. The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom. And he also put it in writing. Thus says Cyrus, king of Persia, the Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

Whoever is among you of all of his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel. He is the God who is in Jerusalem. Well, we've just travel back in time, a good century, and we are told that God moved this pagan king, King Cyrus, by name, to do the work that God ordained would be done.

It's interesting because we can look at this, in the context of some of the prophets of old. Both Jeremiah and Isaiah had foretold that this would take place centuries before it happened. Isaiah had prophesied that this pagan came specifically by the name of Cyrus, would be the one to rule over the nations, and that he would perform all God's pleasure, saying to Jerusalem, you shall be built, and to the temple your foundation shall be laid.

Well, Jeremiah followed this prophecy another century later, and he added this for thus says the Lord, when 70 years are completed for Babylon, I will visit you, and I will keep my good promise to you, causing you to return to this place. Well, here in the opening verses of the Book of Ezra, we see both of these prophecies simultaneously being fulfilled.

More than 50,000 Hebrew exiles answered God's call. They followed us to rubble, whose name, by the way, means begotten in Babylon. And they follow Joshua, the high priest who went with Zerubbabel. And they returned 600 miles from Babylon, captivity back to Jerusalem. It's a bigger feat than it may sound, because so many of these people had never seen Jerusalem, or they'd heard of it.

They'd read about it. They'd even longed for it. But so many of these were able to go back after 70 years of being in captivity in Babylon, were just like Zerubbabel, born in captivity, and they had never been to the city of David. But the Persian king Cyrus, like many of his day, had this belief, and it motivated him to do God's will.

Even though his belief was ill founded. The belief was simply this. Many people of that day believe that gods were localized, that a particular god only had power in a particular place, and King Cyrus wanted that particular God of Jerusalem to be on his side. So he sends the ex-patriots back to repay Jerusalem. He sends them back in hopes that when they build the temple and they begin worshiping again, that the God of that land would here and would also bless Him and His kingdom.

Well, once they were there, the work began quickly. We're told that within seven months the altar was rebuilt, and sacrifices had been renewed. That's because we're also told the people feared the nations around them. Remember, there are no walls. They are open to enemy attack. They were open to pray. And they are wanting. And they are desperate for God to protect them and to bless them in the work that they do.

So they have gone back. They have begun restoring worship. They build an altar. And within a year or two, we're also told the work of God continues as they now have laid the foundation of the temple itself. And over all the people are celebrating their rejoicing to see what God was doing. Maybe they even were beginning to understand how prophecy was being fulfilled in their midst.

But there were some who, even though many were rejoicing, they were not rejoicing. In fact, they were weeping. We're told that tears of grief mixed with shouts of joy, so much so that you couldn't tell one from the other. And it was these people who had known the glory of the former temple, who, watching the foundation of this lesser temple in their mind rise from the ground, were disappointed.

They grieved over what used to be, rather than looking ahead. They couldn't grasp what Haggai the prophet actually was telling them. And that day, listen to what Haggai tells us in Haggai chapter two, verse nine, the latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts.

Well, these words foreshadow something that we will look at in a few moments as we continue our study together. But keep that in mind as we walk through our chapters. Soon as this work was ongoing, however, it would start to face opposition. It would not face opposition in the form of a letter sent to the King that said, don't you know these people are troublemakers?

Why, King, are you allowing this to be rebuilt? You know, it's just going to be a thorn in your flesh. They're not going to pay their taxes on and on the accusations went, and it's a new king sitting on the throne. He reads their letter and he takes it at face value. He looks on the record. And sure enough, Jerusalem has been a thorn to the in the side of many a king after that time.

So he orders the work to cease. Well, maybe it's just as good a time as any to let me go ahead and stay something which I think many of us know experientially. And it's simply this whenever God is at work in an extraordinary way, opposition will surely arise.

But the great news is even the opposition is part of God's plan. This may be something that you've realized individually, because individually, the life of Joseph in Genesis we could trace it much opposition, but it was still God's plan. His brothers intended something for evil, but God intended it for good. And I believe we as a church over the decades have also experienced this as we have dared to step out with God and do something.

