

The Walls and the Word

Nehemiah Overview

(preached Pine Grove 4/26/15; Sunday PM)

Introduction

Most of us are very familiar with the name Saddam Hussein.

He was the president of Iraq for 24 years from 1979 to 2003.

He was known for his dictator style of rule, where his opponents were often killed.

He often mistreated his own people, taking advantage of them by keeping them in poverty while he lived a lavish lifestyle.

Though he was overthrown in 2003 when a coalition of countries invaded Iraq and later killed in 2006, he ruled like a mad man for decades.

However, many or none of you may know the name George Sada.

Sada was born in Iraq in 1941 to a Christian family.

His dad was an air force pilot and as a young boy, George always dreamed of becoming a pilot.

Eventually that dream became reality and at the age of 19, George graduated from the Iraqi Air Academy.

He had a long career with the Iraqi Air Force and eventually rose in the ranks to a 2-star officer before retiring in 1986.

That retirement didn't last long because in 1990, he was called back into service as Saddam Hussein planned to invade Kuwait.

He was named the Vice Air Marshall, which put him very close to Hussein.

As the plan to invade Kuwait neared, Saddam called in all his top advisors and added this twist to the assault on Kuwait.

He was going to send the Iraqi Air Force into Israel as well.

All 98 of their fighters would head to Israel and drop chemical weapons on that country as well.

Such a plan caught Sada off guard.

He knew that Hussein hated Israel, but to carry out an attack without justification was not right in Sada's eyes.

So sitting at a table with all of Hussein's advisors...

With all of Hussein's sons.

With all of Hussein's body guards....

Sada simply stood up and told Saddam that such an attack on Israel was not right.

Listen to how this happened..

"I was thinking of it in two ways," he told me, "One, as a Christian, as a believer. Second, as a national officer that belonged to the Iraqi forces....As a Christian, I could not accept [this order] to send two waves of fighters to attack Israel, one wave through Jordan and one through Syria. I knew the capabilities of the Israeli air force and their air defenses and their plans to destroy all aircraft coming from the east before entering the Israeli borders. So this means the bombs were [mostly] going to drop on Jordan and Syria....But with ninety-eight aircraft, some of them would still penetrate to Israel. Just imagine as a Christian [the deaths that would result] as all three countries were going to be hit by chemicals."

Sada could not bear the thought of having to stand before Jesus Christ on the Day of Judgment with such a sin on his conscience. Nor could he bear to see the destruction that would be unleashed upon his own people if Saddam's plan was successful.

What's more, "as a tactical general and a strategist, I also knew the Israelis would have the

right to retaliate with nuclear weapons and they would destroy our big cities like Baghdad, Mosul, Basra, and the others. So what was the benefit of doing this?

“What gave (me) the courage to try to dissuade Saddam?”

“Believe me, only Jesus. Only. I know how brave I am. I am not a coward. But to be that brave—to put your life in from of Saddam—he could shoot you at any second—there were some people who said, ‘Georges is finished. Today his head is gone’but you see, it was Jesus who gave me the courage.”

You see, Sada was a Iraqi Christian.

I remember the first time I heard this story.

I didn’t even know there were Christians in Iraq, much less in senior roles of the Iraqi military...

But Sada had risen to that position because he was a good pilot.

He was a military expert, and God had allowed him to advance to that position...

So that one day, he could talk Saddam Hussein out of taking innocent lives in a chemical attack on Syria, Jordan, and Israel.

He had earned the trust of a crazy dictator, but in the end, Saddam's trust of him saved countless lives.

Now, I start with that story to say this....

The Lord has people in influential roles all over the world in all kinds of governments and positions that He has placed there for His purposes...

And the Lord uses them to bring about His perfect plans in the world.

Whether it is a president of a nation, a top level military commander or a judge...

God's people serve God's purposes all over the world...

And that is really the story of Nehemiah...

He was a man who earned the trust of the greatest king in the world in his day...

And the respect that Nehemiah was given was used by the Lord to bring more of Israel back from captivity...

And it was also used to allow Nehemiah to do something that just not anyone could do in his day...

Just like George Sada was persuasive enough to keep millions of people alive...

Nehemiah was trusted enough that the Persian king allowed him to rebuild walls around Jerusalem.

Now, what is the build deal about building walls..

Well in that day, walls were a source of defense...

And for a king who enjoyed a large empire, the thought of letting someone build walls around a city is unheard of...

But that is exactly what Nehemiah did...

And we are going to look at that in the first part of the book of Nehemiah...

Chapters 1-6 will be....

I. Nehemiah Rebuilds the Walls (1-6)

Then in chapters 7-10, we will see....

II. Ezra Revives the People....

And then the last 3 chapters will be...

