

## Rebuilding the Ruins

Rebuilding with Prayer (Nehemiah 1:1-11)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on February 4, 2024

### Introduction

- ❖ This morning, we're kickstarting a new sermon series in the book of Nehemiah. It'll take us all the way to May. We're calling this series: *Rebuilding the Ruins*. **As you may know, the book is about the story of rebuilding the ruined walls of Jerusalem after God's people return from exile.** It's named after an Israelite who held a high and important position in the court of the king of Persia. Nehemiah is his name, and he's commissioned by the king to complete the restoration process for Jerusalem that lasted for a number of years. And to do it by rebuilding the city walls and gates.
  - So that's what most people know about the book of Nehemiah. They know it's about rebuilding walls. It's about restoring gates. It's about strong leadership and perseverance. **And it's no wonder that many churches turn to Nehemiah when they want to talk about building projects and capital campaigns.** And you're probably thinking, "Wait, is that what's going on here? Are we in Nehemiah because we're got a building project going on with the land and building next door?"
  
- ❖ Yes and No. Yes, the thought did cross my mind because we joked about this as a staff. During our pledge campaign last year, we kept saying how we better start preaching Nehemiah soon. We joke like that because it's become such a cliché. It's just assumed you're only going to hear Nehemiah from the pulpit when the church has a building project to push.
  - So yes, we are intentionally preaching through Nehemiah this year of all years. **But we're doing it in order to show that a church – with a building project going on – can preach Nehemiah *faithfully*.** It can be done without treating Scripture as an instrumental means to promote our own agendas. We can preach this book while resisting the urge to use it to merely serve our desired outcomes.
  
- ❖ Because ultimately Nehemiah is not just about rebuilding walls and gates. The physical structures are important. But, on a grander scale, they're symbolic of something far more significant that was destroyed by the Exile. **The rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls and gates was one of the final steps in the overall rebuilding of Israel's ruined identity as the covenant people of God and the restoring of its ruined mission as God's representatives on earth.** That's what this book is ultimately about. It's about rebuilding the identity and mission of God's people.
  
- ❖ So when we talk about *Rebuilding the Ruins*, we're implying that all of us can find ourselves in this story. Because like the OT people of God, we're all guilty of sin and rebellion. **We've ruined *our* identity as creatures made in God's image and failed in our mission to reflect his glory and rule over his creation.** We've all fallen short. We've all ruined our identity and mission. We are, by nature, sinners who are living for ourselves.
  - So there's a renovation process that needs to go on – or is going on – inside every one of us. Like the Israelites in Nehemiah, we're in desperate need of God to move in mighty ways to redeem us and rebuild us – to make us into the kind of people that reflect his glory and represent him well to the nations. **Church, this year's building project starts – not next door – but here in *our* hearts and in *our* lives.**

- ❖ **And what we learn from this morning's text – from Nehemiah chapter one – is that any effort to rebuild the ruins will have to start with prayer.** Desperate prayer. So let's take a look chapter one. I've broken it down into four sections. First, we'll discuss (1) the presenting problem. Next, we'll consider (2) the persistent prayer, (3) the penitential prayer, and (4) the promise-based prayer.

### The Presenting Problem

- ❖ Let's begin by considering the book's presenting problem. Which we already said has to do with ruined walls and gates in post-exilic Jerusalem. Now because Nehemiah is a narrative book, so much of its historical background goes assumed, and it just jumps right into the story. So it would benefit us to slow down and consider the historical context.
- ❖ Now Pastor Henry mentioned last week, as he preached Ezra chapter one, that the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written as one continuous work of ancient literature. In the Hebrew Bible it's all one book. It was only until much later that it became separated into two. **So taken together, Ezra and Nehemiah tell the story of the return of God's chosen people; back to God's chosen place; to recover their chosen mission on earth.**
  - It took place in three major stages. The first stage focuses on the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. In Ezra 1-6, the LORD moves Cyrus the king of Persia to authorize a rebuilding project under the leadership of Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel – a descendant of King David and an ancestor of our Lord Jesus (Mt 1:12). The second stage takes place years later under the reign of another Persian king named Artaxerxes. This stage is referenced in Ezra 7-10 and focuses on the recovery of God's Law under the leadership of Ezra, a Levitical priest and scribe.
- ❖ And being one book, Ezra 10 transitions directly into Nehemiah 1. So when we're told in v1 that this third stage – focused on rebuilding the walls and gates – was initiated "*in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year,*" that should be understood as referring to the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes reign (465-425BC).
  - Now notice how chapter one is written from a first-person perspective. **Nehemiah is writing his own memoir. He was an Israelite providentially placed in a position of great influence.** V11 tells us that he was "*cupbearer to the king.*" In ancient times, the cupbearer was an official who would always taste the king's wine first in case of an attempted assassination by poisoning. He was also in charge of guarding the royal chambers where the king slept. So the cupbearer was constantly putting his life at risk to protect the king. Which made him the most trusted official in the royal court.
- ❖ Well, vv1-3 recounts an instance when Nehemiah's brother returns from Jerusalem and brings a report regarding the state of the city and the condition of the returnees currently residing there. Look at v3, "*And they said to me, 'The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.'*"

