

Going back to the Roots: Nehemiah

- ❖ Throughout the Old Testament, we read about the story of the relationship between God and His people, **the children of Israel**. We could easily identify an ongoing cycle in this narrative:

The Israelites lose sight of their true identity as children of God and fall into sin

As a result, they are taken into captivity by a foreign nation and are enslaved

The children of God repent with fasting and prayer

God delivers His beloved children by reconciling them to Himself and returning them to their land

- ❖ In many ways, we also experience this cycle of sin in our own spiritual lives. Just like the children of Israel, every time we go astray, we are called to **return to our roots, the Church**. It is around these themes of returning and rebuilding that the beautiful story of Nehemiah unfolds!

Setting the Scene:

- After the reign of King Solomon, the land was torn in two.
 - The **Northern** kingdom (**Israel**). Capital: **Samaria**
 - The **Southern** kingdom (**Judea**). Capital: **Jerusalem**, which housed the temple of Solomon
- Many of the kings who ruled over these kingdoms were wicked men and the people often displeased God by turning to idolatry and corruption. It was during this dark era of unholiness that God sent many great prophets to His children. These included Elijah, Amos, and Hosea to the North, and Isaiah and Jeremiah to the South.
- These prophets pleaded with the children of Israel, constantly extending God's invitation to return to Him. They warned them that the consequences of their sin would be captivity and death.

Say to them: 'As I live,' says the Lord God, 'I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn, turn from your evil ways! For why should you die, O house of Israel?' (Ezekiel 33:11)

To whom shall I speak and give warning, that they may hear? Indeed, their ear is uncircumcised, and they cannot give heed. Behold, the word of the Lord is a reproach to them; they have no delight in it. (Jeremiah 6:10)

- Despite the many prophets, through whom God sent His loving call to repentance, (which accounted for nearly half the Old Testament books), God’s people continued their wicked way of life. Just as they departed from their roots, they were quite literally uprooted and carried away into captivity.
- Around **586 BC**, the king of the Babylonian empire, **Nebuchadnezzar II**, besieged Jerusalem and marked the end of the Kingdom of Judea. The holy city was wiped out, the temple was destroyed, and God’s people were enslaved.
- This period of **70 years of captivity** is what makes young heroes like Daniel, the Three Saintly Youth, and Esther so impressive.

Did you know

Many of the youth were born in Babylon and have never seen Jerusalem or the temple. They were raised in an environment of constant pressure to conform to the religious rituals of the pagans. Throughout the persecution, God strengthened them as they held to their identity. These characters could be a source of inspiration for us as young Christians who are serving God while navigating an often-unholy secular world.

- Years later, the Babylonian empire was largely overthrown by the Persians and a new king ruled over the Jewish captives. God moved the heart of King Cyrus, and he signed a decree which liberated the Jews, allowing them **to return to their roots and rebuild their home – Jerusalem.**

Overview of Ezra and Nehemiah:

- After Cyrus signed the decree to set the Jews free, there were three consecutive movements which returned the people back to Jerusalem.

Zerubbabel: (Ezra Chapters 1-6)

- Zerubbabel led the first group of people out of Babylon back to Judea. The main goal of this movement was to rebuild the temple.
- They faced opposition to their rebuilding effort because of their enemies who inhabited their land during their exile.
- However, through the grace of God, the temple was completed, and the people rejoiced, worshipped, and celebrated the Passover.

“And they kept the Feast of Unleavened Bread seven days with joy; for the Lord made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria toward them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel” (Ezra 6:22)

- Traditionally, the temple they built is referred to as the **“Second Temple”** and it is the temple that was present during the time of Jesus’ ministry on earth and it stood until it was destroyed by the Romans in approximately **70 AD.**

Ezra: (Ezra Chapters 7 to 10)

- Ezra led the second group of Jews back to Judea. The main goal of this second movement was to spiritually revive the people after the long exile.
- Ezra was a scribe and a priest, and he reintroduced the Torah to the people. He continued to call the people to turn away from their sins, specifically intermarriage with the surrounding pagans.