So God sees that if he didn't show up and do it, it couldn't be done. We've done things like that as God led us and we have faced opposition along the way.

Those who oppose the work of God will stop at nothing to discourage God's people, and to keep God's work from going forward. But God's work can never be defeated, though the work languished for decades. Yes, eventually the people began building their own houses, and the people were beginning to take care of themselves rather than build the temple of God.

God still raised up his prophets. It was through God's Word, through Haggai, and through Zechariah, that the former and former exiles are now brought back into action. And there's a new king sitting on the throne, Darius by name. This time it's the people of God who write a letter. They write a letter to him and say, King, would you search the records?

Would you see for yourself? It was Cyrus that told us to build this temple. We're not building this temple and renewing worship here in order to take away from your kingdom. We are just doing what the king before you said Darius did search, and he found it to be so, and he ordered the work be resumed. But even better than that, he looked at the very governors of the lands around them that were stopping the work and opposing the work.

And he said, you pay the bill. I don't know about you, but I love it whenever I see God's plan unfolding and a great work being done. And he uses pagans to pay the way. But something was lacking. Still. Well, the act of worship had been restored. Worship itself was having very little impact in the lives of the way God's people lived.

Something was needed. Some one was needed to help God's people understand His Word. And that's where we get to understand being grounded in God's Word is foundational for our daily living. We've now moved ahead in the timeline. We've gone several decades forward since the decree was originally given to restore the Temple in Jerusalem. The temple is complete. Sacrifices are being made.

Another new king is on the throne of an earthly kingdom, but God is still ruling from his throne in heaven. So the work of God continues. The people of God needed someone to teach them the law, so they might order their lives a right by their by His Word. So God sends Ezra, the man for whom the book is named.

Finally, we see him appear in his own book in chapter seven. He's the one commissioned to go to Jerusalem for the work of renewing God's people. Worship has been restored, but the people still need to be renewed. So king, after Xerxes gave Ezra explicit instructions, and Ezra seven, verse 25 saying, and you, Ezra, according to the wisdom of your God, that is in your hand, appoint magistrates and judges who may judge all the people in the province beyond the river.

All, such as know the laws of your God and those who do not know them. You shall teach well. Here is a king that appreciated and valued law and order, whether it's his law or whether it was God's law. He knew that people ordered by law or people easy to govern. So Ezra, known as a man who has set his heart on studying the law of God not merely to study it, but in order that he might do it, not just to do it, but in order that he might teach it.

Ezra is the man that the King looks to. He says, you're the man for this job. Go back and begin teaching the repatriates the law of God. Well, for whatever reason, the Bible doesn't tell us, but for whatever reason, worship in Jerusalem have become devoid of obedience to God's Word and in morphed into something that looked a lot more like mere ritual.

And it was lifeless without so much to hold the people of God accountable to the Word of God, God's people began to look like the cultures surrounding them. In particular, some of the priests themselves and the Levites, as well as many of the people they had begun marrying wise from the foreign nations surrounding them. Well, the people of God were now in danger of becoming a mixed race, and with the mixed race would come the mixed worship that sent them into captivity in the first place.

So here we have the predicament repeating itself once more. We have intermarriages. We have inter worship, we have things going on. The God never should go on. And God sends Ezra to take appropriate actions to reform the society of his day as or when he read from the scrolls, and he made sure the people understood what he said it.

In Nehemiah eight, we're told that Ezra gathered the men and the women and all who could understand what they heard. And as he read from the word yes, he read from the book, from the law of God. Clearly, they gave the sense so that the people understood the reading. It would be like this this morning if we didn't have this PA system.