III. The People Resettle the Land (11-13)

So, let's jump into the book of Nehemiah in chapter 1...

I. Nehemiah Rebuilds the Walls (1-6)

Now, we need our memories jogged for just a minute about where we are in the Bible...

We have covered a lot of ground since we began in the book of Genesis in January.

The nation of Israel began in Genesis 12 when God called Abraham from his homeland.

God then blessed Abraham and his descendants with many more descendants until they numbered in the millions in the book of Exodus.

Though they were slaves in Exodus, they eventually escaped in the book of Exodus and headed to the land that God had promised Abraham.

On their way to that land, they were given instructions of how to please and obey God when they arrived in the Promised Land...

Those laws and instructions are found in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

And then we got to the book of Joshua, Israel arrived in the land.

But it did not take long until they began to disobey God and fall into sin.

That was the story of the book of Judges.

God eventually gave them a good judge in the person of Samuel, but the nation wanted a king and the books of 1&2 Samuel are the story ...

Of Israel getting a king.

Saul was the first king, followed by David and then his son, Solomon.

However in 1 Kings, the one nation of Israel split into two parts because of Solomon's sins...

But that was not the worst of it...

Eventually those two parts of the what was left of the nation of Israel were both defeated and captured by the enemy....

That was the story of 2 Kings, where the northern kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians,....

And the southern kingdom of Judah was destroyed by the Babylonians...

And even though that looked real bad for the nation of Israel, God was not done with her yet...

Because a few weeks back as we looked at 1&2 Chronicles and Ezra...

We saw this ray of hope for Israel as God promised to bring them back to the land...

And we watched that happen in two parts in the book of Ezra....

In the year 538, the first group returns to Israel under the leadership of Zerubbabel...

And then 80 years later in 458 BC, the second group returns under the leadership of Ezra...

Here is a little map and chart that shows what this return looked like...

There is going to be one group left to return to Israel, and that is going to be the group that we meet tonight in the book of Nehemiah...

Now, let's get our minds right about what time this book occurs...

Couple things to understand about Nehemiah...

When we finish this book tonight, we will have covered the entire time frame of the OT...

The events of Nehemiah are going to take us up to 400 BC...

Every book that comes after Nehemiah in the OT is going to be a book that is describing earlier events...

Here is a little timeline to explain this...

With the exception of Malachi, everything that we talk about in the OT from here on out...

Will be a flashback to a time that we have already y covered from Genesis to Nehemiah...

Many people get confused about what they are reading in the OT....

But you need to know that it doesn't move in chronological order from Genesis to Malachi...

For instance, we will look at Esther next week...

And we will actually go backwards in time a little from Nehemiah to talk about the events in Esther...

Then we will look a t Job....

And we will go way back in time to discuss Job...

Then we will look at Psalms and they will have all been written before the events of Nehemiah....

The same will be true of Proverbs and so on throughout the rest of the books of the OT...

So, the good news is that we have covered all the years of the OT after tonight....

That means that every book from here on out will fit into something we have already looked at...

Which will make it easier on us to understand what is happening...

For instance, let's say we are going to play a trivia game...

And I told you before it started that all the questions were going to come from the 1980s...

You could be spending time thinking about events of the 1980s...

And you would be better prepared to play and answer questions....

The same will be true of when you get to a passage in the OT now...

Let's say we turn to a psalm to study it...

And it says that it was a psalm of David...

Well, you know this now...

David was a king of a united kingdom...

He was a king before the nation split into two parts..

HE was after the time of the judges and after King Saul but before King Solomon...

And that will help you....

And I say that to encourage you...

After tonight, you will have covered the entire OT timeline even though we haven't looked at all the books of the OT...

So, the story of Nehemiah begins in chapter 1.....

Nehemiah gets a reports about what is happening in Jerusalem.

He hears that the walls around Jerusalem are torn down and that the gates to the city are burned.

Now, we cannot relate much to what Nehemiah is feeling after receiving this news.

We don't live in walled and gated cities.

The closest we have are walled and gated communities, where people build brick walls to keep others out and have coded gates to get in.

However, the walls and gates were a source of pride for the people.

They were a source of comfort as well.

Then folks felt freedom behind a gate to go about their daily lives without a threat from the enemy.

So, when Nehemiah hears that Jerusalem is in disrepair, he sits down to weep in verse 4 but then gets up to pray.

And in chapter 1, he offers a prayer of confession to God, which is always the on ramp to the highway of blessing.

Nehemiah confesses his and the people's sins and asks God to bless him as he prepares to go before the king to see if he can go to rebuild Jerusalem.

Now, we find out at the end of chapter 1 that Nehemiah is the cupbearer to the king.

He was the one who would drink the king's beverage of choice first to make sure that it wasn't poison.

