

Rebuilding the Church - Rebuild, Renew, Revive

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Prelude	1
The Writing on the Wall - Daniel 5	2
Zerubbabel's Return - Ezra 1 & 2	5
Lay the Foundation - Ezra 3	9
The Work Ceases - Ezra 4	12
Don't Give Up - Haggai 1 & 2	15
The LORD Remembers - Zechariah 1-8	19
The Temple Is Completed - Ezra 5 & 6	23
Ezra's Return - Ezra 7 & 8	27
Forsaking Foreign Gods - Ezra 9 & 10	31
Nehemiah's Return - Nehemiah 1 & 2	35
Jerusalem's Gates - Nehemiah 3	39
Rebuilding the Wall (Part 1) - Nehemiah 4 & 6:1-14	43
Rebuilding the Wall (Part 2) - Nehemiah 5 & 6:15-19	47
The Last Revival - Nehemiah 8	51
A Covenant Results - Nehemiah 9 & 10	54
Taking Back the City - Nehemiah 7, 11, & 12	58
But You Say - Malachi 1-3	62
The Old Testament Ends - Nehemiah 13	66
What Have We Learned	70
TIMELINE OF EVENTS	75

PRELUDE

During the later half of 2014, our church conducted an extended sermon series titled "Rebuilding the Church: Rebuild, Renew, Revive". This book contains brief summaries of each message in this series. These are intended to be read alongside the related Bible chapters, in order to bring about a fuller understanding of both. The sermons are labeled with the date of their original delivery and begin with a focal verse or passage. In some places the text is specific to our congregation, but I believe that the teaching can be easily applied to other churches. I pray that you find this commentary beneficial.

The Writing on the Wall - Daniel 5

8/3/2014

Today we begin a new series that we're calling "Rebuilding the Church". Over the next several weeks we will explore the last recorded era in the Old Testament, which details the years following the Babylonian captivity. The Persians (Iran) defeated Babylon (Iraq) in 539 BC and allowed the Jewish exiles to return to Judah to rebuild that which had been destroyed. The walls of Jerusalem were completed in 445 BC, some 96 years later. Therefore, the period of history we are focusing on is about one century long, after which the voice of God goes silent until the beginning of the New Testament around 450 years later.

There are 7 books of the Bible that were written by men (and women) who lived during this time period. They are Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Among these were prophets, scribes, governors, and a queen. There are also some isolated references to these years in other books of the Bible, such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. For the purposes of this series, we will focus primarily on the writings of Ezra and Nehemiah, and will mention passages from these other books when appropriate.

The goal of this series is to discover what God has to say about rebuilding the church. We will study how the people of this era reconstructed the Temple, reestablished the worship, and revitalized their city and nation. I believe that these lessons will have direct application to us here at Calvary Baptist Church, as we seek to do the same - to rebuild our church.

"Therefore thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Because you have not obeyed My words, behold, I will send and take all the families of the north,' declares the LORD, 'and I will send to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon, My servant, and will bring them against this land and against its inhabitants and against all these nations round about; and I will utterly destroy them and make them a horror and a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. Moreover, I will take from them the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the sound of the millstones and the light of the lamp. This whole land will be a desolation and a horror, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.'" - Jeremiah 25:8-11

In the year 612 BC the Babylonians destroyed the capital city of Nineveh, and became the world's newest "superpower" effectively replacing the Assyrians. In the years that followed they subdued many surrounding nations including Judah, forcing them all to become subject states of and pay tribute to Babylon.

In 605 BC under the rule of Nebuchadnezzar, they deported many prominent young men and women from Jerusalem to Babylon. One of these was Daniel, probably just a teen at the time he was taken captive. Daniel was educated and trained to serve the Babylonian king, and he spent most of his life doing just that. The book of Daniel describes many of the notable events that happened during his life.

In today's sermon, the year is 539 BC some 66 years after Daniel became an exile. He is now around 80 years of age, and during his life in captivity he has seen several Babylonian kings come and go. The current king is Belshazzar, considered by many scholars to be the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar. Belshazzar has thrown a party at his palace and invited many guests, not realizing that the end of the mighty Babylonian Empire was imminent.

I. THE MAGNIFICENT FEAST (Daniel 5:1-4)

The name "Belshazzar" means "Baal protect the king". Belshazzar was a highly religious person, a man of faith - but his faith was misplaced. One's faith is only as good as the object or person it is placed in. Powerless god = powerless faith. Despite the rising influence of the Persians, Belshazzar was so comfortable that he threw a grand party. He discounted their strength, believing that his god's would protect him and that his kingdom was impenetrable. Belshazzar demeaned the holy articles that had been taken from the Jewish Temple, using them as instruments to worship and praise other gods. This was a direct assault on Jehovah God.

II. THE MYSTERIOUS FINGER (Daniel 5:5-9)

The world will never be able to interpret and understand the "writing on the wall". They desire to know what it says, but are simply unable to read it. As such, there are countless theories about who God is and what He says. Because it remains unknown to them, the "writing on the wall" is a source of fear and uncertainty for those who can't read it. In other words, life apart from God can be a scary place to be.

III. THE MAN FORGOTTEN (Daniel 5:10-16)

Daniel had served Nebuchadnezzar so well in his younger years that the queen mother remembered him all these years later. It challenges me to consider how memorable my service for God might be. When the opportunity arose, it was Daniel who was used by God to read the writing on the wall. It just goes to show us that God still uses older people and that there is no retirement from Christianity. The younger believers today desperately need to see and learn from the activity of our senior saints.

