

Rebuilding the Ruins: A Series in Nehemiah

Rebuilding Side by Side (Nehemiah 3:1-32)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on February 18, 2024

Introduction

- ❖ As many of you know, we've started a new sermon series going through the book of Nehemiah. We're calling it *Rebuilding the Ruins* since the main narrative plot of the book has to do with the rebuilding of the ruined walls and gates of Jerusalem.
 - Now just to orient those of you who may not be as familiar with biblical history – **the books of Ezra and Nehemiah retell the story of Israel's return from the Babylonian Exile.** The high-water mark of Israel was the reign of King Solomon the son of David. Their stories are found in 1-2 Samuel. Then, 1-2 Kings (and 1-2 Chronicles) tell the stories of the subsequent kings of Israel, especially after the kingdom divided. The northern kingdom was still called Israel and the southern kingdom (with Jerusalem as its capital) was typically identified as Judah or Judea.

- ❖ In the last chapters of 2 Kings (and 2 Chronicles), it describes the rise of the Assyrian empire and their defeat of the entire northern kingdom of Israel. But by God's mercy, Judah is spared. But in time, the Babylonian empire rises up; overtakes the Assyrians; and eventually invades and conquers Judah. Destroying Jerusalem. Burning its gates. Tearing down its walls. And the vast majority of its citizenry is deported to Babylon (in modern-day Iraq).
 - Now most of the OT prophetic books – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel – they're all focused on that time period known as the Babylonian Exile. They all prophesy that one day God will move his mighty hand to return his people to the Promised Land.

- ❖ **And the books of Ezra and Nehemiah tell that story of how God did just that and who he raised up to lead this effort to return.** Which took place about fifty years after the fall of Jerusalem (586 BC). The returnees quickly reoccupy the city and rebuild the altar of God so that sacrifices might resume once more. But not until twenty years later is the temple itself rebuilt. And by the time Ezra arrives (458 BC) to help recover the Law (Torah) so that the will and ways of God might be reestablished once more – well over a century has passed since the deportation. And thirteen years after Ezra's arrival, that's when we get to Nehemiah's story (445 BC) and the effort to rebuild the walls and gates so that Jerusalem might function once more as a city on a hill, shining God's light into a dark world.

- ❖ So that's a quick summary of the background and overall narrative plot of the book. Nehemiah is a good example of an OT narrative. There are characters and plot tensions and narrative resolutions. But *not* here in chapter 3. **If you noticed, Nehemiah 3 is a bit different. It's sort of an interruption in the narrative flow between chapters 2 and 4.**
 - We're presented with an ancient record detailing *who* built *what* section of the gates and walls. It systematically covers section by section (40 in total). It names individuals or families or other groups identified by their hometown or profession. There over fifty individuals or groups that took part in the construction. And it's been suggested that these verses are organized around the seven gates situated along the wall – starting and ending full circle with the Sheep Gate (vv 1, 32), moving counterclockwise. The entire rebuilt wall stretched out one and half miles long.

- ❖ And it's all here in chapter 3. Listed out for you step by step. Detail by tedious detail. **And you might be wondering, "Are we seriously going to preach through this?"** Honestly, I was asking myself the same question earlier this week. This is some dense material. Let's be real, these are the portions of Scripture we typically skim through. You get to a genealogy. A census list. A step by step description of the temple with all its materials and measurements. **It's understandable if you begin to gloss over those verses and speed read until the next narrative section.** This chapter is no different.
 - It's tempting to just skip it and go straight to preaching chapter 4. But as I've said before, we're committed, in this pulpit, to preaching through whole books of the Bible. Because we believe 2 Timothy 3:16 when it says that "*All Scripture is . . . profitable for teaching.*" **So Nehemiah 3 – no matter how monotonous it might get – is still God-breathed, inspired Scripture.**
 - That means there's always something to be gleaned that can edify us. That can build us up in the faith. Especially to rebuild any of us who have neglected our faith – who have allowed things to go to ruin. I believe there's a word here for you. This morning I want to consider four truths that we can glean from this detailed record of this rebuilding project.

God Keeps His Word Without Missing a Thing

- ❖ This is the first truth to consider. **This detailed record of the rebuild confirms that God keeps his word without missing a thing.** This is an important point when you consider just how many promises God makes throughout Scripture. The vast quantity leads some to wonder if he seriously intends to fulfill each and every single one. Or if he's even capable of doing so. **This, of course, is an election year, and we're going to hear candidates issue all sorts of campaign promises.** And we all know that the reality is that they're highly unlikely to keep every one of those promises. Especially since many of them require collaboration with other individuals or branches of government.
 - Now if a candidate is able to keep 90% of his or her campaign promises, I think all of us would consider that to be quite a success. That's a highly effective politician. But what if we're talking about God? **What if God only kept 90% of his promises in Scripture?** Would you praise him for that? Would that be praiseworthy?
 - Or would that be concerning? Because for all those promises he failed to keep – either he never meant it. He lied. Or he did mean it but he's not powerful enough to see them through. He can't always keep his Word. **I think you'd agree that it would be a problem if God did not follow through and keep every single promise that he makes without missing a thing.**
- ❖ Thankfully, that's exactly what's affirmed in our text. The fact that the construction of every single square inch of that wall, from section to section, forty times over, until it comes back around to where it all started at the Sheep Gate – **the fact that it's covered in such detail just goes to underscore that God's promises never fail.** God's purposes are never thwarted (Job 42:2). He keeps his Word – even to the tiniest of detail.

