

Nehemiah - Introduction

During the next few months we are going to look at a great story from the Old Testament. The book of Nehemiah is the story of a man who put his reputation and life on the line because he felt led by God to invest himself in the leadership of God's people. But beyond that, this story is about the faithfulness of God to keep His promises, and reveals to us how God builds His people.

In ancient times, the walls around the city were significant. A city needed a wall and an army to protect itself from outsiders, and to give the people who lived in the city a safe place to live, work, eat, raise families, and explore faith. The army would fight for the city, but without the walls, anyone at any time could waltz into the city and wreak havoc. City walls had sections of stone or brick and mortar with a series of gates. The wall portions were unpenetratable, so just a few soldiers could man a section of the wall. The gates gave cities a way to let the right people in and keep those who wished harm for the city out. It also gave armies focus points for repelling enemies, which could include foreign armies, but often just included bands of terrorists, gangsters, thieves, and rotten scoundrels who just wished to make life brutal for those living in the city. In fact, if a city had people who were acting in these negative ways, one of the first things they would do is to toss them out of the city, leaving these people excluded from the protection of the community.

For 140 years, the ancient city of Jerusalem had existed without walls (see history below). Jerusalem is a very important city in the story of God and the history of the Hebrew people. The significance of the location goes all the way back to the Old Testament story of Abraham, as one of the key events of the Bible took place on a hill that would eventually become the city. Later, the great Hebrew king David chose Jerusalem to be the capital city. It became the largest and most influential city in Palestine (the land where the nation of Israel is located). But the importance of Jerusalem goes far beyond the political and social influence. David's son Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, meaning that it became the center of Hebrew religious life, and the place where sacrifices were made for the sins of the people. Beyond that, God began using the city as a symbol of something much greater, as a picture of the eternal city of God. Jerusalem is also called Zion, which the etymology of the word is a reference to the dryness of the region, but this name becomes synonymous with the final city of those who know and love God. So Jerusalem was symbolic of a bit of heaven on earth, a place where God poured his grace on the people, and protected it with his mercy. At the time of Nehemiah it sits in ruins, but God is going to change that. So he speaks into the life of a cup-bearer living in Persia, close to 2,000 miles away. Nehemiah was a Hebrew still living in exile far away from the location of his national and religious heritage. Nehemiah prays, asks permission from the Persian king Artaxerxes to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls. Nehemiah is the story of God raising this man as a leader and then building the people of God through the building of the walls to protect the city.

History

To understand the place of Nehemiah in the story, we actually need to start at the

beginning and do a quick overview of the Biblical history. God created everything, and owns it all, but the first human parents introduced sin, selfishness, and evil to the system. The result is that we live in a broken, fallen world that still has the marks of its Creator, but also is tainted deeply. All we need to do is look around and we will realize that things are not as they should be. On one hand, something within and the glory of creation outside us remind us that this is a great place that should be wonderful. Still, our experience and even our own inner person struggles and suffers. We know we should be better, and we know the world should too. Yet, left to ourselves, the human race will spiral downward, sinking deeper into depravity, violence, sexual abuse, and evil. The only hope is if God rescues us from ourselves.

The Bible as a whole is the story of God's rescue mission. It begins with God calling a pagan man named Abram (whose name would be changed to Abraham). Although Abraham and his wife were childless and old, God promised them a son. Abraham believed God, and God made him righteous (right with God). Miraculously, when he was 99 and his wife was 90, they had a son. God called a man, made that man a family, that family became a people who found themselves in slavery in Egypt. From here, God called a man named Moses who He used to deliver the descendants of Abraham from slavery in Egypt and lead them to Palestine, which was the land God had promised to give the descendants of Abraham. So this people of God were given a place, and while they were in the place they became a kingdom. To be honest, there was nothing special about Abraham and his descendants. They were not better than the other nations, and there was nothing in them that made them special. But God chose Abraham and the Hebrew people to demonstrate the greatness of His grace and the power of His sovereign love. While God owned everything, including all the peoples of the earth, He had chosen the Hebrews to be the recipients of His grace and an example of a people who were dedicated to the one true God. The nations around Israel were polytheists and idolaters. They worshiped all kinds of created things - a sun god, moon god, sex god, rain god, pottery god. Because of our sin nature, we take created things that we believe will give us happiness and we give those things divine qualities. This is idolatry. Then we bow down to those things, giving ourselves away and doing anything just to get what that item will offer. The nations around Israel were involved in all kinds of crazy and horrible activities as attempts to please their gods. They built statues of giant phallic symbols called Asherah poles, and created whore houses where runaway girls would be forced to live as sex slaves. They would sacrifice their children, throwing babies into fires hoping that this would appease their gods. They would self-mutilate themselves, burn virgins, and all kinds of horrible stuff, all in attempts to get what they wanted from the gods they chose to worship. In the midst of this, the one true God created a people for Himself and He made covenants with them, promises that He would be their God and they would be His people. The result of fidelity to the covenant with the one true God would be that they would experience His blessings and protection, and the world would see the difference and know that Jehovah is the only true God.