And in this room, being fairly large, it's difficult to hear in the back corner. Sometimes, even with the system, it would be like me proclaiming God's word, but then the elders would be the ones that go throughout and they talk with you in small groups. Did you hear what God's Word said here? Now do you understand what God's Word, what God's Word means to you? Can you apply it? Can I help you figure out how to apply it to your life? That's exactly what's going on with Ezra in this time. He is reading from God's Word, and as he reads from God's Word, the Levites, the priests, they now are going throughout the congregation, making sure the people understand. And the people did understand, we're told are they responded with repentance and with rejoicing.

Is that a good thing? When God convicts us of sin and we repent, how good it is for God to not leave us in our sin. As believers, but to help us see where we've gotten off. Mark. He convicts us of sin, so much so that we may also be in tears over our sin. But then the tears of grief begin to

give way to tears of joy because we quickly realize, not only am I guilty of my sin, but I've confessed my sin and I have now been restored.

I'm back in right fellowship with God Himself, which gives my heart great joy. Well, it's important that we understand and apply God's Word to our lives today. That's why, in part, we come to worship every Sunday. We come in order that we might hear God's Word faithfully proclaimed how blessed we are for over 65 years for the pulpit of Brightwood Presbyterian Church to be a bellwether pulpit from which the Word of God is not only taught, but carefully applied and explained.

Well, we are here and we enjoy God's Word being proclaimed. But you know, we need to know how to be obedient to His Word and Dad's. I'm just going to take a moment. I'm going to speak to us. It's on us now, just as leaders in the church, but on us as leaders in our home to be men of God's Word, we need to be in God's Word personally, privately for ourselves.

We need to be soaking in God's Word so that God's Word permeates our lives, convicts us of our sin, humbles us before him. We repent, and we lead our families aright. We need it for our own personal blessing. We need it for the blessing of our families. We need it even for the blessing of the generations to follow.

Should the Lord tarry and not return, maybe generations that we will never even see. But we are called to be men of God's Word, stopping short of nothing but full obedience to it. And when we do see that we have fallen short. Like Ezra, we need to learn to be big repentance. Know it as we did as he saw the sins of the Levites, the priests, and the people marrying foreign wives, he repented as if he himself had committed the sin.

He wept and he interceded, and he sought God's mercy. And he sought God's grace on behalf of a nation, on behalf of a people. He took responsibility. We can do that with him for each other, and we must do that in our homes. Well, there's one more takeaway to be considered yet together this morning, and we see it now, eight years after Ezra's on the scene, here comes another man, Nehemiah.

Whenever the proper worship of God is foundational for all of life, and whenever we remain grounded in God's Word so that it is our lifeline for daily living, lives are changed and suddenly we collectively have a unified purpose which is foundational for life giving ministry. Nehemiah, contemporary to Ezra, he's the next to lead a group of Hebrew exiles back to Jerusalem.

This now is the third wave of Ex-Patriots returning to the city, to the city of David. The first wave restored proper worship. The second wave restored the people of God to the right place

according to God's Word. But now this third wave restores the city itself. The walls of Jerusalem are rebuilt. Now, without strong walls, God's people remain vulnerable to outside attack.

This was obvious throughout Nehemiah's life because Nehemiah's book is just rife with all the different attacks they face. Sometimes attacks temptation to compromise, sometimes attacks that were personal, sometimes attacks that were collective. But they were attacks nonetheless, trying to distract him and God's people from doing God's work. But Nehemiah was a man of action. He boldly remained committed to carrying out God's plan.

He led the Hebrews with purpose and a plan. He equipped the Hebrews with tools to do the work and with weapons of defense. He spurred them on with encouragement and even exhortation as needed, that they would keep pursuing the plan of God. And now we are right back to where we began our time in God's Word. This morning we're back to Nehemiah chapter six.

Again, let's listen to the words, for the wall was finished on the 25th day of the month of Elul and the 52 days, and when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid. They fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

God's people accomplished God's work according to God's plan. Worship was restored. God's word was regarded in its rightful place. And because God's people had a unified purpose, God's city now had a geographical identity. As the wall stood as a testimony throughout time that God was in this place. However, even the people the God used to accomplish this incredible feat, they couldn't see everything that God was doing.