- ❖ But it should be said that God’s Word might not always be fulfilled immediately and all at once. Sometimes the fulfillment is gradual. It takes time. **So while, in one sense, the fulfillment of his Word may have *already* come in seed form. But perhaps it’s *not yet* come to fruition in all its fulness.** But in the end, we can be sure that God will always bring to completion the good work that he has already begun to fulfill.
- ❖ So I’m not surprised if running through Nehemiah’s mind were biblical promises like what’s found in **Isaiah 44:26**. There the LORD promises to his people who are languishing as exiles far away from their ancestral home. Saying, *“I am the LORD . . . who confirms the word of his servant and fulfills the counsel of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, ‘She shall be inhabited,’ and of the cities of Judah, ‘They shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins’”*
 - **God promised to rebuild the ruins. Which gave Nehemiah all the confidence he needed to move forward with this construction project.** And as that last brick was being laid along the wall by the Sheep Gate in v32 – that confirmed the words of the prophets. God said he would raise up their ruins and he did.
 - And this detailed record in chapter 3 also confirms what Nehemiah claimed in chapter 2 – that God put this vision in his heart (2:12). That this effort to rebuild the walls and gates of Zion was God-ordained. God-promised.
- ❖ But we need to be careful. **Let’s be careful *not* to quickly baptize every inclination or idea that we think was given to us by the Lord.** Just because we think God has placed some kind of task or project on our hearts – that doesn’t make it a promise of his. There may be no guarantee that he’ll fulfill it. If it’s not revealed to us in Scripture as a promise, then we can’t assume the same level of confidence that God will fulfill our efforts. In such cases, we need to move forward with humility and a willingness to make adjustments to our plans.
 - But note how, for Nehemiah, he wasn’t basing his project on a mere hunch or impression in his heart. **No, he was confident that God had put this rebuilding project in his heart because it was directly based on God’s revealed word.** God said these walls were coming back up.
- ❖ Let me be direct. What I’m trying to say is this: **Do we know for a fact that God is going to fulfill our building plans for the land next door?** No, we don’t know for sure. Because it’s not in God’s Word. There’s no chapter or verse saying HCC is going to fulfill its plans to construct a church building next door. It doesn’t mean we shouldn’t pursue it. There are a lot of things in our lives we faithfully pursue even if we don’t have a guarantee of its success laid out for us in God’s Word. So we just have to be humble and careful and good stewards of the resources God has entrusted to us. Making adjustments if needed.
 - **But, Church, what we can bank on are the promises of God found in Scripture.** So Jesus promised that all of his lost sheep know their Shepherd’s voice and will listen to that voice as it calls them to come back to the fold (Jn 10:16).

- ❖ **That means we can be absolutely sure that if we faithfully proclaim Jesus’s Word – not just from this pulpit – but in your homes, in your workplaces, in your every day conversation with non-believing friends – lost people *will* be found.** Lost sheep *will* return to the fold. They will hear their Savior’s voice. And they will come.
 - And if a new building next door helps to facilitate our efforts to preach and teach and proclaim God’s Word – so that the voice of Jesus spreads far and wide across our city to the ends of the earth – then let’s go for it! But let’s just be clear with what promises we’re banking on. Trusting that God will keep his Word without missing a thing.