Nehemiah (Book of Nehemiah)

- Nehemiah led the third and final group of Jews back to Judea. The purpose of this movement was to rebuild the gates and walls of Jerusalem.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 1

- Nehemiah resided in the citadel of **Shushan**, which at the time would be considered the capital of Persia.
- He was the cupbearer to the Persian king whose name was Artaxerxes. This meant that Nehemiah was trusted to the highest degree by the king and was also in the king's presence more than any of his other subjects.
 - Nehemiah heard about the state of the people (in great distress) and of Jerusalem (broken down, its gates are burned with fire) and was greatly saddened that he wept and mourned.
- Nehemiah took his great sorrow and put it all in fasting and prayer interceding for his people that God may have mercy on him and all those in Jerusalem.

You are encouraged to read Nehemiah's prayer as you study this lesson. It is full of zeal and passion, lots of repentance, and references to the promises God has made in the past.

- Repentance, fasting, prayer, and intercession: these are the things which marked the beginning of Nehemiah's legacy as one of the great leaders of the Old Testament. It is important to note that Nehemiah was neither a priest nor a prophet, but rather just an ordinary Jewish man with a strong relationship with God and true leadership

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 2

- When Nehemiah was offering the king his wine, the king noted that Nehemiah seemed unusually sad. Though Nehemiah was afraid, he responded by saying:

"Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?" (Nehemiah 2:3)

- Here we notice how dearly Nehemiah loved Jerusalem and how greatly he held fast to his heritage, his roots. Keep in mind that chances are that Nehemiah was either born in captivity or left Judea as a very young child!
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- God gave Nehemiah favour in the king's eyes and the king gave Nehemiah permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the city. He also granted him letters of support such that surrounding governors would not oppose Nehemiah's efforts and gave him timber from the royal forest so that he could begin building once he arrives.
- When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, he saw for himself the poor state of the city walls and gates. The destroyed walls meant that Jerusalem would have been weak in the face of an invasion or a war.
- After surveying the conditions, Nehemiah returned to the Jews, priests, nobles, and officials. He encouraged them saying:

"Let us rise up and build." Then they set their hands to this good work. (Nehemiah 2:18)

Just like Jerusalem's wall needed repairing to protect it from its enemies, the "wall of our heart" sometimes also needs some fixes.

- *Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite, and Geshem the Arab* were greatly displeased that Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem to strengthen the city gates. Throughout this story they will try many tactics in hopes of keeping the walls weak.

Attempt # 1: They laughed at them! The Bible tells us that these wicked men tried to discourage Nehemiah and the people by making fun of them. Instead of feeling demoralized the people said:

"The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore, we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem." Nehemiah 2:20

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 3

- This chapter lists all the different groups of people who contributed to the building of the wall along with the specific locations they each respectively worked on.
- Just like other Biblical chapters which list names (genealogies for example), many of us simply skip to the next chapter to get back to the story.
- However, you may be surprised that these chapters that we view as tedious, actually have a spiritual value. We can clearly see that the building of the wall was an example of immense cooperation between very diverse groups of Jewish people including:
 - ❖ **Eliashib**, the high priest, along with the rest of the priests arose and built the wall with their own hands with the rest of the people.
 - ❖ The returned **captives from the city of Jericho** also built the wall.
 - ❖ The **Tekoites** (originated from the city Tekoa) which is the hometown of who prophesized and warned the people that their sins would lead to captivity.
 - ❖ Other groups of people listed included some **Levites**, some temple servants called **the Nethinim**, and even merchants.
 - ❖ Surprisingly for the time period, **women** also took part in the building of the wall (Nehemiah 3:12). This goes to further show how passionate ALL the inhabitants of Jerusalem were about contributing to the rebuilding of the holy city.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 4

- Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem appeared again and are furious about the progress which the Jews have made. In response, they continued to ridicule and insult the Jews in an attempt to distract them from their work.
- However, their comments did not shake the morale of the Jewish builders and the gaps in the wall were beginning to close. These wicked men turned to another plan.