Sadly, from the get go, the Hebrew people did not live up to their end of the deal. While there are some great Old Testament examples of people who loved God and lived for His glory, most of the kings and in return the people of the Old Testament slipped into the idolatry and evil of the nations around them. God sent prophets to warn His people of the

dangers of leaving Him, and the reality that there was no joy or purpose in anyone but Him. God continually reminded the Hebrews that He was a holy and a jealous God. As a holy God, he is separate from His creation, over it all, and perfect in his moral being. He could not tolerate the sinful rebellion of any people, but especially those who received the blessing of His covenant. But as a jealous God, he would pursue his people, always wanting what was best for them. But the best for the people of God is God himself. Nothing else will satisfy, nothing else will give them joy, and everything else will destroy when it is lifted to the place of ultimate in life. God warned over and over that he could not leave the Hebrew people in a place where they continued to do the ritualistic religion he prescribed while at the same time living outside His will by serving and worshipping idols. For several centuries, God told the Hebrews to repent and return to him, or there would be a day when he would bring a swift and hard judgement to purify them and bring them back to Himself. These warnings fell on hard hearts, and the outcome is that God raised up the Babylonian Empire.

In 605 BC, the Babylonians, led by Nebuchadnezzar conquered Israel. At this time, Babylon took some of the Hebrew people to Babylon (current day Iraq), primarily the best and brightest of the young men. Eight years later, Israel revolts against Babylon, against the clear word from God through Jeremiah, and the result is the second conquest and deportation of people from Israel to Babylon. Finally, in 586 BC, another revolt leads to a third, and a devastating military campaign that includes a barricade around Jerusalem, mass starvation, and the eventual conquest of the city. In the conquest, the walls were destroyed, masses of people die, and the Temple was destroyed. The bulk of the people who are left in Jerusalem are deported to Babylon and forced to live as laborers in the work force of an ancient culture. The few people left in the land live with no protection from the rabblers of the culture around them. They live in fear and even flee. As horrible as this sounds, God is pursuing His people, bringing them back to Himself.

Eventually the Babylonian Empire was conquered by the Persians, which was also prophesied in the Old Testament. In fact, the prophet Isaiah predicts that the Persian ruler Cyrus will rise to power and fulfill God's plan, and this prediction happens 200 years before his birth. Cyrus issued a decree allowing the Hebrews to return to Israel and Jerusalem, which some do, but many living in the middle-east have lived in the region of Babylon all their lives. Eventually, the Bible records three waves of people who move to Israel. The first wave is in 538 BC. The Hebrews rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem over the next thirty years. The second wave is led by a priest named Ezra, a very influential leader and priest at this point in Hebrew history in 458 BC. This wave leads the Hebrews in a season of national revival and renewal, but they are living in danger because of the battered walls. The story of Nehemiah begins in 445 BC, and is the story of the formation of God's people, and the building of the walls around Jerusalem.

The books of Ezra & Nehemiah

Most of the ancient evidence points to the fact that the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one work, edited by the same person, who may have also been the writer/editor of the books of 1 & 2 Chronicles. The books were eventually separated because

they have different parts of the bigger story, and focus on different leaders. Furthermore, both books use the words of Ezra and Nehemiah as firsthand sources, so it is easier to follow the thoughts by breaking the book into two works. Yet, they do represent a continuation of the same story, which is God's renewal and restoration of his people in Jerusalem.

Author

The author, or better called editor of Nehemiah is unknown. Some believe it to be Ezra, but the truth is that any answer would be speculative. But the reason I call this person an editor is that a large portion of the book of Nehemiah is made up of his memoirs, his journal. At the very least, chapters 1-7 and chapter 13 are first person accounts composed by Nehemiah with his thoughts and actions. The bulk of Nehemiah gives us a peek into the mind and spirit of the leader, and we peek into his thoughts, prayer life, joys, and pains.