IV. THE MESSAGE FORETOLD (Daniel 5:17-28)

Daniel rejects the king's offer of gifts, not desiring to receive material possessions from the king. He was not interested in worldly riches or power. Daniel explained that Nebuchadnezzar had been successful because of God's sovereign design, but that his pride and arrogance led to his downfall - he literally went crazy. Although Belshazzar knew this about his grandfather, still he was repeating the same haughty behavior. Why is it that we never seem to learn the lessons of our history? Daniel boldly declared truth to the king. He told Belshazzar that the gods he was serving were powerless, that Jehovah was/is the true God, and that it was He who had written on the wall. He read God's message to the king - a proclamation of God's judgement against Belshazzar and the Babylonian Empire. As Christians today, we are called to warn the world of the consequences of sin.

V. THE MIGHTY FALLEN (Daniel 5:29-31)

Belshazzar heard the message but basically ignored everything that Daniel said. Ever done that? He proceeded to lavish Daniel with gifts and promoted him to a high royal position. His actions indicate that he'd missed the point completely. That very night Babylon fell to the Persians and the king was killed. Cyrus, the king of Persia, installed Darius the Mede to rule over the area of Babylonia.

CONCLUSION

During the 70 year reign of Babylon, the people of God were largely silent. They had virtually no influence and were powerless before their oppressors. Their homeland was destroyed, their cities were burned, and their Temple was demolished. But now that Babylon had been defeated, a new era was about to begin - a time to return to the Promised Land and rebuild that which had been broken.

God took the children of Israel into their captivity, remained with them there, and was now about to bring them out and give them another chance. Would they be able to rise to the challenge? As our church - Calvary Baptist - seeks to rebound from years of decline and hardship, will we rise to it? There is work to be done - it is time to rebuild the church...

Zerubbabel's Return - Ezra 1 & 2

8/10/2014

"It is I who says of Cyrus, 'He is My shepherd! and he will perform all My desire.' And he declares of Jerusalem, 'She will be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation will be laid.'" Thus says the LORD to Cyrus His anointed, whom I have taken by the right hand, to subdue nations before him and to loose the loins of kings; to open doors before him so that gates will not be shut: "I will go before you and make the rough places smooth; I will shatter the doors of bronze and cut through their iron bars. "I will give you the treasures of darkness and hidden wealth of secret places, so that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who calls you by your name. "For the sake of Jacob My servant, and Israel My chosen one, I have also called you by your name; I have given you a title of honor though you have not known Me." - Isaiah 44:28-45:4

This morning we continue our series "Rebuilding the Church". We are talking about the years following the Babylonian exile, when the people of God returned from their captivity to Jerusalem and Judah. They worked to reconstruct their temple, to renew its worship, and to revive their city. By studying their experience, I believe that our congregation can learn truths that will help us to most effectively rebuild our church here in Seymour.

Last week we began our series in Daniel 5, and discussed that infamous night at Belshazzar's palace when God wrote on the wall. Before the sun came up, the king had been killed, the city seized, and the empire fallen. Now the Medo-Persian alliance was in power, Cyrus was the king, and their empire would endure beyond the close of the Old Testament.

The prophet/scribe Ezra recorded this time period of Biblical history. He wrote the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which were originally one book. As a scribe, he was meticulous in his literary style including many lists, duplications of manuscripts, and other details in his writings. He incorporated some of Nehemiah's memoirs with his own as he compiled the books. Ezra also wrote 1st and 2nd Chronicles, and is regarded in Jewish history as one of the men who was instrumental in establishing the books of the Old Testament canon.

Ezra describes 3 separate returns of exiles to Jerusalem - the first led by Zerubbabel (538 BC), the second led by Ezra himself (458 BC - 80 years later), and the third led by Nehemiah (445 BC - 13 years after that). These 3 returns "undo" the 3 deportations of the Jews by Nebuchadnezzar in 605 BC, 597 BC, and 586 BC. They foreshadow the three-fold denials and restoration of Peter found in the Gospels.

This morning we will look at Ezra 1 & 2, as we consider Zerubbabel's return to rebuild the Temple of God. We will discover in these 2 chapters a proclamation, a preparation, a procession, and a purification.

The year is 538 BC. Babylon has fallen and Cyrus the Great of Persia is the new king. Unlike the many rulers that preceded him, Cyrus was a diplomat and a statesman. He treated the nations that he conquered with a greater level of respect and dignity than did most. He did not utterly destroy them, nor did he try to eradicate their identity - rather he simply demanded their allegiance. In keeping with his more tolerant approach, Cyrus allowed exiles from many previously enslaved cultures to return to their homelands, including the Jews. They were free to practice their customs and religion, so long as they maintained servitude to Persia.

I. THE PROCLAMATION (Ezra 1:1-4)

Stirred by God, King Cyrus issued a proclamation that the Jewish exiles were free to return to Judah. This was quite amazing, and was foretold by the prophet Isaiah (see focal verse) approximately 150 years prior to its happening! Cyrus was not a Jew, nor was he a believer in Jehovah God. Yet, the LORD used him to liberate His people. This is an excellent example of how God can use anyone, even those who don't accept Him, to bring about His purposes. God is sovereign.

Not only did he release the Jewish exiles, but Cyrus further expressed a desire to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. He did not intend to do it himself. Instead, he commissioned the returning people to do it, under the leadership of Zerubbabel. This is similar to King David's original desire to build God a house, which was actually accomplished by his son Solomon. Both show a progression - the first expresses his will, while the second does it. In other words, we are called to do what the King asks...

II. THE PREPARATION (Ezra 1:5-11)

The first step to seeing the temple rebuilt was to gather a group of people who were committed to the task at hand. Those who volunteered to return with Zerubbabel left behind the life they'd known in Babylon. It was not an easy decision, but they sensed the call of God and stepped out in faith.

The group was encouraged and supported financially by others who chose not to make the journey. They made their planned return known and openly received the assistance needed to get started. God will bless his people through the kindness and generosity of others. People want to help, and are eager to do so if asked. Thus, God's work should not be done in secret or in isolation.

Even Cyrus returned many of the articles that had been taken from Solomon's Temple by the Babylonians. By returning many of the original articles, the new temple would preserve some of its heritage. The new temple would stand as a testament to the previous one.

