

The Story: Rebuilding
By Jason Huff
Psalm 102:8-22, Titus 3:1-7, Nehemiah 4:6-20

Our final Scripture reading this morning comes from Nehemiah 4:6-20. Listen now to God's Word. "So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart. But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the men of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." Also our enemies said, "Before they know it or see us, we will be right there among them and will kill them and put an end to the work." Then the Jews who lived near them came and told us ten times over, "Wherever you turn, they will attack us." Therefore I stationed some of the people behind the lowest points of the wall at the exposed places, posting them by families, with their swords, spears and bows. After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes."

When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to his own work. From that day on, half of my men did the work, while the other half were equipped with spears, shields, bows and armor. The officers posted themselves behind all the people of Judah who were building the wall. Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other, and each of the builders wore his sword at his side as he worked. But the man who sounded the trumpet stayed with me. Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!"

Rebuilding is a word you almost never want to hear. Every now and then, you hear the coach of a team say that "this is a rebuilding year for us." Now I don't follow sports much, but even I can tell you what that means...your team is gonna stink this year. But when I think about rebuilding, I think about the team that came to my hometown in my childhood...the Colts. When they arrived, they were awful. A local radio station had a song they played every week called, "Lord Help Our Colts." For a long time, the only thing they were good at was rebuilding. But then came Peyton Manning and Tony Dungy. The team got better and better, and in 2007 they won the Super Bowl. Rebuilding paid off.

As we reach the chronological ending of the Old Testament in *The Story* this week, we see the rebuilding of Jerusalem but of the faith of the people of God. God calls Nehemiah to lead the physical renewal of Israel, and He calls Ezra to lead the spiritual renewal. Through them and the prophet Malachi, God readied His people for the gift of His Son, who we'll begin to read about next week.

Here's how it played out...Ezra was a priest and one of the most respected teachers of the Jewish law. He lived in Babylon and gained the respect of King Artaxerxes. With Artaxerxes' blessing and provision, Ezra led a second group of exiles back to Jerusalem in order to teach the Israelites the ways of God. When he arrived, he found he had a lot of work to do. Many who had returned from Babylon did not know God's Law well enough to avoid breaking it. They were marrying into foreign cultures with pagan gods. Ezra mourned over the people and began to help them see the error of their ways.

Several years later, Nehemiah – also a Jew living in Babylon – heard about the ruins of Jerusalem. While the temple had been rebuilt, Jerusalem's gates and walls were nothing but rubble. The once-glorious city was open to marauders and the temple itself was in danger. Nehemiah was determined not to let Jerusalem remain in that state. With Artaxerxes' permission, he took a final wave of exiles back to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

This was a difficult task. Israel's enemies wanted Jerusalem to remain a junk heap. Even some of Artaxerxes' own governors opposed the rebuilding, assuming Nehemiah was going to set himself up as king over the Jews. The entire time, the bricklayers had to be on their guard. Sentries were posted and guards assigned to the most vulnerable spots around the city. The threat became so severe, the guys taking the materials around the wall worked with weapons drawn. All the builders had swords strapped on. Each bricklayer had another guy watching his back at all times. Because they were so spread out, Nehemiah made plans to sound an alarm in case a remote place along the wall was attacked. Despite threats and power plays by their enemies, the project was completed in just 52 days. The speed at which the reconstruction was accomplished took the wind out of the sails of their foes, who realized only the hand of God could have made it possible.

Once the wall was rebuilt, it was time for the people to learn God's Word in earnest. They gathered in Jerusalem and heard Ezra read the whole of the Law. The other priests helped explain the texts to them – not only because some of them were unclear, but the common language of the people was no longer Hebrew but the Aramaic spoken by the Babylonians and Persians. When they heard the law and understood it, they realized their guilt and mourned. Yet when Ezra and the priests saw that the people were grieved by their sin, they said not to weep – it was a day holy to the LORD, one to celebrate with feasting because, as Nehemiah said, “The joy of the LORD is your strength.” After this, everyone obeyed God's instructions by celebrating the Feast of Booths together. Nehemiah said it hadn't been celebrated so well since the days of Joshua nearly a thousand years before.

Many years later, the Hebrews had trouble remaining devoted to God. Malachi, the last OT prophet, spoke of their sin. They gave God diseased animals and whatever they felt like giving from their harvests instead of giving God the best. They followed God, but they weren't dedicated to Him. God called them to repent, hinting of the coming messiah and warning of the day of judgment when He would call everyone to account. From then until the time of Christ, Scripture goes silent. While the next 400 years would be full of major events in the life of Israel, God's messages to His people cease.