Attempt #2: They conspired to hide in the rubble of stones and suddenly attack and kill the builders such that the restoration of the wall would be halted.

- By the grace of God, the Jews who dwelt near these enemies heard of their evil plan and went to inform Nehemiah.
- Nehemiah quickly came up with a strategic plan to continue the work on the wall while also keeping the people safe against any potential attacks. He told all the people that at any given time, half of them would work on the wall while the other half would wear armour and hold spears and swords to remain on defence. The Jewish people laboured tirelessly towards their goal of completing the wall!
- Nehemiah also assured them that God Himself will fight for them and protect them. This is an excellent example of what many Church Fathers call **Synergy**. **Synergism is working together or the act of cooperation with God**. Essentially, God allows us His children to be a part of His amazing story of Salvation.

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 5

- In this chapter, Nehemiah encounters strife from **within** his people instead.
- The Jews in Jerusalem became exceedingly poor and were struggling to find food or pay their taxes. To keep up with their financial obligations, the people began borrowing money from the noblemen of Jerusalem and some even resorted to selling their children into slavery. The Jewish noblemen fell into the temptation of greed and started setting a heavy interest on the loans which the people took from them.
- When the Jews cried out to Nehemiah about the situation, he rebuked the noblemen:

“What you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies? I also, with my brethren and my servants, am lending them money and grain. Please, let us stop this usury! Restore now to them, even this day, their lands, their vineyards, their olive groves, and their houses, also a hundredth of the money and the grain, the new wine and the oil, that you have charged them.” (Nehemiah 5:9-11)

NEHEMIAH CHAPTER 6

- Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem make yet another appearance in this story. With the wall nearly completed, they make one last attempt to destroy the work of the Jews.

Attempt #3: They planned to harm their leader Nehemiah.

- The three evil men sent a message to Nehemiah inviting him to meet with them in a nearby plain called **Ono**. Nehemiah turned down their invitation and sent back to them that he was very busy with the completion of the construction of the wall. The true intentions of these men were to draw Nehemiah away to harm him.
- They sent Nehemiah this invitation four times and in return were turned down every one of those times.
- Lastly, Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem hired a Jewish man called **Shemaiah** to deceive Nehemiah. Shemaiah told Nehemiah that he was sent from God to inform him that his enemies were coming to kill him that night and that he should hide in the temple. Nehemiah refused to do such a thing because he deeply respected the temple and he quickly understood that Shemaiah was not truly sent by God and that this was part of the plan to cause him to misuse the temple.
- Meanwhile, the Jews continued their hard work, and the wall was finally completed. The children of God were now completely re-established in their home, the Holy City. Surely, God is faithful in all His promises! Just as He returned the Jews to Jerusalem as He promised them through the prophets, He also keeps every one of His promises to us throughout the Bible.

THE REMAINDER OF NEHEMIAH (CHAPTER 7 THROUGH 13)

The rest of the Book of Nehemiah contains genealogies for the purposes of recording the people who returned from captivity, recording the names of those who signed the new covenant, as well as the priests and Levites. Besides this we learn that:

- After the completion of the wall, the people gathered together to hear Ezra read aloud the Law of Moses. *The children of God had returned to their roots physically and now they were also returning spiritually* by being reintroduced to the word and the laws of God. Upon hearing the scriptures, the people wept and mourned over their many sins. Ezra, Nehemiah, and the Levites urged the people to feast and rejoice instead:

“For this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the Lord is your strength...be still, for the day is holy; do not be grieved.” (Nehemiah 8:10-11)

- Chapter 9 consists of the people confessing their sins and the sins of their ancestors. Ezra publicly confesses the collective sins of Israel in a long prayer of repentance.
- To end off the book, Nehemiah urges them to sin no more. He specifically advised them to keep the Sabbath, keep their tithes, and to keep themselves from pagan marriages. This marks the end to this long story of **sin, captivity, and redemption!**

When we return to our roots through repentance and confession after going astray, we ought to make a serious effort to stay away from the things which severed our relationship with God in the first place.