III. THE PRECESSION (Ezra 2:1-60; 64-70)

Ezra carefully lists - by name - all of the families, priests, and Levites who returned to take on this monumental task. What they were about to do was significant, and their faith was worth remembering. Isn't it amazing? God knows your name. He knows who His workers are, and He will reward them for their efforts.

The total number of people who returned was a mere fraction of those who were in exile. Many of the Jews had become quite comfortable and even wealthy in Babylon. When the decree came to rebuild, many choose to ignore it preferring instead to stay right where they were at.

IV. THE PURIFICATION (Ezra 2:61-63)

Some of the men's names who claimed to be priests were not found in the official registry. A few generations before, their ancestors had married the daughters of Barzillai and changed their names. Consequently, their Hebrew names and tribal affiliation was lost. Because they were not documented, these priests were disqualified from the work of rebuilding God's house. Only those who were undoubtedly God's people would do it.

The suspended priests could be restored only if the urim and thummim allowed. In various places throughout the Old Testament, urim and thummim were used by the priests to determine God's will. Whatever they said, whether yes or no, was considered to be God's answer. The point being made here is that only God can bring about restoration...

CONCLUSION

For decades the people of God had lost their voice, their influence, and their standing. But a new era was beginning, and God was opening the door for them to rebuild, renew, and revive. This would ultimately unfold in 3 stages, as the people returned to Jerusalem and Judah in waves. The first one, led by Zerubbabel, set out specifically to rebuild them temple.

As I consider this story in light of ours here at Calvary, I am certain that God is calling us to rebuild this church. The first thing we must do as a congregation is hear His calling.

Then we must commit ourselves to it. In addition, we must prepare financially and otherwise to complete the task before us. But most importantly, we all need to be priests - ie, born again believers. Only Christians can build a church. God will not use unsaved people to do it. So I ask... is your name written in the book, namely the Lamb's Book of Life?

Laying the Foundation - Ezra 3

8/17/2014

“Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.” - 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

The title of our current sermon series is "Rebuilding the Church". As I have studied and began putting these sermons together, I want to add a subtitle to this – "Rebuild, Renew, Revive". When Zerubbabel led the first expedition back to Jerusalem, they were charged to rebuild the temple. When Ezra led the second expedition back years later, his goal was to renew the worship. Then when Nehemiah led the third expedition, it was to revive the city by rebuilding the wall around it.

Scripture provides a 3-fold strategy for rebuilding the church. We must work on the building itself (Zerubbabel), what we do inside the building (Ezra), and how we impact those outside the building (Nehemiah). These represent three broad areas that need to be addressed as we rebuild. They aren't to be viewed as isolated from one another. In other words, we don't have to accomplish one before moving on to the next. Rather, we may work on all three objectives at the same time.

Last week Cyrus issued a proclamation allowing the Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem. A group of committed volunteers gathered, made preparations, and journeyed back home. They were led by Zerubbabel, and had been tasked to rebuild the temple. We pick up the story this morning beginning in Ezra 3. We will frame this sermon with 4 major points - the home, the altar, the Levites, and the foundation.

I. THE HOME (Ezra 3:1)

The distance from Jerusalem to Babylon is over 500 miles in a straight line, yet the people would likely have traveled up the Euphrates before turning south to Jerusalem making the journey even longer. It likely took about 4 months to make the trip on foot.

When the exiles arrived at Judah, they scattered to their own cities and what was left of their own homes. They were allowed a few months to put things in order, to evaluate the damage, and make repairs. Then, at the appointed time, they all came back together at Jerusalem to start rebuilding the temple as they had been instructed.

As we seek to rebuild the church, it is important to remember our homes come first. This does not diminish our responsibility to the church, but does serve as a guideline. When

faced with the choice to take care of the critical needs of your family or give to the church, Scripture says we should choose family. This does not mean that we choose family over God – God is always first. God and church are not the same thing. So the Biblical order of these three is as follows – God, Family, then Church.

II. THE ALTAR (Ezra 3:2-6)

Before they started building the temple itself, the people rebuilt the altar on what was left of its original foundation. One of the primary purposes of the Jewish Temple was animal sacrifice, in which God made atonement for the peoples' sins. This was their ongoing expression of repentance.

The altar stood outside of the temple itself. The people built it first so that they could go ahead and begin making offerings and sacrifices to God, even as they worked to complete the temple. Although they feared the adversarial people living in the city, they rose above it and continued working faithfully. After completing the altar, they immediately began making daily offerings and reinstated many celebrations and customs in accordance with the law of Moses.

The first element of the church that needs to be rebuilt is the altar. If we are not going to use the altar and practice ongoing repentance, then there really is no need for the remainder of the building. God will not bless a stubborn, cowardly, or unrepentant people. Oh how I long to see the altars of God within our churches full again!

III. THE LEVITES (Ezra 3:7-9)

Having completed the altar, the people now used the money they'd brought with them from Babylon to acquire materials that they'd use to begin temple construction. Zerubbabel and Jeshua appointed the Levites as supervisors over the construction. For a few months they did the groundwork, clearing and preparing the area to begin building soon.

The Levites were the descendants of Levi, many of whom served in the Levitical Priesthood. As such, in Old Testament times they represented the mediators between man and God. In other words, God himself was overseeing and directing the work through the Levites.

As we seek to rebuild our church, we must do so under the direction of God Almighty. He will guide our steps as we engage in the labor. Everything we do should be honoring to Him.

IV. THE FOUNDATION (Ezra 3:10-13)

The people celebrated after completing the laying of the foundation of the new temple. Although work on the building itself had not yet started, this was a major milestone and the people rejoiced. They praised God for their success, and were careful to do so in the manner prescribed by King David years before. Though creating something new, they still wanted to honor their past.