The Importance of Strong Spiritual Leadership

- ❖ So that’s the first truth we can glean from this detailed record. Here’s the second: **This detailed record of the rebuild stresses the importance of strong spiritual leadership.** Notice how Nehemiah doesn’t even appear in this chapter. (The Nehemiah named in v16 is referring to another brother with the same name.) I think his absence is significant. Because notice who’s the first man to step up and initiate the rebuild. It’s the high priest of Israel. The most prominent spiritual leader among them.
 - Look at v1, *“Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set its doors. They consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Tower of Hananel.”*
- ❖ So the high priest of Israel took it upon himself to get the construction going. **And his attention was focused on rebuilding the Sheep Gate and the adjacent wall stretching out as far as two defensive towers.** Now this was the gate located on the north side of the city, and it was the entrance closest to the temple grounds. It got its name from the sheep that worshippers would lead through its entrance to bring to the temple to sacrifice.
 - **Now along the entire one and a half mile stretch of wall, this section was arguably the area of greatest need.** Unlike in other areas, in this section the walls were completely destroyed. That’s why, in vv1-3, you’ll see the verb for *build* and not the word for *repair*, which doesn’t show up until v4 and on. That’s why scholars think the Babylonians likely breached the walls on this side. So the city was most vulnerable at this section. That’s one reason why Eliashib starts here.
 - **But beyond the physical vulnerability at this section of the wall, the high priest, along with his brothers the other priests, took the lead and chose this section because of its proximity to the temple.** That’s their way of stressing the priority of the temple. That’s how you communicate to everyone that the worship of God is the most important thing.
- ❖ **Something you notice in later verses is that many people worked on sections of the wall closest to their own homes** (vv10, 23, 29, 30). Which makes sense. People are going to care the most and work the hardest on the sections with the highest personal stakes involved. **But notice how Eliashib the high priest prioritized the house of God over his own.** Look later in vv20-21. He left the repair work on the section of the wall near his own house to others. He was more concerned about the walls near the temple.

- ❖ This is what strong spiritual leadership looks like. **Spiritual leaders take the initiative.** They step forward. They rise up. And without a self-serving motivation. They're there to serve. That's how spiritual leaders lead. Not by compelling others with sheer force. Not by wielding their authority in a domineering manner. No, their leadership over you looks like service. It feels like they're serving you.
 - **Just consider the Great High Priest and how he led.** How he wielded his authority. Jesus stepped up to lead his disciples – by getting on his knees to wash their feet with water, cleansing them of their filth. And ultimately, by getting onto the cross to wash their souls with his own blood, cleansing them of their sin. That's what strong spiritual leadership looks like.

- ❖ **Now in comparison, that kind of leadership stands out in sharp contrast to the leadership exercised by the nobles of the town of Tekoa.** Look at v5, “*And next to them the Tekoites repaired, but their nobles would not stoop to serve their Lord.*” The men of Tekoa were willing to build but their nobles refused to stoop to serve. **They were all for receiving the position of a leader but refused to adopt the posture of a servant.** They were self-serving leaders who knew nothing about spiritual leadership.

- ❖ **So for those of you who are currently in a position of spiritual leadership, what does your leadership look like?** Does it look self-serving? Or does it look like service to others? Do those under your leadership feel like you're serving them?
 - **And, for others, what if God is calling you to rise up and lead?** Every church, every ministry, every project needs strong spiritual leadership. I hope you heed the call and step up and lead. Just make sure it looks and feels like service.

A Diverse Body Working Side by Side to Fulfill a Singular Purpose

- ❖ So that's already two relevant truths that can be gleaned from this text. Here's a third: **This detailed record of the rebuild demonstrates how a diverse body can work side by side to fulfill a singular purpose.** If you take the time to read through the entire chapter, you can't help but notice how diverse the people were who worked on these walls. But despite all their differences, they come together as one to finish the task.
 - Notice how there's cooperation between men *and* women. V12 mentions the daughters of Shallum getting involved. There are priests *and* laypeople working together. There are all sorts of tradesmen engaged – goldsmiths, perfumers, and merchants. There are Jerusalem locals working on the walls *along with* non-residents from surrounding villages and towns. V2 mentions men from the town of Jericho who travelled to Jerusalem to assist in the rebuild. And notice as well how provincial rulers (six are mentioned) are working *hand in hand* with common folks.
 - **Bottom line, there are so many people of different walks of life, different backgrounds, different professions** – laboring side by side for the singular purpose of rebuilding those walls and gates.

- ❖ Now that vision of a diverse but unified body working together for a singular purpose is carried over into the NT in the mission of the Church – the diverse but unified body of Christ. **Hebrews 12:22** says that “*we belong to the city of the Living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.*” In other words, we, as the Church, are the New Jerusalem.
 - And Ephesians 4 says that God has given the Church different kinds of people with a diverse set of spiritual gifts and talents. Listen to **Ephesians 4:11-12**, “*11And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.*”
 - So the goal is similar to what we find in Nehemiah. It’s about building things. **But in our case, we’re building up the body of Christ.** And that only happens when a diverse body of people work together, using our diverse gifts, to build each up as one body of Christ.

- ❖ That’s what I love about our church. **We have different people, of different professions, with different spiritual gifts, and different natural talents, and different amounts of resources.** We have three different congregations, speaking different languages, coming from different cultures. Which means there are plenty of factors that could divide us. That could distract us from the task that God has put before us.
 - **But it also means we have a unique opportunity to glorify our God by staying united, working side by side, committed to our one gospel mission to both grow and build up the body of Christ.** To make and mature more disciples. Just like the diverse, remnant community in Nehemiah’s day, who were united and committed to rebuilding that wall and those gates.

