

## Rise and Build Part 9

We are going to wrap up our study of Nehemiah this morning. Just to remind you, the people of Judah and the residents of the capital city of Jerusalem had been defeated and carried off in exile by the Babylonians. Jerusalem and the glorious temple built by Solomon in Jerusalem had been destroyed as well. Seventy years of exile goes by, this is when we read about Daniel and the Lions' den and Shadrack, Meshach and Abednego. All that is happening during this exile. The Babylonians are defeated by the Persians and a new king comes along that allows the return of the exiles. A couple of different waves of exiles return under different leaders. Finally, almost 150 years after Jerusalem had been destroyed, Nehemiah returns and rallies the people to rebuild the walls and gates. That's what we've been talking about.

Last Sunday we saw the completion of the walls and gates and Ezra began to read the word of God (the Law of Moses) to the people. We said last week it had to be about more than physical walls and gates being restored, there had to be a restoration of obedience to God and respect for his word. Nehemiah, acting as the Governor of Judah, appointed gatekeepers to control who and what was coming into Jerusalem. He also appointed singers to lead the people in worship and prayer and Levites to explain the Law of God to them.

Nehemiah 8 tells of the people gathering in Jerusalem to listen as Ezra the scribe read to them the word of God. Verse 3 says the people listened attentively and verse 8 tells us the Levites instructed the people as Ezra read, making it clear and giving the meaning so the people could understand what was being read. Keep in mind they had been in exile and generations had gone by without knowing or understanding or practicing the Law of God. As they listened and began to understand the word the bible says, **“the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.” Nehemiah 8:9**

Why were they weeping? I think they were weeping because they recognized their sinfulness, that they had not been living in obedience to God's word, to God's law. But I also think they were weeping out of gratitude and thanksgiving. They were realizing God cared enough about them to prescribe a way of life for them and a means to receive God's blessing and provision. The law made it plain to them, “if you will do this, God will do this.” They began to understand the covenant that God had made with their fathers and with them. Look at verse 12. **“Then all the people went away to eat and drink...and to celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them.” Nehemiah 8:12**

Church if you will study God's word and then live according to God's word, there is blessing that comes with it. You will have cause to celebrate with great joy!

Verse 13 tells us the heads of all the families along with the priests and Levites gathered together to give attention to the words of the Law. They wanted to know **“What does the word of God say? What does God require of me and my family?”** Good questions for us to ask and to which to find answers!

In chapter 9 they gather again as Ezra reads the Law for a quarter of the day and then, in response, now that they know the word of God and what he requires, they spend a quarter of the day repenting, confessing their sin and then worshiping and giving thanks to God. Chapter 9 is something of a brief history of Israel. They recount God's faithfulness in spite of the repeated sins and failures of the people. “You were faithful and good but we were disobedient and rebelled against you.” It's repeated again and again. **“They put your law behind their backs. They killed your prophets who had admonished them in order to turn them back to you...So you handed them over to their enemies who oppressed them. But when they were oppressed they cried out to you. From heaven you heard them and in your great compassion you gave them deliverers, who rescued them from the hand of their enemies. But as soon as they were at rest, they again did what was evil in your sight. Then you abandoned them to the hand of their enemies so that they ruled over them. And when they cried out to you again, you heard from heaven, and in your compassion you delivered them time after time.”** Nehemiah 9:26-28

All the people heard the telling of this history. This was their fathers and grandfathers they were talking about. They were living in the consequences of disobedience. So what do they do? **“In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.”** Nehemiah 9:38 The leadership said “never again! We will put it in writing that we will serve God!” Then in chapter 10 **“The rest of the people...bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God...and to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our God.”** Nehemiah 10:28-29.