Literary genre

As mentioned, Nehemiah does contain memoirs, but as a whole it should be considered as a historical narrative. Nehemiah tells a story, but the story is true. A majority of the Bible is this genre of literature, stories that allow us to see into the work of God in the lives of people. Many people, when they think about the Bible believe it is a book of rules and regulations for people to follow. But well over half of the Bible is story, the story of God and his rescue mission. Authors present the events as real, true, historical, and purposeful. But Biblical historical narratives are doing much more than presenting the facts. They are teaching theology through the story. We see God at work, and we find Jesus as the hero of every story. This is the lense by which we should read the Bible. In John 5:39-40 Jesus rebukes the religious leaders because they are diligent to search the Scriptures, but they are rejecting Jesus who is the very one the Scriptures testify. After Jesus resurrection, Luke records the story of Jesus interaction with two men who do not realize he is the risen Lord. In the text Jesus explains the Old Testament to them, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he (Jesus) interpreted to them in all the Scriptures things concerning himself (Luke 24:27)." When we read historical narratives, we need to remember these two things. First, God is interacting with people in their setting and culture. He speaks to people and steps into their lives to act. Second, the goal of God's interaction is to point them to Jesus as the one who rescues them ultimately from their plight. While the book of Nehemiah is a true story about the building of walls around the ancient city of Jerusalem, the larger picture is that God is building a people to live out the beauty of the Gospel in a world that does not know God. This is true of Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day, and it is true of us, in Eureka, MO in 2010.

Why study Nehemiah

Beyond the fact that it is Scripture, and all Scripture is inspired by God (1 Timothy 3:16), Nehemiah has some great themes that will assist us as we seek to live out our faith and grow as the people of God. Here are a few.

1. The role of prayer in God's work - The book is full of prayers, by Nehemiah, by Ezra, by the

people. Some of these prayers are private, others are corporate. Many come in times of crisis or the unknown.

2. God's faithfulness - The situation in Jerusalem came as a result of God's judgement, but the promise to renew Jerusalem was also part of the promises of God. Nehemiah's story is the result of God keeping his Word. To accomplish this God speaks to Nehemiah, moves a world emperor to allow his trusted advisor go, and provides the resources for the job.

3. Leaders and people - Nehemiah is a classic book on leadership in God's kingdom. The leadership of Nehemiah contains some incredible principles that we can follow, and numerous books, lecture series, and sermons have been done gleaning these ideas. But Nehemiah is also about the importance of all God's people participating in the mission together. Leaders lead, but everyone is gifted and everyone is called.

4. The formation and protection of God's people - God takes care of the Hebrews, and gives them a safe place to develop as the people of God.

5. The centrality of the Scriptures - Nehemiah's familiarity with the Old Testament is the source for Nehemiah as he listens for God's will. Later in the book, Ezra opens the Bible and preaches to the people.

6. A city within the city - In the story, God's people get a safe place to develop faith and live life. But God never does this so that the believers can live in separation from a broken world. In the Old Testament, God's people living in fidelity to the one God and the blessings they receive are to be an example and blessing to all the nations. The two dangers are exclusivism and syncretism. When God's people become exclusive, they completely separate themselves from the culture seeking to live apart in every way. The culture is an enemy that needs to be avoided. On the other hand, syncretism involves an embracing of culture, its values and beliefs, mixing them into Christian ideas, as if somehow the thought of a sinful world could mix with belief in Jesus as the only true God. Syncretism sees culture and Christianity as totally compatible. The third way is for the people of God to see themselves as a city within the city. People who are being transformed by the Gospel, with different values, beliefs and lifestyles than those of the culture. Yet at the same time, living as a people of God for the good of the city and with a heart for the broken and lost people living in the culture.

7. The mission of God - Finally, Nehemiah is one chapter in the great story of God. When we take chunks of the great story out of context, it is easy to miss that the entire story demonstrates a God who is on a mission. The mission began before the world was formed, flows through creation, and leads to Jesus. God's mission is to rescue and save people. When God saves people, he calls them to the mission. Every follower of Jesus has been enlisted to join the adventure of the greatest story, the grand narrative of God. Nehemiah is a chapter of this mission, but so are we!