

## **The Story – Nehemiah**

Last week we talked about Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, three young men who were taken from Jerusalem and exiled in Babylon. Their deliverance from the fiery furnace was a reminder God had not forgotten his people, even if they were in exile because of their rebellion and sin. The prophet Jeremiah had warned them they would be carried into exile and Jerusalem destroyed, (a good summary is found in 2 Chronicles 36) but he also said the Lord would bring them back to the land. After 70 years of exile, Babylon was conquered by the Persians and King Cyrus of Persia issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to their land just as God had said. There were three waves of return with Zerubbabel leading the first, then Ezra. These two focused on rebuilding the temple and altar that had been destroyed. Nehemiah led the third wave of return around 444 BC and he focused on rebuilding the walls that had been pulled down. A city without gates and walls in the ancient world wasn't much of a city. Nehemiah probably told the people, "I guarantee you I'm going to build a wall. We will build a wall and it will be a great wall and I'm going to get the Persians to pay for it. (Ezra 6)"

Nehemiah was serving as a cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes when he hears from one of his brothers who had made the earlier trip to Jerusalem. Nehemiah assumed everything was going well and the remnant that returned with Ezra and Zerubabel probably had things rebuilt by now. Instead, he hears the walls are still down, the gates burned, the city is in disrepair and the people are discouraged. Nehemiah grieves over what he hears, acknowledging once again it was their own sin that led them to the mess they were in, and then he asks God to help him do something about it. That's the first chapter. The rest of the book tells the story of Nehemiah and the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and essentially the reclaiming and restoration of the city. It's a big story because it's basically the second exodus. It is the story of the return of the Jewish people to their land. And why is that so important? Partly because God said he would bring them back. More importantly, they had to be back in the land because the prophets said the Messiah would be born in this land, not in Babylon or Persia or Assyria, but in Bethlehem in Judea. God was setting things in order for the arrival of the promised Messiah.

The story is significant in the history of Israel and the Jewish people. But as we walk through part of the story this morning, I want to use it as an allegory for what I believe God wants to do in our lives, to help us recognize the need to rebuild the walls of our own life and personality. Let's look at the story and see if we can learn some lessons. Nehemiah 1.

**“One of my brothers came from Judah with some other men...They said to me, ‘Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire.’ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.” Nehemiah 1:2-4**

Thirteen years had gone by since Ezra left with a group of exiles. Nehemiah wasn't concerned. He had his own stuff to worry about. He was busy checking the King's wine. Jerusalem wasn't even on his radar screen when suddenly this bleak report comes back and Nehemiah realizes, **“We've got a mess on our hands and it's up to me to do something about it!”**

Life is like that sometimes. We're sailing along, thinking we've got it all together when suddenly something happens that makes us realize we've got a mess on our hands. Like Nehemiah, we suddenly realize we're part of a big problem. We share the guilt. We have been proud, disobedient, sinful and rebellious. We thought things were going well then we suddenly realize the walls of our lives are broken down and the gates have been burned. We're in a mess!

Solomon said **“Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control.” Proverbs 25:28** We realize, “the walls are down in my life.” The walls, the self-control that protects and guards my heart and mind; the walls that protect and guard my family, that protect me from yielding to temptation and sin, those walls of self-discipline are down and I've left myself and my family open and vulnerable to my enemies and to destruction! The walls are down and we are in a mess.

The gates were burned as well. The Old Testament spoke of the leaders of a city sitting at the city gate. The gates represented the seat of authority as well as the means of passage into the city. You enter the city through the gates. What you allow through the gates can either strengthen or undermine the authority of the city. You have to control passage through the gates so the authority can function as it should.

Are you getting this? The walls were down and the gates were burned. There was no defense and there was no authority in place. What's the application in our lives? The walls are down, self-control is destroyed and we are vulnerable to temptation and sin. The gates are destroyed so there is no authority in place to determine what is right and what is wrong. Consequently, we let anything into our lives and the authority that should be functioning to keep

us from evil and trouble is nowhere to be found. Like Nehemiah, we realize, “we’ve got a mess on our hands and it’s up to us to do something about it.