Yet many of the older men wept. Most scholars tell us that they wept because, compared to the grandeur of first temple, this new one would be much more modest. No expense had been spared when building Solomon's temple, but now it was gone. Zerubbabel's temple would be built on a budget and would appear far less impressive to the eye. Sadly, these senior saints did not sense the joy of what could be... only the sorrow of what was no more.

As we rebuild our church, we cannot be stuck in the past. We must make our church relevant, contemporary, and inviting to the new generation. Times have changed, circumstances have changed, and people have changed. The best way to honor those who went before us is to build a church to meet the needs of those who will come after us.

CONCLUSION

The first group of exiles had returned to Judah. After a few months in their homes, they reunited in Jerusalem. They rebuilt the altar of God, began making daily sacrifices, and commenced observing the Jewish festivals and traditions according to the Law. They gathered workers and purchased supplies to begin rebuilding the temple. Soon the foundation was laid.

As we apply their situation to ours, I see four important truths. Though we are called to rebuild the church, our work should not impair our home life. If we want our church to be effectual, we must rebuild our altar by becoming a people of repentance. We must be mindful that God is watching, and do everything by His direction and for His honor and glory. We must build with a vision for the days to come, not with a nostalgia to duplicate days gone by.

Fortunately, Calvary does not have to build a church from the ground up. We have a wonderful facility already. But there is no denying that it is aging and in need of much repair. It needs to be made contemporary and attractive, that it might appeal to this generation. The condition of our church building is very important - and it is an area we must address as we begin to rebuild, renew, and revive.

The Work Ceases - Ezra 4

8/24/2014

“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits.” - Matthew 7:15-20

This week we continue our sermon series called “Rebuilding the Church: Rebuild, Renew, Revive”. This is the fourth message in the series. We are using Ezra and Nehemiah as our primary texts, however, we will look at other related books throughout this series as well. Today we will be in Ezra chapter 4.

This is a period in the history of the Jews which focuses on restoration. The people of God had been in captivity for decades, their temple was destroyed, their worship all but nonexistent, and their ministry lost. But with the fall of their captors, and their own emancipation, it was time to start again - to rebuild, renew, and revive.

In a similar fashion, our church here at Calvary has gone through some very difficult years in the immediate past. As we are emerging from them and moving forward toward the new and exciting future God that has in store for us, I believe there are many lessons we can learn from the Jewish exiles who returned to rebuild.

Up to this point, we have seen the Babylonian Empire give way to the Medo-Persians. Soon after, the new king named Cyrus the Great released the Jewish exiles and allowed them to return to Judah to rebuild the Temple. A group was assembled, and they returned to Israel under the leadership of a man named Zerubbabel. After a brief time, they all gathered in Jerusalem. First they rebuilt the altar and then they laid the foundation for the new temple. All of this work was being done as the citizens of the city looked upon the returnees with bitterness and disdain. As we begin today’s message, a few years have passed and it is around 536 BC. The people living in Jerusalem are becoming increasingly disturbed by the presence and activity of these Jewish exiles.

I. A DISINGENUOUS OFFER (Ezra 4:1-3)

The citizens of Jerusalem during this time were not Jews - rather they were a people who would come to be known as Samaritans. They were foreigners who had been placed there by the Assyrians years before. They themselves had been exiled from

their various homelands to Israel, just as the Jews had been carried away to Babylon. And so, when the people of God returned to what had been their home they were met by a city that was hostile to their presence.

These Samaritans were a mixed breed, who had incorporated their various pagan religions with Judaism. Thus when they claimed to worship the same God as the Jews, their words were not completely true. He was simply one of many gods they worshiped. They offered to "help" with the rebuilding of the temple, but in reality they only wanted to infiltrate and frustrate the efforts of Zerubbabel and his workers. Their insincerity was evident, and the remnant who had returned rejected their offer.

As we seek to rebuild our church, we will certainly face opposition and obstacles. We must be careful to recognize them when they arise, even if they come in disguise. This will require Godly discernment. We must understand peoples' true motivations. Sometimes what appears to build us up will actually tear us down.

II. AN APPEAL TO THE KING (Ezra 4:4-16)

For the duration of King Cyrus' reign, the Samaritans conspired against the Jews. They sent a letter during the reign of King Ahasuerus lobbying against the effort to rebuild. Another letter was written a few years later during the reign of Artaxerxes, which is transcribed by Ezra in this passage. Their effort to prevent the reconstruction of the temple continued through the reign of Darius. It was an ongoing, prolonged assault against the people of God.

In their letter to Artaxerxes, the Samaritans falsely accused the Jews of rebuilding with the intent to revolt. The remnant of Jewish exiles was relatively small and of no consequence. These accusations against them were ridiculous and completely unfounded. Such slanderous comments are the work of Satan himself.

As we seek to rebuild our church, we must be mindful that our accusers are actively working against us. What we are doing is a divine work that brings glory to God, and therefore it is an affront to Satan. He and his followers will resist our efforts fiercely.

III. THE KING'S RESPONSE (Ezra 4:17-22)

As requested in the letter he'd received, the king researched the history of Israel to determine its reputation. As the Samaritans had pointed out, Israel did indeed have a long history of revolt and rebellion - not just against earthly kings and kingdoms, but against God as well. Their stubborn, rebellious reputation played a major role in the

king's decision. And so, knowing their past nature and fearing the worst, Artaxerxes decreed that the rebuilding of the temple was to be suspended indefinitely.

As we seek to rebuild our church, we will have to overcome ill feelings that we may have caused over the years. Unfortunately, even the best churches occasionally do things that hurt people and turn them off - Calvary is no exception. We will have to develop and cultivate a reputation of love and righteousness.

IV. THE WORK CEASES (Ezra 4:23-24)

When the king's response came, an armed force was dispatched to stop the temple reconstruction. Although the exiles remained eager to work and rebuild, they were physically prevented from doing so. The rebuilding of the temple would remain suspended for 16 years. Zerubbabel and his followers would have to patiently wait on God's time table, trusting that someday they'd be allowed to finish the work they'd started.

