

EZRA/NEHEMIAH: BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE

## 5. DOUBLE DUTY

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Nehemiah 4:1-9

Today, we continue our summer sermon series on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah with our second look from the story of Nehemiah. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah focus on the return of the Jewish exiles from their captivity in Babylon. In 597 BC, the armies of the Babylonian Empire defeated Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, and carried many of the elite members of the nation back to serve in Babylon. 58 years later, the Persians, led by King Cyrus, defeated the Babylonians, and King Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Judah. The book of Ezra tells of the first and second wave of returnees and the rebuilding of the great temple in Jerusalem. Approximately 50 years after those events, we come to the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a Jew living in Babylon. He was a descendent of those exiles taken from Jerusalem. His job in Babylon was serving the king as the king's cupbearer. Nehemiah gets word from his brother Hanani that Jerusalem is still in shambles; its walls are down and its people disgraced. Nehemiah goes to the king and asks permission to return to Jerusalem for a period of time in order to rebuild the city. The king approves his request and names him governor of Judah. Nehemiah makes the journey to Jerusalem and takes up residence there. He makes a midnight trip around the city secretly surveying the city walls. He then calls the city leaders together to share with them his plan to restore the city. He tells them, *You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace.* I covered all this in my previous sermon, how the leaders agreed with Nehemiah's plan and everyone adopted a gate or section of wall to rebuild.

Today, in chapter 4 of Nehemiah, we discover how dangerous it was for the Jews to attempt to rebuild the city wall. Earlier, we had learned that there was some opposition to the Jews rebuilding Jerusalem. Allow me to take a moment to describe the political landscape. Each area of the Persian Empire was ruled by a governor. Governors reported to satraps who oversaw each province. The satraps reported to the king. Nehemiah is appointed to be a governor of Judah. The nations around Judah also had their own governors. The two most prominent in our story are Sanballat the governor of Samaria and Tobiah the Ammonite (we're not exactly sure what area he governed). These two make the most noise. As neighbors of Judah, they do not wish to see Jerusalem regain power. It is in their best interest that Jerusalem remain weak. Once a regional power, Jerusalem had become a no-mans-land that anyone could exploit. Psalm 80 in the Old Testament describes the situation in Jerusalem like this when the psalmist asks God, *Why then have you broken down its walls, so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?* A fortified Jerusalem would become a competing power to Samaria and others.

So when word gets out that the Jews are going to rebuild the wall, Sanballat becomes angry and he mocks the Jews saying, *What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore things?* He asks if the Jews even have the will to make the sacrifices they need to rebuild the wall. How long will it take? Do they think they can complete the task in day? Tobiah the Ammonite says that the wall they are building is so weak that if a fox were to climb on top of it, it would fall down.

Nehemiah hears these taunts from his opponents and he prays to God saying, *Hear, O our God, for we are despised; turn their taunt back on their own heads, and give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover their guilt, and do not let their sin be blotted out from your sight; for they have hurled insults in the face of the builders.*

The Jews begin rebuilding and they quickly restore the wall to half of its former height. As work progresses, the neighboring governors grow angrier and angrier and they plot to disrupt the work. In response, Nehemiah reports that he and his people do two things: 1) they pray to God, and 2) they set up guards as protection.

One of their leaders points out that the people are growing exhausted and that working on the wall leaves them exposed to potential attacks. The Jews who lived outside the city expressed their fear at being attacked in their homes. So Nehemiah develops a plan. He stations armed guards near every group of workers and he reminds them what they are fighting for: their family, their sons, their daughters, and their homes.

Half the people worked while half the people stood guard. And even those working carried a weapon with them. They were always on alert. Because the work was spread so thinly around the city, Nehemiah had a trumpeter ready to sound the alarm in case of any attack. At the sound of the trumpet, everyone was to rush to oppose the attackers. In the face of this persistent threat Nehemiah reminds the people, *Our God will fight for us.* And work continued.

Unfortunately, the threat to the city was not just from the outside. Inside the city were some who were aligned with Tobiah. Even worse were the economic hardships imposed upon the people. Rebuilding the wall was expensive. People had to take time away from their businesses and their fields. On top of that, taxes to the king still had to be paid. The wealthy in Jerusalem were willing to make loans to those in need but at crippling interest rates. Nehemiah confronted the nobles and officials and convinced them to stop charging interest on the loans and return any property they had seized. Furthermore, in chapter 7, we read of various plots to discredit Nehemiah or even kill him.

Despite all of these obstacles, the wall is completed. It took the people 52 days. Modern archeological evidence tells us that the wall they built was neither pretty nor particularly strong; in time, however, it would be improved. But it was enough,

enough to protect the city, to eradicate the shame the people felt, to allow them to become a place where God could reside.

When Nehemiah first asked his king for permission to rebuild Jerusalem, his objective was not simply to construct walls, but to restore a community—a community that for generations had been beaten down and humiliated. The temple had already been rebuilt, but the people continued to suffer fear and disgrace.

We, as God's people, are called to identify the injustice in this world and work to eradicate it. We are called to bring healing and wholeness to broken communities, to lift up shattered lives, to bring grace to the disgraced. However, when we do engage in these acts of justice we are guaranteed to encounter opposition and threats. In those moments we can back down or choose to stand strong.

Who would oppose doing God's work? Lots of people—anyone who feels threatened by justice and righteousness. Injustice makes people rich. It gives them power. Justice threatens that. Nehemiah teaches us that to do God's work, sometimes we need to do double duty—to do the work but also to be on guard.

The work we are called to do is to aid the hungry and the homeless, to protect the refugee and those smothered in violence, to visit the prisoner, to care for the sick, to love the forgotten. The list goes on and on. Our calling is to confront injustice in all its forms. We are to do this selflessly, as children of God, as followers of Christ.

But one last thing. Did you notice that those builders in Jerusalem never had to fight? They never had to lift their swords. Yes, they were armed, but they also prayed. It turns out that their prayers were far more effective than their weapons. Remember Nehemiah's promise to his people, *Our God will fight for us*. And God did. When you come to church, do you want to be well-armed? If so, you don't need to carry your Smith & Wesson, let your prayers be your concealed weapon of choice.