That's because God's work always is to be continued. God is working all the time, in every generation and in the life of each and every believer. We each have been personally planted on God's timeline of the work he is doing, and we collectively, as a church, are equally planted squarely in the timeline of God's plan for what he wants to do in Briarwood

Presbyterian Church in Birmingham, Alabama and beyond. We've seen the work of God unfold here in three waves. We've seen as God raised up a man named Rev Frank Barker, and the church was called into existence. It was established and many great works began. We've seen as a second wave came and we followed Pastor Harry Reeder as he brought new wind and fresh wind into our cells, and we continued the work that God had begun, and we further the advancement of the kingdom of heaven.

And now here we are, a part of God's work in the present. Do you realize we are the third wave? We're looking forward to welcoming Doctor Scott. Red is our new lead pastor, and we get to be

part of the work that God wants to do going forward. Do you understand? There may be something brand new that God wants us to do that we haven't even dreamt of yet.

We haven't even begun to fall to think of it, why do you think Barbara Barker was looked at a little bit different when she said, hey, could a church do ballet? yeah, that was unheard of. Well, maybe there's something just as radical as a church doing ballet the gospel wants to do through us, but we have to be willing to be part of God's work.

We have to be willing to be open to his leading to his timing, to his purpose, to his plan. And we have to encourage one another all the more so as hard as it is day, we have so many missionaries that we support so many ministries that have been lost through this church. But God is still at work.

Present is not past. We can look back and we can rejoice when we can further what God already began. But God is moving us ahead. I, for one, can't wait to see what he has in store as together we as a church say, Lord, let us follow your plan. We don't know how much greater the plan might be, but maybe we can get a little bit of a grasp simply by returning to the narrative of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Let's see how much greater the work was that God was doing when those walls were built. That was a great feat. 52 days. The city now is secure, but those walls had greater purpose. God had a bigger plan again. Haggai earlier prophesied to those and Ezra and Nehemiah's days, saying, the latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts.

And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts. While there's a kind of glory of God never filled this temple like it did Solomon's Temple when it was dedicated, while it never shown in the way that maybe some would have looked for a greater glory, would in fact exceed the glory of old. These walls and these gates would be the same walls and the same gates through which the Messiah would enter hundreds of years later, the movement of God, the movement of what God was doing, was far from finished, and the work of God was to be continued as Jesus came to God's people in this place.

This place would be the focal point of redemption story. This place would be the place of the cross. It would be the place where there would be neither Greek nor Jew. There renewed be neither slave nor free, male nor female. For all are one in Christ. It would be the place from which talks of logical evangelism would go forth.

As the early church met in Jerusalem, and they praise and they worship God, and they celebrated the fact that Jesus Christ was crucified, dead, buried, risen, and ascended, and coming again. And through this place, the gospel went forward and the world was turned upside down. That's what this place was. And what happened in this place 2000 years ago is what we rightly focus on whenever we come to the Lord's Table.

When we say at the Lord's table, we quote Jesus saying, do this in remembrance of me. We sometimes don't emphasize enough. I don't think until I come, he's coming back. You know what this place Jerusalem stands for? It stands for something still. Yet in the future, there will be the day when the new heaven, the new earth, the new Jerusalem will come from heaven, and we will forever then be with our Lord face to face, inhabiting his holy city, the new heaven and a new earth. We will dwell with him there forever in his work is being continued right now, until that day comes. It's up to us to be willing to be part of that work.

Let's Pray,

Father, we thank you that your work is continuous. It never veers to the left or to the right. It never wavers and never fails. Your work will be complete. And yet, in some ways, Lord, your work will be ongoing. Because even when consummation takes place and we are with you forever, we will still forever be praising you, exploring who you are, learning who you are, and praising you more and more. But Lord, continue your work even now in our lives and our church. Continue, O Lord, and help us to be found as faithful stewards in the moment. Let us be humbled and willing and encouraged and encouraging one another, that by your Spirit's power, we might see your work continuing in our lives today and in us in the days ahead. We thank you.

In Jesus name,

Amen.