They put it in writing and sign their names. “We won't let what happened to our forefathers happen to us.” They specifically say they will not allow their children to intermarry with people of the nations around them. The concern was that intermarriage would open the

door to idolatry as it had in the past. It was not racism, but recognizing a real threat to the faith, marrying non believers. They would not compromise or allow pagans or pagan religions to infiltrate their lives. They promised they would honor the Sabbath. They would not sell nor would they let others sell on the Sabbath. They accepted their responsibility to pay tithes and offerings to meet the needs of the temple and of the priests and Levites. They said, **“We will not neglect the house of our God.” Nehemiah 10:39** With that, the promise is made. They’ve sworn an oath with a curse as well. One of those, “May my hand fall off my arm if I go back on this promise” kind of thing. They mean business! I’ve been there too, haven’t you? “God, I’m going to serve you this time. I mean it. I won’t go back. I mean business.”

There is a grand and glorious celebration in chapter 12 as they march on top of the newly restored walls, singing and playing instruments, rejoicing in what God has accomplished. The gatekeepers and singers and Levites are all in place. The people are happy, devoted, serving God, eager to please and honor the Lord. This time will be different.

Nehemiah returns to the court of King Artaxerxes and we aren’t certain how long he is gone but perhaps ten years or so. He decides to return to Jerusalem to see how things are going and what does he find? **Every promise they made to God and to Nehemiah they had broken.**

They promised not to compromise their faith by intermarrying with non-Jews. Not only had they allowed their sons and daughters to marry people from among the nations, the son of the High Priest was married to the daughter of Nehemiah’s old enemy Sanballat! (13:28) The priesthood would be defiled by this. Sin and idolatry was working its’ way back into Jerusalem.

Nehemiah comes back and finds another of his enemies that had tried to stop the work and have Nehemiah killed, Tobiah, is – get this – living in one of the storerooms in the temple! The high priest had turned one of the large store rooms into an apartment to accommodate one of God’s enemies! Can it get any worse than that? Talk about compromise. You invite the devil to live in the fellowship hall of the church! Sanballat and Tobiah couldn’t openly defeat Nehemiah, but now they have managed to work their way into the life and fabric of the people, subtly exercising influence. Don’t allow the enemy to gain influence in your life!

Books have been written about Nehemiah’s leadership style, his diplomacy in appealing to the king, organizing the people, etc. But when it came to dealing with sin and compromise there was little diplomacy. With regard to Tobiah living in the house of God, Nehemiah said

**“I...threw all Tobiah’s household goods out of the room. I gave orders to purify the rooms and then I put back into them the equipment of the house of God.” Nehemiah 13:8-9.**

Nehemiah physically threw Tobiah’s stuff out and had the place fumigated! There is no place for compromise in God’s house and 1 Corinthians 6:19 says our bodies are the temple of God. No compromise. Do you need to throw some things or some people out? (And you may need to have the place fumigated and purified.)

Verse 10 tells us Nehemiah found out the people hadn’t been bringing their tithes and offerings to the temple. They had neglected the house of God. In verse 15 Nehemiah sees men violating the Sabbath, buying and selling and bringing goods into Jerusalem on the Sabbath. He warns them this will bring destruction again and orders the gates to be shut and not opened until the Sabbath was over. When he discovers merchants spending the night outside the walls of the city, hoping to sneak in and sell anyway Nehemiah threatens to whip them! (v21) He was an older man but I don’t think anyone wanted to mess with Nehemiah.

Verse 23 tells us he found men of Judah who had married pagan women and now, **“Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or the language of one of the other peoples and did not know how to speak the language of Judah.” Nehemiah 13:24** Just what he feared would happen was happening. The godless culture of the surrounding nations was influencing the next generation. Pagan mothers were raising the children to follow their gods and not the God of Israel. They didn’t speak the language of Judah, Hebrew, which meant they weren’t reciting the prayers. It meant they didn’t read the language either so they weren’t reading the Law of God. They were losing their faith.

Pastoral counseling may not have been Nehemiah’s strong suit. In response to this, Nehemiah rebuked them, called curses down upon them and in verse 25 he says, “I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair.” You gotta love this guy!