Nehemiah asked of the king, **“Let me return so I can rebuild the wall.” Nehemiah 2:5** He couldn’t rebuild it by himself, but he was taking responsibility. That’s the kind of determination it takes. “With God’s help I’ll do this if I have to do it alone. I’ll rebuild the walls of self-control in my life. I’ll get the gates of God’s authority back in place in my life to control what comes in and what goes out of my life. I’m going to get out of this mess I’ve gotten myself into, with God’s help!” Nehemiah started by repenting and purposing in his heart he was going to do something about the mess he discovered. That’s where you need to start today!

**Don’t just stand there, get busy!** Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem, quickly surveyed the situation, called the leaders together and said, “Let’s rebuild the wall.” The people had just been waiting for someone to say, “we can do this.” The bible says, **“They replied, ‘Let us start rebuilding.’ So they began this good work.” Nehemiah 2:18** They didn’t hesitate. They didn’t debate the pros and cons. It was the right thing to do so four days after Nehemiah showed up they were already at work on rebuilding the wall. You’ve waited and delayed long enough. You’ve used all the excuses you could come up with for allowing the walls to stay down in your life, but the fact is, it’s time to get busy! Get the walls back up and the gates back in place. There is too much at stake and there is no better time than right now!

**Don’t let the critics get you down.** When the work began, so did opposition from local officials. Chapter 4 tells of the critics who said, “Who do you think you are? You can’t succeed. You can’t repair those walls. You can’t rebuild those gates.” You’ll have your critics too. Some external and some those internal voices of self-doubt that tell you you simply can’t do it. You can’t succeed, you can’t rebuild a marriage, you can’t restore a broken relationship with a son or daughter. You can’t overcome sin or addiction, you can’t win this battle. Listen: We serve a God who brings the dead back to life! Don’t let the enemy, don’t let any enemy tell you what God can or cannot do. Don’t let the enemy tell you what you can or cannot do. Greater is he that is within you than he that is in the world. Nehemiah said “I’m going to build this wall. Who’s with me? With God’s help and favor we can do this” and they did it! Don’t let the critics stop you from building the walls back in your life. “But I’ve tried before and failed.” I know. So had the people of Jerusalem, with Zerubabel and Ezra, but they tried again and this time, they would succeed. This is your time!

**Pray, post a guard and carry a sword.** That's what Nehemiah did. They managed to get the wall rebuilt to half of its height because the bible says the people worked with all their heart. But when their enemies saw the progress and that these Jews really were rebuilding the walls, they began to plot against them. They weren't just mocking them, but now they posed a real physical threat. As a result, Nehemiah prayed and posted a guard. He wasn't going to quit, or slow down, or give up. Not only did he post a guard day and night, he then armed the people. Half his men did the work on the wall while the other half stood guard. Even the people working carried materials with one hand and held a weapon in the other. They were aware this was a real threat with a real enemy coming again them.

You need to recognize there is a battle going on for your soul. There is a real enemy, a real threat, a real and present danger. Don't drop your guard. Don't put down your weapon. The bible speaks of God's word as a sharp, two-edged sword, the sword of the Spirit. Take your sword, God's word, and the shield of faith, and guard your heart, guard your mind, guard the walls and the gates of your life, the access points to your heart and life. Don't neglect your sword! I remember Don Casey telling me about life in Viet Nam. You never went anywhere without your weapon. You went to shower, you carried your weapon. You never knew when an attack might come. Don't drop your spiritual weapon. It's too dangerous!

**Remember what you are fighting for!** Chapter 4 tells us Nehemiah posted guards at the weakest places along the wall and then told the people to remember who they were fighting for. Rebuilding the wall wasn't just for themselves. Nehemiah said, **“Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”** Nehemiah 4:14 Nehemiah reminded them there was more at stake than just bricks and mortar, more at stake than just a wall. They were fighting for the Lord, for his name and his glory. They were fighting for their family, for the future of the nation, for the destiny of God's people. They were fighting to rebuild the city so 400 years later the Messiah could be born in the land of Israel. They were fighting for the future.

