

"WALK THRU THE BIBLE: NEHEMIAH."

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First Christian Reformed Church, Lynden, WA

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Text for Sermon: Nehemiah 1:3-4, 11; 2:17-20; 6:15-16; 8:1-3

Introduction to Nehemiah.

Let's recap where we are in God's story. In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And then God created the human family. God being a covenant making and covenant keeping God entered into a covenant with His people whom He loves.

In the fullness of God's time He chose and called Abraham out of the Ur of the Chaldees and He made a covenant with Abraham and God said:

Genesis 12:2-3 I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

This is as far reaching a promise as you can imagine. From this one family all the families of the earth will be blessed. From this one nation would come blessings for all the nations. From this one nation God would bring forth a Savior, the Messiah, who is Christ the Lord, who would save all His people from their sins.

After four centuries in bondage in Egypt God miraculously saved His people and delivered them through the wilderness to be established as a nation in the Promised Land. God was faithful and provided for and blessed His people in every possible way. But God's people struggled to follow God and obey His commandments. They were unfaithful, they committed adultery by whoring after the gods of the evil nations they were supposed to drive out. They did not keep covenant. Their light grew dim and the glory of their God was extinguished.

So God was forced to do what He had promised and warned them He would do, He disciplined His people by bringing a great judgment on them. He gave them into the hands of pagan nations to scatter His people among the nations. For seventy years, God gave the land a Sabbath rest while His people were in exile in Babylon.

At no point in Israel history had the prospects for God's people looked bleaker, their city was ruined, the temple and walls torn down, hateful enemies all around them, and their own sin still clinging to them.

But God never forgot His covenant promise and after seventy years, God restored His exiled people to the land He had promised to Abraham.

Through His servants Ezra and Nehemiah God called His people to renew their covenant with Him, to obey His Word, to seek God's forgiveness, to separate themselves from the pagan peoples around them, and to practice holiness and purity in their corporate and private lives.

God's purposes and plans for His people never waned or changed. This was His people, the nation through whom He would accomplish His redemptive plan for the human race. Our salvation is linked to these people, to their story, their history.

Ezra and Nehemiah preserve us from a gloomy pessimism and fatalistic perspective on the future. God is God and this is God's world and God is establishing His kingdom and the kingdom of His beloved Son.

Remember that story as told in Ezra and Nehemiah, in the Hebrew Bible was one book, one story. As we have seen with the other historical books, Nehemiah is basically a book of history designed to teach theology, and meant to edify and correct the returning Israelites, and us.

The story of the Old Testament ends with the book of Nehemiah. All the rest of the books in our Bible after Nehemiah are scattered chronologically throughout Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah. Esther, the last of the historical books, takes place between the time of Ezra chapters 6-7, between the first and second wave of returning exiles.

After this there will be a long, dark intertestamental period of four hundred years of silence before God resumes His story with the coming of the Messiah. The end of the Old Testament is one of anticipation of the good news of the gospel in the coming Messiah, and the great revelation of God's deliverance.

The book spans a history of 15 years, but it records the events of just two years, the year the wall was rebuilt and the year the moral reforms were carried out. It reads like a general's diary, a governor's report, a civil record, a management handbook, and a memoir, all in one short book.

I don't tire of reminding you once again, this is not a book about human faithfulness to God and what people do for God, but a book about God and what God does through people and how faithful God is in the face of His people's unfaithfulness.

Nehemiah 1-7, Nehemiah rebuilds the wall around Jerusalem.

Restoration of the walls.

Nehemiah 8-13, Ezra rebuilds the moral and religious life.

Restoration of the Jews.

Which of those two events was more important to God? To ask the question is to answer it. The civil reformation was secondary to the reading of the Law that took place in Jerusalem. This is always the way with God. He cares more about our eternal hearts and souls than our temporal and material well-being.

Themes:

This is a book about restoration, about second chances and even third chances. This is a book about starting over and rebuilding, about renewal and reformation. This is a book that is honest about spiritual danger, about sin and confession, about getting right with God and retuning to His Word.

It is about leadership, but about a certain kind of leadership that speaks to all of us. It is not just talent or ability or smarts.