The neat thing about the history of Israel is that it's never just history. God speaks to us about ourselves and our relationship with Him through that history. As we consider the final words of the Old Testament this week, God shows us how builds His ways in us. There are three concepts I noticed in the rebuilding of Jerusalem this week. First, *building faith requires hard work*. Second, *the proper response to God's Word has always been genuine sorrow and repentance, followed by celebration and obedience*. Finally, *God's blessings are promised to those who give themselves over to God*.

Starting at the beginning...*building faith requires hard work*. Jerusalem was the center of Israel's religious life. It was where the glory of God resided. Rebuilding its walls was a work of faith for the exiles who'd come home, a statement that this was the place God had chosen for Himself and His people. But the task of rebuilding took everything they had. Scripture tells us that there were guards on constant watch round the clock. The builders worked from the earliest morning light until the stars started shining at night. It was constant, backbreaking, grueling. There were constant threats. Remember what happened the last time the Israelites were threatened during a building project? They stopped working on the temple for over ten years! But this time, they finished the walls of Jerusalem in less than two months – for a city of its size and the number of people working on it, truly a miracle. God came through and blessed what they had done...but they put their entire selves into it.

As we enter into the season of Lent, a time of preparation and prayer and giving as we look forward to Easter, we are reminded that faith is not a simple or easy thing. It requires hard work. That's a truth that's been lost. Sadly, we've often dumbed down faith to the point where we say, "Intellectually agree with these few statements and you're in." Churches today are often more interested in entertaining folks to keep them coming back each week rather than challenging them to real spiritual growth. Many people change churches often, looking for the newest idea or the best worship band or the place where they can be anonymous or aren't challenged to give of their time or their money. But God calls us to hard work and to practice spiritual discipline.

The workers on the wall of Jerusalem all carried swords for protection and security. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that the Word of God, Scripture, is stronger than a double-edge sword. Ephesians 6:17 commands Christians to strap on "the sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." Have you been carrying your sword lately? If we're to be in a serious relationship with God, if we are going to grow in discipleship and follow our Savior faithfully, we've got to be in the Bible daily. It's not just reading for reading's sake like a novel. As you grow to read Scripture more often, it's like reading letters from your best friend. You might find it difficult at times, but you'll want to read more because Jesus is not only your Savior and Lord, but He calls himself your brother. It's hard work to stick with it and it takes time and patience to understand it, but it will eventually be fruitful.

What's your prayer life like? James 5:16 tells us that the prayer of the righteous person is powerful and effective. In both Matthew 21:22 and Mark 11:24, Jesus says that whatever the believer asks for properly in faith will be granted. Prayer brings us close to God, and He hears our yearnings and needs and praises. But are we doing the hard work of prayer? In 1 Thessalonians 5:17, Paul says, "Pray continuously." Scripture tells us to pray for other believers, to lift up those in need, in *everything*, by prayer and petition, to present our requests to God. Hard work? Yes, but these things build a fortress for God in our hearts, a place from which He can direct the renovations in our souls.

We could talk about the other work we are called to do...to be a cheerful giver, to tell others of God's mercy and judgment, to be salt and light in the world around us. The point is, none of it is easy. But if we steel ourselves to doing the hard work in order to bring glory to God, God will multiply it in countless ways. God kept the men on the wall safe from harm and made it possible for the wall to be completed in an impossible amount of time. Keep your eye fixed on Him, and He will bless the work you do on His behalf as well.

Here's the second thing I see God teaching us in this passage: *the proper response to God's Word has always been genuine sorrow and repentance, followed by celebration and obedience.* Sometimes we have been led to believe that in the Old Testament, God was a god of judgment and wrath and anger and law, and in the New Testament, God became a god of love and peace and mercy. That's simply not true. God shows love and mercy and grace throughout the Old Testament, and He promises judgment and wrath in the New Testament on those who refuse to accept His Son. The key difference is, in Jesus Christ, God came to near to us and showed us that He desires relationship with us as, through His son, He worked out the intimate details of our salvation.

In both the Old and New Testament, the proper response to God is the same. When the Israelites heard Ezra teaching from the Law of Moses, they were humbled. So many rules they'd broken; so many of God's ways they'd failed to honor. They mourned because they weren't right with God and hadn't been for a long time. Surprisingly, Ezra and the Levites told them to stop their mourning. It was a holy, sacred time meant for rejoicing. And rejoice they did, celebrating with a feast. Then they realized the Festival of Booths was coming, and so they celebrated it just as God had commanded. At least for that generation, they kept faith with God.