Remember what you are fighting for. This is about more than just you and your choices. Your life and your choices influence others. Your family, your friends, your colleagues and classmates, your spouse, your parents, your siblings, your children, the list can go on. Fight because your life and your choices influence others. Fight because if you compromise, if you fail, if you give up, someone might follow you into defeat and failure. Fight because you need

those walls of self-control back up for your sake and for the sake of others. Fight because you need the gates in place to control what comes into your mind and body and spirit. Fight because eternity is at stake for you or for someone you know and love. Remember who and what you are fighting for and don't give up.

**Get connected because you don't have to do this alone.** The people said, **“The strength of the laborers is giving out and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall.”** Nehemiah 4:10 The task was exhausting. The laborers were working night and day and their strength was giving out. That's when Nehemiah divided up the labor. Some guarded while others worked and then they would switch. Nehemiah assured them they were not working alone. Even though the work was extensive and they were spread out around the whole city, he kept a man with a trumpet at his side. He told the people, “If trouble comes we will sound the trumpet and if you hear that trumpet, run to the sound. He said, **“Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us.”** Nehemiah 4:20

We received members this morning. It's not about church membership as much as it's about church relationships. We need one another and we are in this together. Get connected. Do more than attend Sunday morning. Come to something else where you can get acquainted, where you can build relationships, where you can connect because we need one another and we will need each other even more as the days grow darker in our world. When trouble comes, when someone has a crisis, we come running. How about this: **If the enemy attacks one of us, he has to fight all of us!** Get connected, listen for the trumpet and let's fight for one another!

**Remember with God all things are possible.** When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, the walls were down, literally in rubble with the gates burned and the people defeated, convinced there was nothing they could do. The situation looked bleak, impossible. But Nehemiah was committed to working, praying and trusting God. Look at his report: **“So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.”** Nehemiah 6:15-16

They completed the rebuilding of the wall and gates in 52 days. Unbelievable. The walls were destroyed and had been lying in ruin since 586. It was 444 when Nehemiah came to town. What seems impossible becomes possible when we trust and obey the Lord.

Your situation seems just as impossible. The thought of rebuilding and repairing the broken down walls in your life seem just as impossible, but it is just as true for you as it was for Nehemiah, that God is at work with you, for you, within you. If you are ready and willing to repent and turn to him with your whole heart, he will help you rebuild those walls. He will repair and restore and give you hope and a future.

Talking about this very situation in Jerusalem God told the prophet Jeremiah about the destruction that would come, Babylon would destroy the city, but the day would come when God would restore her fortunes and because they would repent and turn to the Lord, he would bring them back. But how could it happen? It all sounded so impossible. God said, **“I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is anything too hard for me?”** **Jeremiah 32:27** No one is beyond his mercy, his forgiveness, his reach, his power to restore, transform and rebuild. Surrender to him, trust him and get to work!

One last thought from our story: **Make it clear where you stand.** When Nehemiah and the people started rebuilding, we mentioned their enemies showed up and began to mock and criticize them, trying to stop the rebuilding. Nehemiah told those who opposed him, **“The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it.”** **Nehemiah 2:20**

Nehemiah took the steps necessary to get the wall back up. He repented, he called on the Lord for help, he went to work rebuilding the walls and getting the gates back in place. He posted a guard and kept his sword at his side to fight the enemy, but he made it clear from the beginning to the enemy, “You have no share, no claim, no right to this city.”

It’s time for us to get to work rebuilding the walls in our lives. We need to repent, call on the Lord and get busy. Don’t delay. And like Nehemiah, make it plain to the enemy of our soul he has no claim over us. Tell him, “Devil, you have no share, no claim, no historic right to me, to my life, to my family, to my future. I belong to the King of Kings. I have repented of my sins. I have asked for the Lord’s help and I am going to rebuild the walls and get the gates back in place in my life. I am going to serve the Lord and him alone and devil you have no right to me or anything in my life. You have no hold over me. Not now. Not tomorrow. Not ever!”

Nehemiah got it done in 52 days. I don’t know how long it will take you to rebuild the walls in your life, but I know God is with you, he will grant his favor and you can do this!!