Nehemiah was a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah was not a king, a priest, or a prophet, but an ordinary Israelite. Nehemiah was a layman, not a professional religious leader. He had a secular job. Nehemiah was like you. He gave up a very cushy day job, for demanding, dangerous manual labor.

Did Nehemiah have a plan, did he know what he was doing? No, he did what godly people in situations like that do. He was willing to do what he didn't know how to do by faith, trusting on and depending on God. He exhibited the marks of Godly leadership.

The book of Nehemiah highlights the leadership of one man to rebuild materially and spiritually the nation of Israel for God's glory and the good and well-being of the people.

Lots of Christian books on leadership use the book of Nehemiah as the guide. I have some of them. The book is full of great practical leadership advice, how to motivate people to do what you want and like it, how to manage difficult people, how to master the secrets of overcoming obstacles and succeed where others have failed, how to win without intimidation, and on and on.

Of the thousands of books written on leadership, none have really improved on the very first book on leadership ever written, the memoirs of a man who served as governor of Jerusalem.

But some of the books miss the most important point. The thing that sets Nehemiah apart from so many others. The one thing that if missed, renders all the rest of the good points, just more worldly, secular, wisdom.

Nehemiah was a man of God, a godly man, a man close to God, fervent and faithful in prayer and personal piety. He truly kept first things first. He humbly gave all the glory and credit to God.

Six marks of Godly leadership.

A Godly leader prays, chapter 1.

What is the very first mark? He prayed. He asked God for wisdom, for help. And not just once or twice. Again and again and again (1:4; 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31).

First things first. Prayer is not a last resort, it is the first resort. No one can accomplish what is most important without God. We are not alone, not at the mercy of forces. God is always approachable, always open to us, always ready to hear and answer. This book is part history, and part prayer journal. Cultivate the humility of prayerful dependence on God.

Neh. 2:4 Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. 5 And I said to the king ...

A Godly leader acts, chapter 2.

There had been earlier attempts to rebuild but they all failed, leaving a defeated, discouraged, frustrated, vulnerable population. So how in the world did Nehemiah accomplish such a daunting task in the face of such opposition in only 52 days?

He acts but in total dependence on God. “Our God will fight for us.”

Neh. 2:8 for the good hand of my God was upon me.

Neh. 2:20 The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build.

Neh. 4:20 Our God will fight for us.

Neh. 6:15-16 So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. 16 And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

What we need to learn from Nehemiah more than all his skills and leadership ability, is his deep dependence on God and not on himself.

After praying a great prayer of faith, Nehemiah boldly asks his king permission to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall, and the king grants him his desire.

Nehemiah had an attitude of faith, remarkable confidence in God. Notice a pattern, see a need, pray about it, act in faith.

A Godly leader faces opposition, chapter 4 (and again in chapter 6).

Nehemiah 4:7-9 When Sanballat and Tobiah and the Arabs and the Ammonites and the Ashdodites heard that the repairing of the walls of Jerusalem was going forward and that the breaches were beginning to be closed, they were very angry. 8 And they all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause confusion in it. 9 And we prayed to our God and set a guard as a protection against them day and night.

There will always be opposition as long as Satan is free to roam the earth. They hated Jesus, they will hate His people. And the most likely and obvious target will be leaders, leaders in home, church, community and nation.

When Nehemiah faces great opposition from several sources, he responds with prayer and then action, preparation and carrying through. Armed and guarded.

Don't let opposition drive you from God but to God. (Prayer of thanks for my enemies). Take God's admonition to heart. Be strong and courageous.

How do you counter the fear of man? With a higher fear, the fear of God. Fear God and nothing else. Remember to pray for your leaders, that they will rightly, faithfully respond to opposition.

A Godly leader cares, chapter 5.

The rich were taking advantage of the poor and abusing them. Nehemiah modeled a genuine compassion for the poor, needy, disadvantaged. His heart was warm toward them.

God cares for the poor and cares about how we care for the poor. Cultivate genuine concern for those who are older, needy, see how God would have you serve (meal, drive, visit, assist). How many are quietly serving, giving, supporting helping.

