

EZRA/NEHEMIAH: BUILDING GOD'S HOUSE

4. RE: BUILD

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Nehemiah 2:1-8

Today is our fourth entry in this seven-week series from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. We have completed Ezra. And today, we start on Nehemiah.

As you will recall, in 597 BC, the Babylonian Empire defeated the Southern Kingdom of Judah and laid waste to its capital Jerusalem. The Babylonians tore down the walls of the city, destroyed the great temple which had been built by King Solomon, and carried many of the elite members of the community back to Babylon.

Fifty-eight years later in 539 BC, the Persian Empire, led by King Cyrus, defeated the Babylonians. Cyrus issued an edict allowing the Jews in Babylon to return home. The initial wave of Jewish exiles (about 50,000 of them) returned to Judah and immediately set about re-establishing worship and rebuilding the temple. Rebuilding the temple took twenty years. About fifty years after the first wave, King Artaxerxes of Persia sent Ezra to Judah with the instructions to bring back a report on the province. Ezra took with him the second major wave of exiles.

Today, we come to the book of Nehemiah. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are considered by many scholars originally to have been a single book. These books appear to have been compiled from three different sources. First, we have the memoirs. We have the memoirs of Ezra and of Nehemiah telling of their time in Jerusalem. Second are the historical documents—the letters and edicts and proclamations. Third are the lists—lists of gold and silver and valuable goods and lists of people in the form of census and genealogies.

The book of Nehemiah opens with Nehemiah's memoirs. He writes, *The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital.*

Nehemiah is a Jewish descendent of the exiles. He lives in Babylon and serves the king as his cupbearer. The cupbearer would be something like a personal assistant/butler/secretary. The cupbearer would spend a great deal of personal time in the presence of the king. They would need to be a person of honesty and good character.

This book opens with Nehemiah receiving news about Jerusalem from his brother Hanani. Hanani could be a blood brother or he could be a Jewish "brother." We don't know. Hanani has just returned from Judah and he informs Nehemiah, *The survivors... are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.* Now, it's not clear here if Hanani is

referring to a recent military action against the city or if he is saying that after 150 years, the walls of the city still have not been rebuilt after the defeat to the Babylonians. We do know that early on there was an effort by the first wave of returnees to rebuild the walls but it was interrupted.

So Nehemiah prays to the Lord. For days he weeps, and mourns, and fasts. He prays that God will listen to him. He confesses the sins of Israel against the Lord.

Sometime after that, Nehemiah is performing his normal duties and attending to his boss—King Artaxerxes. The king comments that Nehemiah seems sad. Nehemiah replies, *Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors' graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?* The king asks Nehemiah what he would like to do about it and Nehemiah says a quiet prayer to God and screws up his courage and answers the king saying, *If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors' graves so that I may rebuild it.*

There is more to this request than simply allowing Nehemiah some time to attend to personal matters. If the king agrees then Nehemiah will not only require funding but he will become something like an interim governor of the city. He will be the king's man in charge; he will have royal authority.

The king's next question is, *How long will you be gone, and when will you return?* Nehemiah gives him a date and then asks for two more things. He asks for letters of introduction to the governors of the province Beyond the River and a letter granting timber from the royal forests. The king agrees to these things and Nehemiah recognizes that *the gracious hand of God* was with him.

And this is what underlies the books of Ezra and Nehemiah—God's active hand. The Jews should not have recovered from the defeat of the Babylonians. But God is present. God moves Cyrus and Cyrus supports the rebuilding of the temple. God sends Ezra. God inspires Nehemiah. There are obstacles along the way but God's hand is always there. Without God's intervention, the Jews would not have survived as a people.

Nehemiah sets out to Jerusalem with a cohort of the king's troops to protect him. Not everyone is glad to see him. His creates a stir among the local governors who are less than pleased that someone was there who had come *to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.*

On the third night after arriving in Jerusalem, Nehemiah takes a few men with him and secretly rides around the city surveying the condition of the walls and gates. No one knows of his plans to rebuild.

The next day, Nehemiah calls together the city leaders saying, *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. He explains how God had been gracious to him and how he has the support of the king. The people respond by shouting, *Let us start building!* And so, as Nehemiah writes, *they committed themselves to the common good.*

Immediately, two governors in the region begin ridiculing Nehemiah's building plan. They question if the Jews are rebelling against the king. (We'll see more of these two in the coming weeks.) Their words mirror the accusations made against Jerusalem 150 years earlier, that Jerusalem was a rebellious city and that if the walls were rebuilt the king would lose all control over the people. Nehemiah tells these naysayers that God supports the Jewish people. The outsiders have no claim over Jerusalem or of what happens there.

All of this takes place in chapters 1 and 2. Then in chapter 3, we encounter one of those lists that we find so frequently in Ezra and Nehemiah. But I would urge you to read this list for it is a list of the people of Jerusalem and the sections of wall and gates they agree to rebuild. The chapter begins saying that the high priest Eliashib and his fellow priests rebuild the gate known as the Sheep Gate and when they are done they consecrate that gate. From there work continues in each direction around the city. For example we read, *Hanun and the inhabitants of Zanoah repaired the Valley Gate; they rebuilt it and set up its doors, its bolts, and its bars, and repaired a thousand cubits of the wall, as far as the Dung Gate.* The chapter goes on describing who builds each section.

Now, I don't expect that these people did all the actual work themselves. More than likely they financed their section and supervised its completion. But the point is that this was not just Nehemiah building the walls, it was the community working together. It was an act of healing.

Why were these walls so important? It's difficult for us today to grasp the necessity of city walls. However, without walls, Jerusalem was naked, it was defenseless. Jerusalem's geographic location placed it on valuable trade routes. The region's geopolitical powers preferred that Jerusalem remain weak. Without walls Jerusalem was weak. Her neighbors could exploit her as they wished. A secure Jerusalem would pose a threat to their power and profits.

When Nehemiah first received news about Jerusalem, he was told that given the broken walls and gates of the city, the people were living in *trouble and shame*. Their shame was to inhabit a broken and insecure city where foreign armies marched through at will. Nehemiah challenges the city leaders to rebuild the city walls so that they would *no longer suffer disgrace*.

Nehemiah went to Jerusalem not simply to build walls around the city. His purpose was to rebuild the house of God. Yes, the temple had been rebuilt, and yes, the temple is the house of God. But the people who worship the Lord don't live in the temple; they live in the city. And living in the city was a source of demoralizing

shame. Nehemiah wanted to rebuild the people for they are the true house of God. If the people are broken with shame and despair then God's house is not whole.

In the same way, we, as God's people, are more than just a church building at the corner of West Main and South Greenwood. We are part of a larger community. Our community is our town, our state, our nation, our world. That is why we as a church engage in acts of mission and outreach. We do these things because our Christ commands us, and we do these things because each act of compassion rebuilds a section of broken wall, each act brings some measure of healing to the community. Just as Nehemiah sought healing in his world, so we should work for healing ours.