The Centrality of Our Spiritual Mission as the People of God

- ❖ There’s one more truth I believe we can glean from this passage. Here’s our final point: **This detailed record of the rebuild highlights the centrality of our spiritual mission as the people of God.** This brings us back to certain details in v1 that we skipped over earlier. Look back and notice how it says that, after rebuilding the Sheep Gate, they consecrated it and set its doors. And they consecrated the adjoining section of the wall up to those two towers.
 - **It’s that act of consecration – which happens only here on this section of the wall and nowhere else along the entire stretch – that stresses the spiritual nature and mission of this entire construction project.** To consecrate something in the OT meant to set it apart as holy and dedicated to the worship and service of the LORD.

- ❖ So to consecrate *this* section of the wall – nearest the temple, where the glory of God resides – that act of consecration was their way of saying that rebuilding this wall and these gates is not just for our physical safety. **It’s ultimately about recovering our spiritual witness as the holy city of God.** It’s about showing the nations how blessed it is to live in a covenant relationship with the LORD.
 - But the problem is that our spiritual witness is in jeopardy so long as our walls are down and our gates burned. The nations will look at our city, and they won’t be impressed by the glory of God. They’ll walk away with a lower view of him.

- ❖ In other words, a well-fortified wall around the city of God speaks volumes about the glory of God. Psalm 48 teaches this very principle. **The mighty, secure walls of Jerusalem were to serve as an object lesson teaching an important truth about God.** Listen to **Psalm 48:1-3**. *“¹Great is the LORD and greatly to be praised in the city of our God! His holy mountain, ²beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, in the far north, the city of the great King. ³Within her citadels God has made himself known as a fortress.”* **In other words, God has revealed himself to be a spiritual fortress for his people as symbolized by the physical walls and towers around Jerusalem.** So you can understand how ruined, demolished walls reflect poorly on God.
 - Listen to vv12-14, *“¹²Walk about Zion, go around her, number her towers, ¹³consider well her ramparts, go through her citadels, that you may tell the next generation ¹⁴that this is God, our God forever and ever. He will guide us forever.”* In other words, people were invited to walk around Zion and examine the walls and towers. And they were to take what they learned – about God! – and pass it on to the next generation.

- ❖ The point is this: **The wall is not just a wall. It’s a sign pointing to the glory of a Mighty God.** And this project is not just about securing Israel’s physical safety. It’s about recovering their spiritual mission to be that city on a hill – from which the glory of God brilliantly shines. Israel’s spiritual mission far outweighs any other priority or goal.

- ❖ And the same principle should apply to us. **A church might feel called to pursue any number of projects and initiatives.** Establishing a food pantry. Running a daycare or afterschool program. Offering ESL classes or language courses teaching Chinese or Spanish. Organizing sports ministries. Mobilizing homeless outreaches. Buying and building new facilities. Those can all be good and godly pursuits.
 - **But if we’re not consecrating the spiritual dimension of these projects and initiatives, then we’ve missed the point.** If in the course of our efforts, if we’re not setting apart and making central our spiritual mission to be witnesses of the Lord (of his glory and his grace), then our priorities are grossly disordered.

- ❖ Like the people of God in Nehemiah’s day, we need to make clear – in all the busy projects and pursuits we get into as a church – that our spiritual mission to proclaim the gospel and to make God-loving and compassionate disciples of Jesus Christ among all nations – **let’s make sure that that takes central place, that that’s consecrated and set apart, standing out from everything else we do.**

- ❖ Let me show you how the people in Nehemiah’s day did that. Look at vv13-14. When the people rebuilt the Valley Gate or the Dung Gate, notice how it says they *“set its doors, its bolts, and its bars.”* In fact, it uses that same phrase for all the gates that were repaired (vv3, 6, 13, 14, 15). All except one. Look back at v1. *“And they built the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set its doors.”*

- ❖ Notice that there are no bolts and no bars. **Which means the Sheep Gate is not locked. It remains open.** Signaling that the God of Zion welcomes everyone – all nations, all tribes and tongues – to enter through the Sheep Gate. To come and worship him. That’s how they kept their spiritual mission central. Even after their walls and gates are rebuilt, keeping them safe and secure. What was set apart was that Sheep Gate with its welcoming doors.

- ❖ **And as the story of Scripture goes, many centuries later, the Lamb of God – who takes away the sins of the world – entered the gates of Jerusalem riding on a donkey.** And in five short days he was hanging on a Roman cross dying for our sins. But he defeated our sins as he defeated death and rose again on the third day.
 - And now whosoever believes in him will be saved. **Jesus even described himself as a new Sheep Gate.** He said, *“I am the door of the sheep If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.”* (Jn 10:7,9)
 - Church, in every effort and every endeavor we take on, let’s make sure we keep central our commitment to preach this gospel and hold out this invitation to come to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.