The good news about Jesus, who comes fully into the conversation next week, is that Jesus makes God's ways clearer to us. He reveals the truth about our hearts, but He also provides the sacrifice necessary to make us right with God. In the New Testament, we see the same responses when people come to faith in God. When the crowd listening to Peter learned of Jesus' sacrifice and realized they were responsible for His death, "they were cut to the quick." They grieved what they had done. But the good news came immediately. Peter told them, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This promise is for you and for your children and for all those who are far off – for all whom the Lord God will call." As they turned to Jesus and followed His teachings, the entire group was filled with awe. They met together with glad and sincere hearts. They celebrated God's mercy to them.

This pattern is still true for the modern believer. We can't short-circuit the process. We can't accept the gift of God's salvation through Jesus unless we have repentant hearts that have turned away from sin and towards God's ways. If we don't acknowledge our sin, we reject the need we have for salvation in the first place. But at the same time, we need not forever mourn. Forgiveness, not guilt, is the primary motivation for Christians. Believers are driven to celebrate God's compassion that was shown to us on the cross. Our normal state should be one of praise and thanksgiving, rejoicing in the One who gives us new life. As we celebrate, we stay mindful of obedience. God has not given us freedom from sin just to wade back into it again. He wants us to have lives full of His grace and truth, not lives driven by our own desires. Our pattern should be one of repentance, rejoicing, and obedience.

Our final thought today is this: *God's blessings are promised to those who give themselves totally over to Him.* The prophet Malachi warned that God was not happy with the lackluster, haphazard way His people had started to follow Him. They weren't sliding back into idolatry, but they had slipped into a way of thinking that still plagues us today – the "good enough" paradigm. They were sacrificing diseased and damaged animals and giving only a tiny portion of their earnings to God and they thought it was OK. They apparently believed that God would accept whatever they gave Him. But they forgot that God doesn't *need* anything from us, and nothing we give Him obligates Him to us. And moreover, this kind of slapdash obedience is actually disobedience. God told the people to trust Him, to give Him His due, and they would see their real obedience rewarded.

Now before we start dutifully counting out an exact 10% of our earnings to give to God, we need to remember something else...that following the letter of God's Law can cause us to miss its spirit. During the four hundred years when God's prophets were silent, a group known as the Pharisees became the spiritual leaders of the Israelites. They were determined not to fall into the trap Malachi described of "good enough." The rabbis developed the *halakah* – an entire system of life that includes not only the written laws in the Old Testament but also the interpretation of that law, oral codes passed down through the centuries, and more. The *halakah* created a kind of fence around God's Law – the belief was that someone who lived by the *halakah* would always be right before God. There would be no possibility of fault. The *halakah* is still practiced by some Jews even today.

The problem is, the *halakah* was a system of rules made by men. As they interpreted God's Law, they often broke the spirit of it. They even found ways around honoring the Ten Commandments. Their new laws sounded pious and holy but wound up being disobedient to God's intent. In their desire to never break the Law, they missed that God wants to be first in our lives, above everything else. He wants our thought lives and our actions to flow out of our relationship with Him. The Law was meant to point us to a relationship with God, but it can never be a substitute for that relationship. As we study the life of Jesus during Lent, we'll see this tension between the *halakah* of the Pharisees and Jesus' teaching that we need salvation *from* the Law, not just *more* law.

We understand the truth of this in our own lives too. Most of us rarely break the law of the land except to drive too fast. But we don't build relationships with local law enforcement officers by not breaking the speed limit! The same is true of God. Not breaking God's Law doesn't mean we're close to Him or right with Him. As we'll see coming up, Jesus didn't emphasize the negative aspects of the Law – what not to do – so much as He emphasized the positive elements of the Law – the things we are commanded *to* do. Jesus said that the most important commands were to "love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and to love your neighbor as yourself." While God calls us to stay far away from sin, acting out God's love and grace and mercy is by far the most important way we grow with Him.

For us, the lesson is this: give yourself over to God completely. Let Him be the center of your days. Make regular time for Him in the everyday patterns of your life. Give Him the best of yourself and turn to Him with anything that's on your heart. He wants to meet you there. When we give Him the best of ourselves, it's not out of duty or obligation but a desire to thank Him for His grace to us. When we give to the church, when we work at Euchre or Angel Food, when we invite a friend to Sunday service, it's to show how we appreciate His work in saving us, in redeeming us from our sin through His Son Jesus. Don't just give Him what's "good enough" – give Him your whole self.

Rebuilding can be an excellent thing. For those who've given their lives to Christ and trusted in Him for salvation, He is working right now through the Holy Spirit to rebuild us from the ground up. It will require hard work, repentance and obedience, and a willingness to give all to the task. But in that rebuilding is celebration. He will take us from being the team who can't even score to one that wins the Super Bowl. In His mercy and love, He will recreate us, and we will win the race, we will end victorious, and we shall be rewarded at the end of all time with the victor's wreath of eternal life.