Because of that role, the king trusted him.

And so Nehemiah goes before the king and asks if he can return to Jerusalem.

Now, I want you to notice something in chapter 2 that happens while Nehemiah is before the king..

In verse 6, the king asks how long it will take?

And notice Nehemiah's response...

He gives him a definite time..

Then look at verse 7...

He asks for letters from the kings so that he can safely make it Jerusalem..

This would be the equivalent to a passport today.

Nehemiah would need permission to travel throughout the kingdom...

And then look at verse 8...

He asks for a letter from the king so that he can get wood to build the walls and gates...

Why do I point all of this out?

IT shows preparation on Nehemiah's part...

He had already planned how long this would take...

He already planned out his route.

He had already planned for his lumber needs.

What does that teach us?

Preparation is a good thing when you set out to do a task.

Think through the process.

It showed the king that Nehemiah was not acting on a whim.

IT showed that he had thought through all of the parts of his request.

And it may have played a part in getting permission to go back..

So, Nehemiah heads back to Jerusalem at the end of chapter 2...

And he goes to look at how bad the city looked...

Look at verse 17 in chapter 2...

17 Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach."

Though the walls and the gates were a blessing to the people..

The motivation behind their repair was to keep the unkempt city from being a disgrace to God.

In many ways, Jerusalem represented the LORD.

IT was His city and to see it in the state that it was in was a disgrace to His name.

And so Nehemiah goes to the people and they all agree to help rebuild the wall...

But then look at Nehemiah 2:19...

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite ^[1]official, and Geshem the Arab heard it, they mocked us and despised us and said, “What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?”

These men were enemies of the Jews that sought to oppose the rebuilding of the walls and city gates...

And look, the lesson here is obvious...

Any good work of the Lord will face opposition and discouragement.

And it will usually come pretty early in the process of serving the Lord.

It is something that you need to be prepared for if you work for the Lord.

That is not to say that everyone who asks you questions about what you are doing is the enemy..

Sometimes it is good to listen, but realize that not everyone is as excited about the work as you are...

And know that some will be clearly opposed to it...

So, the discouragement comes but that doesn't stop the work and in chapter 3, the people begin rebuilding the city...

Unfortunately, the enemy responds to all the work of chapter 3 by bringing more discouragement in chapter 4...

This time, the threat goes beyond words of ridicule...

This time, they prepare to wage war against the Jews to stop the rebuilding of the walls...

Nehemiah goes to the LORD in response to the threat of war...

And that is the right response...

Nehemiah knows that God must fight for them if they are to survive and proceed in their work...

His prayers are answered when the attack never happens...

And all the time, the Jews continue to work even if it means carrying a spear in one hand and their tools in the other hand...

That brings us to chapter 5.

Because the people were always working on the walls instead of their own crops and fields, many families suffered financially.

Some could not feed their families and were forced to borrow money to survive.

The Jews who loaned the money were doing it at high interest rates.

When Nehemiah heard of that, he rebuked the lenders and told them to give back whatever they had gained from this practice.

In chapter 6, the opposition to the Nehemiah grows when Sanballat tries to discourage the people by spreading lies that they are building the walls..

So that they can rebel against the Persian king...

When that doesn't work, he simply tries to lure Nehemiah away from the work so he can kill him...

And let me say this right here before we move on...

When you win the first battle against discouragement, don't think that it will go away..

It will keep coming and coming and the effort will rise and rise each time.....

The enemy stops at nothing to keep you in the chains of discouragement....

It is one of his greatest weapons to keep you right where he wants you or even to stop your progress.

What is the best way to avoid discouragement?

Never do anything for the Lord.

Simply stay right where you are, and guess what?

Satan has you right where he wants you.

And you waste your life and lay up no treasure in heaven.

The bottom line is this.

Being discouraged as a Christian is often a sign that you are trying to make a difference in your life and in the world.

Well, Nehemiah doesn't listen to those opposing the work of rebuilding the wall, and the wall is rebuilt by the end of chapter 6.

That leads us to second section of this book beginning in chapter 7, where...

II. Ezra Revives the People (7-10)

In chapter 7, Nehemiah simply lists all the people who are now in Jerusalem after their return from Babylon..

And then in chapter 8, Ezra leads a revival of sorts in the land...

And how does he do that?

What is the key to revival in a group of people or a nation?

People often pray for revival but how does that happen?

Read with me from Nehemiah 8:1...

8 And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate, and they ^[a]asked Ezra the scribe to bring the book of the law of Moses which the Lord had ^[b]given to Israel. ² Then Ezra the priest brought the law before the assembly of men, women and all who *could* listen with understanding, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ He read from it before the square which was in front of the Water Gate from ^[c]early morning until midday, in the presence of men and women, those who could understand; and all the people were attentive to the book of the law.