A Godly leader turns people to God's Word, chapter 8.

At the Water Gate, Ezra read the Word of God.

At first glance, Nehemiah appears to be rebuilding walls. But by the Spirit of God, a more significant reformation was taking place in the hearts of God's people at the preaching of God's Word.

In Nehemiah 8 we see the supreme importance of the preaching of the Word of God to bring reformation and revival to souls. May the Spirit of God bring us under the same conviction as we read and study and hear and love the Word of God.

God's Word is meant to be heard, read, understood, honored, and heard and understood in community. How do you respond to the reading of the Word of God? Do your hearts leap, are they strangely warmed like the disciples on the road to Emmaus? It is meant to convict us and change us and reform us. Keep the Word of God central in your life.

Godly leaders turn people to God's Word, godly fathers, godly parents, godly grandparents.

They most important thing we do is read and study and know the Word. God's word is seed of your life. Believe it, hear it, love it, want more of it, read it in your home.

We are not a reformed church, but a church always being reformed by the Word of God.

A Godly leader confesses sins, chapter 9.

Nehemiah 9:33-35 You have been righteous in all that has come upon us, for you have dealt faithfully and we have acted wickedly. 34 Our kings, our princes, our priests, and our fathers have not kept your law or paid attention to your commandments and your warnings that you gave them. 35 Even in their own kingdom, and amid your great goodness that you gave them, and in the large and rich land that you set before them, they did not serve you or turn from their wicked works.

Our greatest enemies are not outside the gate, out in the world. I am my greatest enemy, I am my greatest problem. This is the beginning of true reformation and transformation.

The book teaches us to confess our sin and to repent. The whole history of Israel, God's people can be summarized in a prayer of confession and repentance.

We can look down with judgment on them for their constant return to temptation and sin, or we can look with compassion knowing our own hearts and our propensity to wander and stray and take Satan's bait.

A Godly leader confesses his sin, and leads his people to confess their sin. This never ends. We as individuals, we as families, we as a church, never cease in our sin and our struggle with temptation and in our failure to live holy lives. We all stray and often. Glory to God who's grace is sufficient and more than abundant.

Lead to the end by battling sin to the end.

Jesus.

Just as Nehemiah was a faithful intercessor for God's people, so is our great intercessor, Jesus. We have Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 when He poured out His heart to God for us.

Jesus told the disciples He would build His church and the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). That's what Nehemiah is all about. God is always building His church, His kingdom, His people.

Ephesians 2:19-22 You are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

I Peter 2:4-5 As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5 you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

The rebuilding of the temple and wall in Jerusalem are a foreshadowing of the eschatological hope of God's people as we long for and look forward to the glorious return of our Messiah who will rule and reign as our King and great high priest in the New Jerusalem.

Revelation 21:2-3 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God.

We are God’s workmanship, we are the temple of the Holy Spirit, we are the dwelling place of God, for His glory of shine. “Christ in you, the hope of glory,” (Colossians 1:27).

Implications and application.

We are not all called to govern, to lead great organizations, to undertake huge building projects. But we are all called to be strong and courageous, to be inflexible, decided and resolute in following our God and doing His holy will.

The same God who enabled Nehemiah to do what he did, is the same God who enables us to do what He has called and given us to do. No matter how difficult the task, or strong the opposition, as Dr. Raymond Edmon said, “It is always too soon to quit.”

Our day is not so different from Nehemiah’s. Not many Christians want to devote themselves to God’s service like Nehemiah. Are you willing to put yourself in His hands? God is not limited by your skills, abilities, talents and smarts. In fact, He has been compensating for your deficits all your life whether you realize it or not. Give what you are able to Him and His service, leave the future to Him.

Pray, act in faith, confess your sin, turn to the Word of God, lead and serve those around you.

“Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father” (Colossians 3:17).

Prayer: Holy Father, raise up in our midst, in our homes, in our church, in our community, in our nation leaders like Nehemiah, men after your own heart, willing to sacrifice to serve you, willing to die to themselves, willing to humbly pray and lead depending on you.