- ❖ Upon hearing those words, we're told that Nehemiah "*sat down and wept and mourned for days.*" Now some have wondered why the news shocked him. **Shouldn't it be, for all exiles, a well-known fact that Jerusalem's walls and gates were destroyed?** Yes, he's aware they were destroyed when the Babylonians sacked Jerusalem all those years ago. But what likely surprised him was the lack of progress in the overall rebuild of the city.
  - **You see, back in Ezra 4:11-16, it recounts an instance in Artaxerxes's reign when the returnees made an initial effort to rebuild the walls and gates.** An effort adamantly opposed by their pagan neighbors, who wrote a letter to Artaxerxes accusing the Jews of sedition as evidenced by this attempt to fortify the city walls. And they were successful in halting the rebuild. In Ezra 4:17, we're told that the king writes a letter ordering the work to cease. So the walls remain in pieces and what little did get put up was quickly torn down.
  
- ❖ So, in all likelihood, Nehemiah was taken by surprise because he wasn't aware that the imperial policy to rebuild Jerusalem had been reversed by his own master. Now, at this point, he feels compelled to say something. **He recognizes a responsibility to leverage the influential position God has placed him in to advocate for God's people and God's city.**
  - But he realizes this is going to be a big ask. He has to approach the king and ask him to reverse his own policy. To restart a project he personally shut down out of concerns of seditious behavior. **His loyalties could very well be questioned.** A mistrusted cupbearer needs to start checking his *own* cup for poison.
  
- ❖ But to Nehemiah, it was worth the risk. The presenting problem was urgent enough. Now that question of urgency is worth exploring. **Why would the ruined walls and gates of Jerusalem present such an urgent and dire problem?**
  - Well, for practical reasons, city walls and gates are needed to protect against invasion. **The remnant of returnees would be vulnerable to attack without defensive walls.** But beyond the practical, there's a psychological effect if Jerusalem remains exposed and wall-less. It serves as a constant reminder of their past shame in abandoning the LORD. Their sin invited this form of divine punishment. So remaining in a ruined state would suggest they were still under divine wrath. **So for God's people to have a feeling sense of his mercy, it's important to complete the rebuild of the city.**
  
- ❖ **But on a larger scale, until the walls and gates are rebuilt – until Jerusalem is a proper city again – how can the people of God function as his earthly representatives?** Remember how we've said before that, under the Old Covenant, the people of God were called to bless all the earth – with a come-and-see approach.
  - The nations were to come and see Israel as an example of what it looks like to live under God's blessing – as you live according to God's Law. And the clearest expression was to be manifested in and through the city of Jerusalem.

- ❖ The capital was called “*the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.*” (Ps 46:4) It was known as “*the holy city.*” (Neh 11:1; Isa 52:1) It was meant to be a beacon of God’s light shining in the darkness for all the world to see and to be drawn towards (Ps 43:3).
  - But all ancient cities had proper walls and gates. **If the people of God are going to heed their calling – if Jerusalem is going to fulfill its mission as a holy city – then it needs to be fully rebuilt into a proper city again.** That’s why Nehemiah felt the need to initiate this building project. He was driven by a concern for their identity as God’s covenant people and their mission to represent him before the nations.

### The Persistent Prayer

- ❖ So the first thing Nehemiah did in response to the presenting problem was not to rush into the presence of his king with his petition. No, it was to patiently go before the King of Kings in persistent prayer. Listen to v4 again, “*As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.*”
  - Nehemiah recognized the importance of going to the highest authority first. **Eventually he’ll have to approach his earthly boss. But what’s more important is to first go to his heavenly Lord.** That’s a good lesson for us. Too often – when dealing with our urgent problems – we’re tempted to go directly to those we think have the power and authority to solve them. We don’t have Nehemiah’s instincts. We don’t turn first to our highest authority – to the great and awesome God of heaven.
- ❖ Now v4 says he mourned and fasted and prayed for days It doesn’t say for how many days. **Maybe a couple? A whole week? Well, we actually don’t have to speculate.** Because in chapter 2:1, we’re told he finally approached the king “*in the month of Nisan.*” Which corresponds to the months of March-April. Recall that v1 says he heard this report earlier in the month of Chislev, which corresponds to November-December. So it was a 4-5 month period of prayer and fasting before Nehemiah approaches the king with his request.
  - That’s significant when you consider the fact that, later on in Nehemiah 6:15, it says the entire rebuilding project for the city walls and gates took less than two months to complete. **That means Nehemiah spent more time praying and fasting over the rebuild than the time it took to actually do it!**
    - That is so unlike us. We just give a nominal amount of prayer to the beginning of a project. Of course, we know better than to *not* pray at all. **But how rare is it to spend far more time praying over a ministry effort compared to the actual time it takes to perform or complete that ministry?** It really goes to show who exactly we’re depending on for success. It’s humbling.
- ❖ But the next question is: **What motivated Nehemiah to persist in prayer for so long?** What kept him going during that prolonged season of mourning and fasting and praying? Let’s read starting in v5, “*5And I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 6let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants.”*”