As we seek to rebuild our church, we will face obstacles that might slow us down or even stop us for awhile. Even so, we must not become discouraged. We must move forward, knowing that success will come according to God's timing.

CONCLUSION

What had started out so promising had now seemingly come to an abrupt end. The temple was not rebuilt, and the people were prohibited from completing it. It seemed that the enemy had prevailed and the obstacles before them were just too great to overcome...

Here is the bottom line - the Devil does not want God's people to rebuild the church. He will use whatever means necessary to keep it from happening. Some of his attacks will be direct and others will be indirect, some internal and others external. He will try to infiltrate us with enemies who pose as friends, he will slander and accuse us falsely before others, he will seek to smear and damage our reputation, and he will even resist us physically if necessary.

As we seek to rebuild, renew, and revive our church we should fully expect opposition and obstacles to come our way. When they come, we must turn to God in order to overcome them. No matter how long it takes and whatever roadblocks stand in our way, we must remain committed to the task that the Lord has laid before us. In His power and for His name, we will rebuild the LORD's church!

Don't Give Up - Haggai 1 & 2

8/31/2014

When the prophets, Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them, then Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel and Jeshua the son of Jozadak arose and began to rebuild the house of God which is in Jerusalem; and the prophets of God were with them supporting them. - Ezra 5:1-12

This week we continue our sermon series called “Rebuilding the Church: Rebuild, Renew, Revive”. In this series, we are studying how the Jews who returned to Judah following the Babylonian exile worked to rebuild their temple, renew their worship, and revive their city. Their story provides a God-given blueprint for revitalizing the church.

The first wave of exiles returned from Babylon to Jerusalem in 538 BC led by Zerubbabel. They had been decreed and equipped to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Within 2 years they had rebuilt the altar of sacrifice and laid the foundation for the building itself. But, as we studied last week, the inhabitants of Jerusalem - the Samaritans - became increasingly hostile toward them.

At first they tried to infiltrate the group of returnees by offering to help them rebuild. When this failed, they began making false allegations to the king. They reminded him of the Jews’ rebellious past. When given permission, they actually sent armed soldiers to physically prevent the exiles from rebuilding the temple of God.

So the work stopped, and the passion to rebuild the church slowly faded. Before too long, the armed guards were no longer needed as the people of God had all but given up on their dream. For the next 16 years the temple foundation laid bare and the altar unused. The opposition that caused them to stop had given way to complacency that would not allow them to restart.

Sometime around 520 BC God raised up 2 different prophets to exhort or encourage those exiles who remained to continue the work of rebuilding the temple. They were named Haggai and Zechariah. This week will look at the words of Haggai and next week we will consider Zechariah.

Haggai is the second shortest book in the Old Testament. In it, he delivers four distinct prophetic statements to the people of God. These four separate prophecies will be the main points of this morning’s message.

I. THE FIRST PROPHECY - The Price of Neglecting God's House (Haggai 1:1-15)

The Jewish exiles had rebuilt their own homes and become focused on their own lives. They decided that it was not the time to work on God's house, so they'd put it off for later. "Now is our time" they thought, "and we'll get around to the Lord one of these days."

Despite their self-focused efforts, the people constantly struggled "in their ways". They were not able to produce bountifully, always lacking an abundance. They were just scraping by, always fighting just to stay afloat. Drought plagued the land and led to constant hardship. Why was this happening? One reason was because God's people were neglecting Him and His house the temple.

For 16 years the exiles were busy doing other things, and had practically forgotten about the incomplete temple. But God remained faithful to them, and they finally heard Him calling through the words of Haggai. The long break was finally over and the people went back to work rebuilding the temple.

Haggai's first prophecy is both a call to action and a warning against inaction. When God's people knowingly, willfully, and continually neglect His house both individually and collectively, there are certain to be negative consequences that affect us all. One of the primary reasons for the difficulties we face today is the disregard that "Christians" have for the church.

II. THE SECOND PROPHECY - The Promised Glory of the New Temple (Haggai 2:1-9)

Many of the older workers who had seen the lavish splendor of Solomon's Temple in their youth were grieved because they knew this new temple would be much less immaculate. As such, they were not as energized to rebuild as they should have been.

Their lack of enthusiasm was only part of the problem... the Samaritans still lived in Jerusalem and remained unwelcoming to the exiles. Would hostilities break out again? God urged the returnees to be brave and courageous, and that He would be with them as they reinstated the temple construction.

God promised that "in a little while" (sometime in the future) the glory of the new temple would actually exceed that of the original. How? Well, Zerubbabel's temple was greatly renovated and enlarged by Herod the Great beginning in around 20 BC. But more importantly, it was in this temple that the Messiah would be dedicated, teach, preach, and minister to the world. Jesus would physically walk in this temple someday...

Haggai's second prophecy presents a contrast. The glory of God's house is not determined by its outward appearance or magnificent size. We should want our facilities to look nice, but we must remember that their ultimate glory is determined by the presence of God within them.

III. THE THIRD PROPHECY - The Blessing of God on the People (Haggai 2:10-19)

In their present state, it seemed that everything the Jewish remnant touched was somehow defiled. How would they be able to rebuild God's temple when they were so unclean? For years, everything they took part in just fell apart. Not much of a motivation to rebuild is it? Yet God promised that, if they'd simply complete the task they'd started, He would bless their labor and give them success.

In Haggai's third prophecy, God promised to bless the exiles efforts to rebuild. The LORD will bless those who are obedient to His will. We may face hardship and setbacks, but nonetheless God will bless obedience. We may not live a trouble-free life, but we can live a blessed one!

IV. THE FOURTH PROPHECY - The Promise of God to Zerubbabel (Haggai 2:20-23)

This final vision is apocalyptic in nature and paints a picture of the end times. All the kingdoms of earth will be overthrown on "that day". A descendant of Zerubbabel, namely Jesus Christ, will be exalted above all and His name will be God's signet ring (official seal). Zerubbabel is told that he is to be a direct ancestor of the Messiah.