Nehemiah did his very best to once again put things back in order but the screen goes black. What happened next? How does the story end? It just ends. There is no ending. I wrote the sermon to this point and kept saying, I don’t know how this is supposed to end. My sermon was ending the same way the book of Nehemiah was ending. There is no resolution. We don’t know the rest of the story for these people. You see, their story is our story. We have the walls rebuilt and the gates in place. We are serving the Lord, showed up in church today, doing our best to live for God. How will our story end? I don’t know. It’s up to you. It’s up to me. We

are writing the ending to our story. As we write our own story, keep in mind a couple of lessons from Nehemiah's story.

**Don't let down your guard.** The fact the people swore this binding oath, knowing their history, but then within ten years they were back to their old habits and sins lets me know they dropped their guard. They quit posting gatekeepers in their own lives. The apostle Paul warns us using examples from the Old Testament and writes, **“These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfillment of the ages has come. So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!” 1 Corinthians 10:11-12** The best of us can fall if we don't remain vigilant. Don't compromise. Don't let down your guard. Thomas Jefferson said, “eternal vigilance is the price we pay for liberty.” Remain vigilant in your spiritual life.

**Don't give the devil a foothold.** That's what Ephesians 4:27 says. I can't help but believe the sin the people fell back into in Jerusalem was made worse, or made easier if you prefer, by the presence of Tobiah in the temple and Sanballat's daughter married to the high priest's son. Every compromise, every little sin opened the door wider and wider for the devil's influence and control. **“It's no big deal” may be the most profound lie the devil ever tells us or that we tell ourselves.** The devil is looking for a base of operations in your life, a foothold from which to expand his influence, his control. He will subtly infiltrate your life through every inch of territory you grant him until suddenly, destruction comes. Don't give him a foothold.

**But what if I fail? Again?** That's where we are at the end of Nehemiah. The people have sinned and disobeyed God. Again. After their promises and oaths. After signing in writing that they would obey God's word, they failed. If they couldn't live for God, what makes us think we can? Fast forward about 450 years to a fellow named Paul. Writing to Christ-followers in Rome he says something like this: “It seems I keep failing. The things I know I should do, I don't do. And the things I know I shouldn't do, I keep doing. I can't seem to keep the law of God. Instead I find the law of sin at work within me. I want to do the right thing but sin keeps sabotaging my best intentions and tripping me up.” Paul says, **“What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” Romans 7:24**

That's us and the people in Nehemiah's day. We want to do the right thing. We signed our name on the dotted line, but sin tripped us up and we failed. Again. What a wretched person I am. Is there anybody that can rescue me from myself, from my sinful tendencies? Paul's

answer is our only hope: **“Thanks be to God – through Jesus Christ our Lord!” Romans 7:25** Here is our hope. Here is our answer. Jesus changes everything! Jesus rewrites the ending to our story! To every story! To our family’s story! We don’t have to keep failing and messing up. Jesus is here with us to not only forgive us of our sins but to grant us the grace and power and strength to stay true to him and his word. We aren’t just trying to obey him on our own. Instead, he places His Holy Spirit to live within us, to help us live for him. He is changing us from the inside out! He wants to give us a new heart and new desires.

Eugene Petersons Message Bible translates this passage in Romans 7 like this. **“I’ve tried everything and nothing helps. I’m at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn’t that the real question? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does.” ...The Message Bible**

Jesus Christ can and does! He changes everything. He can keep you from returning to sin. He can deliver you. I don’t care how many generations have failed before you, you and Jesus can change all of that. “Yes, but the people in Nehemiah’s day went back to their sin.” Some of them did, but Nehemiah didn’t. Be one that chooses with God’s help to remain true!

Don’t drop your guard. Don’t allow the devil to gain a foothold in your life. Throw him and his stuff out of your life and put your complete trust in Jesus and his amazing grace. If you fail, run to him again.

Nehemiah’s last words were these: That’s all we are asking for isn’t it? For God to look upon us with his grace, his unmerited favor. Ask him for his grace, his favor. Turn to him with your whole heart and life today. Let Jesus write a new ending to your story!

“Oh God, grant to us your grace and with your help, we will live for you.”