You know how revival starts?

It starts with a return of the people to love the Word of God!

It is that simple.

You don't need lights, a big stage, a big choir.

Don't need to meet all week in a hot tent.

You need people who are ready to hear the Word preached and a man who is ready to preach it.

⁴ Ezra the scribe stood at a wooden podium which they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Anaiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand; and Pedaiah, Mishael, Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah *and* Meshullam on his left hand. ⁵ Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. ⁶ Then Ezra blessed the Lord the great God. And all the people answered, "Amen, Amen!" while lifting up their hands; then they bowed low and worshiped the Lord with *their* faces to the ground. ⁷ Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodia, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, explained the law to the people while the people *remained* in their place. ⁸ They read from the book, from the law of

God, ^[d] translating to give the sense so that they understood the reading.

That last statement is my model for preaching.

I need to stand up, read God's Word, explain what it means so that you can understand..

Then I need to sit down and let God's word do the work..

And guess what happens?

The Word of God does it all.

If you don't know who Martin Luther is, you need to read about him and study him.

He was no saint, and had many weaknesses...

But the reason that you are coming to a Roman Catholic church today is because he preached against the abuses of that church.

And eventually his preaching started the Protestant reformation of which we are all a part of even today.

Yet what was the secret to reviving the hearts of people in that day?

Did he kill catholic priests or burn catholic churches?

No, he simply turned the people back to what the Word of God said...

Listen to what Luther said about what happened...

*“I simply taught, preached, and wrote God’s Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26–29], the Word so greatly weakened the pope and his teaching and the Catholic Church. **I did nothing; the Word did everything.** Had I desired to cause trouble, I could have brought great bloodshed upon Germany; but I did nothing; **I let the Word do its work.** You want people to work and serve the Lord. You don’t take them by force. You simply teach them the Word of God and when the Word has captured their heart, change will come naturally.*

And that is exactly what happened in Nehemiah.

Ezra stood up and taught the Word to the people.

And guess what happens in chapter 9..

The people get right with the Lord.

Most of chapter is the nation confessing their sins to God in a beautifully written prayer.

We don’t have time to look at that prayer, but you can’t help but see the connection between the preaching and teaching of God’s word...

And the repentance of the people...

You want revival in the world?

Send men to learn how to preach and teach God's word.

You want revival in your life?

Fall in love with the study of God's Word!

That leads us to the final section of Nehemiah, which is found in chapters 11-13...

III. The People Resettle the Land (11-13)

After getting right with the LORD, the people began to spread out in the land of Israel.

Some are allowed to live in Jerusalem with the leaders, but others find areas outside of Jerusalem to live in chapter 11.

In chapter 12, Nehemiah leads the people to dedicate the wall and to celebrate God's goodness in bring Israel back to the land.

In chapter 13, an interesting thing happens..

If you remember, Nehemiah had promised the King of Persian that he would return.

And as any man of God does, he keeps his words and returns in chapter 13...

But while he is away, the people fall into sin and chapter 13 ends with Nehemiah returning to Israel and calling them to repentance.

And with chapter 13, you read the final words of the OT if we were looking at it from a perspective of time.

The year is about 430 BC, and the Lord is about to go silent for 400 years before John the Baptist arrives and announces the coming of Messiah...

Conclusion

What do we take from the book of Nehemiah...

#1 , we see that no good deed happens without opposition.

Even if you are trying to do something for the Lord from a pure heart and pure motivations, don't expect everyone to sing your praises.

There are simply people in the world who oppose anything that God's people set out to do.

Again, that doesn't mean don't listen to anyone who offers advice...

It simply means that there is opposition to the work of God in the world, and we should expect it.

But #2, we see the importance of God's word in the world.

The Bible is not something to stick under your arm so you look like a Christian walking into church.

It is a source of authority, power, and wisdom for the believer.

I know I sound like a broken record when I speak of the importance of the Bible...

But that is the backbone of my ministry.

Without God's word, I have no idea how to be a preacher, and you have no idea how to be a Christian.

I get mail every day for the church...

And though I know some of what I receive is helpful information...

I get so amused at the outside of some of the envelopes...

"Hurry and open and find 10 steps to growing your church."

"Inside is a CD that will help your church double in size in 2 years..."

OR my favorite...

You want to bring revival to your people?

Sure, I do,

So I opened up the envelope and it read....

Revival starts with the right sound...

Call our technicians to come install a sound system that will bring the sound of heaven down to your church and revive dead hearts..

And look, all of that is fine and well.

But let me be clear, revival begins with a heart or a people who love studying the Word of God, obeying the Word of God and being taught the Word of God...

True revival is founded upon a return to the Word of God.

That is certainly my prayer for this church today and everyday.

Amen.