As the leader, Zerubbabel needed some additional encouragement to rebuild. In Haggai's final prophecy, God gave him just what he needed. Often times, our leaders need an extra measure of support and encouragement because of the responsibility they carry.

CONCLUSION

The people have God had been idle for so long that they'd become lethargic and complacent. They neglected God's house and subsequently God himself without even as much as a second thought. They had misplaced their focus fully onto other things, and were suffering as a result. Though they had forgotten the LORD, He hadn't forgotten them. He raised up a prophet to call them back to the task at hand, and to begin rebuilding again.

Perhaps your life is like this... maybe at one time you were zealous for God, but somewhere you got off track. And now years have passed and you have been unfaithful

to God and to His church. Perhaps you have not made Him the priority in your life that you should have. Could it be that some of the problems you face are due to your disregard for Him?

Like Haggai, I have good news for you. No matter how long you have chosen to stand on the sidelines, God is still willing to put you back into the game. You may have been knocked down, but because of Him you are not out. So whatever you do, don't give up... there is work to be done, and God is calling you to get up and go do it. Rebuild, renew, revive!

The LORD Remembers - Zechariah 1-8

9/7/2014

The LORD remembers us and will bless us: He will bless his people Israel, He will bless the house of Aaron, He will bless those who fear the LORD — small and great alike. - Psalm 115:12-13

Today's message is the sixth in our series titled "Rebuilding the Church: Rebuild, Renew, Revive". We are studying about how the people of God returned from Babylon to rebuild their church, renew their worship, and revive their city. Perhaps their experience will help us do likewise.

Commissioned by King Cyrus of Persia, a remnant of Jewish exiles had returned to Jerusalem. They were being led by Zerubbabel, their secular leader, and Joshua, their spiritual leader. They eagerly began rebuilding the temple by laying a new foundation, but soon opposition coming from the Samaritans led to a suspension of their work.

For the next 16 years the people of God put off rebuilding the temple. Finally, around 520 BC God sent two different prophets to admonish the exiles to continue and complete the work they'd begun. These men were Haggai and Zechariah. Last week we studied Haggai's message to the people, and this week we will briefly examine some excerpts from Zechariah's writings.

Internal evidences and quotations within their writings seem to suggest that Haggai was an older man, likely 75 years of age or more, while Zechariah was much younger, perhaps in his 20's or 30's. Not only was there age quite different, but so was their literary style. As such, together they likely appealed to a more diverse audience of listeners. But while their approach differed, their message was the same!

The book of Zechariah has 14 chapters, but the final ones (9-14) were written sometime well after the days of Zerubbabel when the temple had already been rebuilt. Therefore, for the purposes of this study we will focus on the first 8 chapters only. After opening with a call to repentance, the young prophet describes a series of 8 visions that he had over the course of a single night. Each of them, when interrupted, are designed to encourage the Jews and motivate them to rebuild.

Have you ever had one of those nights where you couldn't sleep because so many things kept creeping into your mind? If you have, then you'll be able to relate extremely well to Zechariah. He was up all night listening to God! His 8 nighttime visions will be

the focus of today's message. Hopefully this sermon (like Zechariah's visions) will keep you awake...

I. THE HORSEMEN AMONG MYRTLE TREES (Zechariah 1:7-17)

Zechariah sees a man riding a red horse, which was standing amongst myrtle trees in a ravine. With him there were also other horses - red, white, and sorrel. The man riding the horse is identified as the angel of the Lord. He explains that these horses have been sent by the Lord to patrol the earth, and that they have discovered that all is peaceful and quiet. The angel of the Lord then cries out to God asking, "How long will you withhold your compassion from Judah and Jerusalem?" God responds by assuring that His temple will be rebuilt and His compassion renewed.

II. THE 4 HORNS AND 4 CRAFTSMEN (Zechariah 1:18-21)

Zechariah sees four horns, which the angel identifies as nations that "have scattered" Israel, Judah, and Jerusalem. Some scholars suggest that they may represent Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Greece. Then he sees four craftsmen, which are identified as nations who have been sent to defeat the horns and thereby rescue God's people from their oppression. Some scholars propose that they are Babylon, Persia, Greece, and Rome. Regardless of the exact identity of the horns and craftsman, the point is that God has always delivered His children and always will.

III. THE MAN WITH A MEASURING LINE (Zechariah 2:1-13)

Zechariah sees a man with a measuring line in his hand who is going to measure the dimensions of Jerusalem. An angel says that Jerusalem will be inhabited with a multitude of people and cattle so great that walls will be unable to contain them. In that day, the Lord himself "will be a wall of fire around her and the glory in her midst." Since its destruction, Jerusalem had become an inconsequential and somewhat desolate city, but this vision pictures a complete and glorious restoration.

IV. CLEAN GARMENTS FOR JOSHUA THE HIGH PRIEST (Zechariah 3:1-10)

Zechariah sees Joshua the high priest standing before the LORD wearing filthy garments, and Satan is there also making accusations against him. The LORD silences Satan, tells Joshua that his iniquities have been removed, and then charges the angels to put clean robes and a turban on him. God then promises that Joshua will have charge over His house (implying that it will be rebuilt). The point is that God is personally blessing and exalting Joshua the high priest, who is the spiritual leader during this era of rebuilding.

V. THE GOLDEN LAMPSTAND AND OLIVE TREES (Zechariah 4:1-14)

Zechariah sees a golden lampstand in the midst of 2 olive trees - one on the right and the other on the left. Throughout the Bible, the lampstand is symbolic of the Holy Spirit. Most understand the olive trees to represent Zerubbabel and Joshua. With this in mind, picture the lampstand shining upon the trees. This image reveals that it is the Holy Spirit himself who has anointed and will empower these men to complete the temple reconstruction.