- ❖ **Notice how Nehemiah's confidence to persist in his prayer is not rooted in the fact of his persistence or his devotion to the Lord or the eloquence of his prayers.** He's asking God to pay attention – to let your ear be attentive and your eyes open – not because of anything having to do with Nehemiah. **No, his confidence in prayer has everything to do with the character of the God to whom he's praying.**
  - O LORD, pay attention – because you're the kind of God who keeps covenant. You're the God who is utterly faithful to the covenant relationship you established with us. You are supremely loyal to your chosen people.
  
- ❖ And that's why you keep showing us steadfast love. You keep *hesed*. **The Hebrew word *hesed* is so difficult to translate into English because there's really no equivalent.** You might see it translated as God's mercy, his kindness, his goodness, his faithfulness, or his loyalty. But none of those words, by themselves, capture the essence of *hesed*. The word essentially means all of those things at once! The best attempts usually resort to a combination of words. So God's *hesed* gets translated as his steadfast love, his loyal love, or his covenantal faithfulness – all directed towards his chosen people.
  - So what fueled Nehemiah's prayers? What gave him the confidence to persist for five long months? It's because he knew the God to whom he was praying. **That this transcendent God – who is high and mighty, great and awesome – is also gentle and lowly and utterly faithful to his chosen covenant people.** Keeping steadfast love. That's what keeps Nehemiah praying.
  
- ❖ **He had so many reasons to give up praying.** He experienced the trauma of exile. He knows what spiritual abandonment feels like. Yet none of that deterred him from praying. We, on the other hand, give up far too easily. After experiencing a mere fraction of the disappointment and distress that Nehemiah went through, we start turning to other people, other powers, other authorities for answers. What we need to do is to turn back to Scripture to remind ourselves of the true nature and character of God. That will bring us to our knees in prayer.

### **The Penitential Prayer**

- ❖ And what it will lead to is a recognition of our unworthiness and a confession of our sins. It's the same for Nehemiah. This brings us to our third section – the penitential prayer. **That's another way of saying a prayer that expresses penitence or a sorrow for sin.** That's what we see in Nehemiah's prayer starting in v6.
  - Listen again, *"<sup>6</sup>let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. <sup>7</sup>We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses."*

- ❖ So as Nehemiah prays a prayer of adoration – exalting God for his greatness and for his steadfast love – he is humbled by his own sinfulness and unworthiness and immediately offers a prayer of confession. Notice how he prays in the first person plural. *We* have sinned against you. *We* have acted very corruptly against you.
  - He doesn't distance himself and point fingers at others. **No, Nehemiah is more than willing to identify himself with the sins of his community.** He explicitly includes him and his household. "*Even I and my father's house have sinned.*" Nehemiah, his family, and the entire remnant of God's people have failed to keep the commandments, statutes, and rules that the LORD delivered through Moses.
  
- ❖ Now, on one hand, we should be encouraged. Because the book of Nehemiah proves that our failure to keep God's commandments doesn't rule us out permanently. It doesn't disqualify us from experiencing a renovation in faith.
  - **But what we learn from this prayer is that confession is a precursor to any experience of renewal.** If you've been far from God, if you've been living contrary to his commands, and you need spiritual restoration and rebuild in your life – don't imagine that it just happens all the sudden out of nowhere. No, there is something you can do. **You can dismantle your pride. Tear down your ego. Confess your sins. And then your soul will be ready for God to do a rebuild.**
  
- ❖ This is why we make it a priority to confess our sins together in corporate worship. And why we encourage you to make confession a regular practice in your prayer life. It's vital to the overall project of renovating your soul. Just like a good builder, God is not going to rebuild until you clear out the rubble. **So it's always the right time to inspect your own soul and to confess any known sins.** I'm talking about the sins that you committed and even the sins that stain your family or community that bleed onto you. Confess your sins and he is faithful and just to forgive your sins and cleanse you from all unrighteousness (1 Jn 1:9).

### The Promise-Based Prayer

- ❖ That's a promise in Scripture. It's a promise you can bank on. It's the kind of biblical promise that needs to be littered throughout your prayers. **In other words, fill your prayers with the promises of God.** That leads to our fourth and final section – the promise-based prayer. Look at v8 and notice how Nehemiah is asking God to remember his own words. To remember his promises to his people. "*Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses.*"
  - Now he's asking God to remember his word – not because God needs a genuine reminder. It's not like he's at risk of forgetting some of the past promises he's made. No one needs to remind him of the covenants he's forged with his chosen people.
    - This is just how godly saints pray. **They're so saturated in God's Word and so familiar with biblical promises that their prayers are naturally filled with them.** They're always referring to these promises because they're banking on God doing what he said he'll do.

- ❖ **And what did God say he'll do if his people have been unfaithful and yet return to him?**  
Listen to vv8-10, “*8Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, 9but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there. 10They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.’*”
- ❖ Nehemiah is making reference to Deuteronomy 30:1-5 where Moses essentially predicts these events. He says one day the LORD God will drive his people from this land because of their unfaithfulness and idolatry. **But Moses also predicts that the God who scattered them will be the same God who gathers them back to the place where he has chosen to make his name dwell.** That, of course, being Jerusalem.
  - Nehemiah knows Deuteronomy 30 very well. He knows the promises found there. He knows how relevant they are to his situation. And that’s why they naturally fit within this prayer of his. **This promise to regather and restore a scattered but penitent people – this promise is what gave Nehemiah the confidence to believe God will act.** God will finish what he started.
- ❖ That’s the emphasis in v10. “LORD, you’ve already redeemed us by your great power and strong hand. You’ve already brought us out of exile and back to Jerusalem. Please finish the job. Please complete our rebuild. Grant me favor as I approach the king with this bold request to restart the effort to rebuild those walls.” That’s his immediate ask in v11. “*Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.*” **He’s able to approach his king with confidence because he’s banking on promises of the King of kings.**
- ❖ So what’s the takeaway for us and for our prayers? **This means we need an intimate knowledge of God’s Word. We need to familiarize ourselves with his promises.** What has he committed himself to do? What has the Lord obliged himself to do for his people? And once we figure that out, why would we *not* appeal to them in our prayers?
- ❖ **It’s the same problem we have when the vast majority of us never read the fine print.** We sign up for services. We enter into contracts and agreements. And we don’t read the fine print. We just have a general idea of what we’re signing up for and ignore the rest.
  - Of course, that means we’re probably ignorant of certain obligations that are stipulated for us to fulfill. **But it’s also very likely that we have no idea the kinds of promises that that company or service has obliged to keep – that benefit us!** If we have issues or complaints, we wouldn’t know what kind of benefits and promises we could appeal to. Because we never bothered to read the fine print!
    - But if you did take the time to read it, then I have no doubt you would be appealing quite a bit to the fine print the next time you’re on the phone with customer service. You’d be quoting chapter and verse to that agent.

- ❖ In the same way, if you never take the time to carefully read the Scriptures – if you ignore the fine print – then you wouldn't know the kind of obligations God has willingly bound himself to. **You wouldn't be aware of the type of promises you can boldly appeal to. Which would leave your prayers bare and impotent.**
  - But, on the other hand, if you're familiar with God's promises, then it makes perfect sense to pepper your prayers with them. To saturate your prayers with as many promises that you can. That's what makes your prayers powerful.
  
- ❖ So consider modeling your prayers after Nehemiah's. He believed the God who scatters is the God who promises to gather. The God who tears us down is the God who promises to build us back up. **The God who redeemed us by his great power and strong hand is the God who promises to restore us when we approach in repentance and faith.**
  - So if you're feeling far from God – if you need a spiritual renovation to take place in your soul – you need to acknowledge, first of all, what Christ did to redeem you by his strong hand. **Essentially, he was willing to be exiled – so that you could be returned to God.** He chose to be spiritually abandoned on the cross – so that you, as God's chosen ones, would never be abandoned.
  
- ❖ **And if Jesus is your Redeemer, then you can bank on his promise to finish what he started in you.** That's what's promised in Philippians 1:6, *“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”* **In other words, if Jesus already started a good work of salvation in you – then, in your prayers, you should be appealing to his promise to bring it to completion.** To finish the rebuild.
  - Listen to Hebrews 7:25. It says Jesus is *“able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him.”* If you're his, Jesus has promised to save you – not just to a certain degree, not just to an acceptable amount – but to the uttermost. He won't leave you partially done. He'll finish the work in you.