VI. THE FLYING SCROLL (Zechariah 5:1-4)

Zechariah sees a flying scroll that measures 20 cubits by 10 cubits. In our modern customary measurement, that is about 30 feet long and 15 feet wide - that's a pretty large scroll! The angel explains that it contains a curse against all those who steal and swear "falsely by My name", and that it is going forth into their homes to consume them. It indicates that sinners will be "purged" from the land. This is a promise of cleansing - that only the righteous will remain and that the wicked will be cast out.

VII. THE WOMAN AND THE EPHAH (Zechariah 5:5-11)

Zechariah sees an ephah, which is a container used for measuring volume like a modern measuring cup. Inside this ephah is a woman, which reveals that it is much larger than usual. The woman represents "wickedness". A lead cover lies over the opening of the ephah, in essence trapping the woman inside. The lead is believed by many to mean guilt, which is weighing down upon the sinner. Two female angels come, lift the ephah, and carry it off to Shinar (which is Babylonia). The vision furthers the previous one, showing that wickedness will be removed from Israel and relocated to a more fitting place. Again, this is a promise of cleansing and purification.

VIII. THE FOUR CHARIOTS (Zechariah 6:1-8)

Zechariah sees 4 chariots come forth between 2 bronze mountains. The first chariot was pulled by red horses, the second by black horses, the third by white horses, and the fourth by dappled horses. While precise understanding is difficult, many scholars advocate that the chariots represent God's various judgments and the mountains represent His steadfastness. In other words, the LORD's ways are unshakable. Notice that His wrath against the north has already been appeased, which suggests that the fall of Babylon (the North) was an execution of God's judgment. This vision affirms God's complete sovereignty over the affairs of nations.

CONCLUSION

In these 8 visions we see God communicating that His temple will be rebuilt, His compassion will be renewed, His people will be delivered, His city will be restored, His high priest will be exalted, His Spirit will empower, His curse will purge the land, His judgment will relocate wickedness, and His sovereignty will endure.

In the remainder of chapter 6 through the close of chapter 8 Zechariah continues to encourage the Jewish exiles. He expounds on his visions in more detail, applying them more specifically to the peoples' lives and circumstances.

As he concludes his prophetic message to the exiles in chapter 8, Zechariah records a question in verses 6-8. To paraphrase, God asks, "Just because the people think it is too difficult for Me, does that mean I can't do it?" The answer is obvious - God is not constrained by the limitations we place upon Him. Nothing is impossible for Him. Yes, rebuilding the church was proving to be difficult... but by God's power it would be done.

Perhaps you think that your problems are too big for God to handle. They aren't. Perhaps you think that your sin is too great to be forgiven. It isn't. Perhaps you think that God is unable to save you. He can. Perhaps you think that the LORD has forgotten you. He hasn't. The name Zechariah actually means "the Lord remembers". When you belong to Him, you'll never slip from His mind nor will you ever slip from His hand...

The Temple Is Completed - Ezra 5 & 6

9/14/2014

I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. - Philippians 1:3-6

As we have discussed, the return of the Hebrews to Judah following the Babylonian captivity occurred in 3 phases. The first group, led by Zerubbabel and Joshua, returned around 538 BC and they were commissioned to rebuild the temple. The second and third waves of exiles came many years later. The second group came back around 458 BC, led by Ezra, who was intent on renewing the worship of the Jews. The third group returned around 445 BC, under the leadership of Nehemiah, with the goal of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls thereby reviving the city.

Over the course of this sermon series, we will explore all three of these occurrences. Together they make up the framework for these messages - "rebuild, renew, and revive". This morning we will conclude the first chapter of this series, as we take a final look at the first wave of exiles. We will be reading from Ezra chapters 5 & 6.

The Jews who had returned from Babylon under Zerubbabel had begun rebuilding the temple, just as King Cyrus had decreed. But the ambitious king was killed in battle, and was followed by others who were less sympathetic. Samaritans living in Jerusalem lobbied to prevent the exiles from continuing to rebuild and they were successful. And so, despite having already rebuilt the altar and relaying the foundation, the temple reconstruction was abruptly halted. It remained for suspended for 16 years.

Around 520 BC God raised up two prophets, each quite different from the other, but both with the same message. These two men, Haggai and Zechariah, encouraged Zerubbabel, Joshua, and the Jews to complete the work of rebuilding the temple that had been dormant for so long. They appealed to the people of God, urging them to go back to work and finish the task that they'd started.

This morning we will study the people's response. Would they disregard the prophets exhortation, or would they finally finish rebuilding the temple? Our message has 4 points - The Work Resumes, The Work Is Allowed, The Work Is Approved, and The Work Is Finished.

I. THE WORK RESUMES (Ezra 5:1-4)

Motivated by the ongoing encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah, the people of God arose and began to rebuild. Sometimes in life we need a little motivation to spur us forward. It may come in a variety of ways, and through different sources. Sometimes it is a spoken word, other times a pending deadline or consequence, and still others a difficult situation. Whatever the motivator may appear to be, ultimately it is God who is calling us back or pushing us on to be the people He has called us to be.

The governors of the region were still leary of the Jews rebuilding the temple. They asked, "Who gave you permission to start working again?" While Cyrus had originally commissioned them to rebuild, Artaxerxes had order them to stop. Which king had more authority? The answer is simple - the King of kings has supreme authority. When God tells us to do something, we don't need man's permission to do it. They people proceeded based on God's authority. Caution - this is not a blanket excuse to do whatever we want to do "in the Lord's name". It is permission to do whatever He wants us to do, regardless of the opinions of men.

The exiles openly listed the names of the people who were involved in the rebuilding. This reveals that they had overcome their fear. If it was determined that their rebuilding was a willful and knowing violation of the king's order, they could be in danger. Still they boldly and publicly gave out their names. They were hiding no more, confident in God to see them through to the end.

II. THE WORK IS ALLOWED (Ezra 5:5-17)

The governors of the region did not immediately attempt to stop the exiles from rebuilding. They allowed the work to continue while they sought the counsel of King Darius. They were not as hostile as the Samaritans had been previously. God was blessing the efforts of the workers, just as He had promised.

The first letter (recorded in Ezra 4) had been written to King Artaxerxes. It accused the Jews of planning to incite revolution. It was extremely slanderous in nature, and resulted in the king's suspension of the temple reconstruction. This second letter, however, was quite different. Written to King Darius, it presented the Jew's position and then asked the king to determine whether or not what they said was true. In other words, the exiles defended their actions rather than going down without a fight. They stood up for God and the mission He had given to them.

III. THE WORK IS APPROVED (Ezra 6:1-12)

By order of King Darius, a search is conducted and the original decree issued by Cyrus is found. It reveals that the Jews had been commissioned to rebuild the temple, and provides funding from the Persian treasury for the relaying of the foundation.

In light of this new evidence, Darius instructs the governors to leave the Jews alone and allow them to rebuild the temple. He gives his stamp of approval. In addition he decrees that the full cost of the reconstruction project be paid from the royal treasury, that the exiles be provided with whatever they need, and that those who try to stand in the way of their work be punished severely. Again, this is evidence of God's blessing on the Jews.

IV. THE WORK IS COMPLETED (Ezra 6:13-22)

The governors allowed the work to continue along with all the new provisions that Darius had made. The prophets continued to encourage the builders. After 4 years of work, in approximately 516 BC, Zerubbabel's Temple was completed. This is exactly 70 years after the original had been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, just as Jeremiah had prophesied almost a century before.

Upon completing the new temple, the people dedicated it to God and to His service. They appointed priests and began utilizing the temple as a place of worship and sacrifice.

With the temple now finished, the Jews reinstated one of their most significant observances - the Passover. Just as God had delivered their fathers from the hand of the Egyptians and brought them to the Promised Land, so also had He delivered them from the Babylonians and had allowed them to rebuild His temple.

CONCLUSION

22 years had passed from the time that the first wave of exiles returned until the time that they finished the temple. As we have seen over the past few weeks, it had not been an easy process. Nevertheless, God was faithful and the temple was finally rebuilt. When God starts something, He finishes it - nothing gets left undone.

After this chapter, nothing more is recorded in the Bible about Zerubbabel the leader or Joshua the high priest. We can assume that they continued their lives, living for the LORD until the day they died. We know that Zechariah continued prophesying to the people for sometime after the temple was completed.

We will not study it during this series, but scholars tell us that the story told in the book of Esther takes place in Persia sometime between the days of Zerubbabel and the return of Ezra (likely between 480-460 BC). It is a short book, very easy to read, and full of adventure. I'd encourage you to read it this week if you can.

In closing, when I think about Zerubbabel and what he accomplished, I am reminded that the building used to worship God matters. It needs to be nice, useful, and appealing. Our church building is important, and I am convinced that one of the priorities of rebuilding our church is renovating and updating this facility. It may take us years to complete, but it is absolutely necessary.

Ezra's Return - Ezra 7 & 8

9/21/2014

"If you love Me, you will keep My commandments." - John 14:15

Last Sunday we completed the first section of our current sermon series "Rebuilding the Church". More than 20 years after their return from Babylonian exile, the first wave of God's people completed their rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. This new structure, which we commonly refer to as Zerubbabel's Temple, was the second (following Solomon's) in Jewish history.

Following the years of reconstruction, these exiles who had returned continued to live and worship in and around Jerusalem and Judah. Despite some efforts to restore it, the city remained dirty and desolate. A large presence of foreigners who had been relocated to the area by conquering nations continued to threaten and oppose the Jews.

The Persian Empire continued to rule over all of Palestine. During the reign of King Ahasuerus (486-465 BC) an evil servant named Haman hatched a plot to eradicate all of the Jews. Thanks to the intervention of Mordecai, his plan was foiled and God's people were saved. The Jewish celebration of Purim is held to memorialize God's deliverance of His people from the wicked schemes of Haman. This story is recorded in the book of Esther.

Although they now had a temple, the pagan culture around them continued to influence and dominate their way of life. The Jews living in Jerusalem struggled to maintain purity and fidelity to God and His law. Increasingly they blended in with the world around them, until eventually there was very little difference to be seen.

In 458 BC, a priest and scribe named Ezra returned from Babylon with a second group of Jewish exiles. This was almost 60 years after the temple had been rebuilt, and it is safe to say that most of that generation had already passed away. Ezra came to Jerusalem with a different purpose - to evaluate the spiritual condition of the Jews, to teach and encourage them to follow God's law, and to renew their tainted religious practices.

I. THE MAN EZRA (Ezra 7:1-10)

Ezra was a direct descendant of Aaron, and thus a Levite of the Aaronic priesthood. While the responsibility of tending to the temple of God had been given to the entire tribe of Levi, only those in the line of Aaron could act as priests. Other Levites served as

singers, attendants, guards, or held various other duties. Not all Levites were priests, but all priests were Levites.

Ezra was a scribe - he copied, reproduced, and preserved manuscripts before the advent of the printing press. As he meticulously copied the Law of Moses as written in the Torah, he studied it and learned it well. He became an expert in this area, the foremost authority of his day.

Ezra was favored by God. Throughout his autobiographical narrative he states again and again that "the hand of God" was upon him. Obviously, he felt truly blessed by the LORD. God used Ezra in a mighty way to bring about the spiritual renewal of his people.

Ezra was more than a Biblical scholar... he had a burning desire to teach God's law to the people and to practice it as it was written and intended. He was burdened that the Jews were not following the ordinances and statutes correctly and was committed to showing them their errors, with the goal of leading them back to proper worship and practice.

II. THE KING'S PROVISION (Ezra 7:11-28)

In keeping with His promise to restore His children from the hands of Babylon, God ordained that another sympathetic Persian king would rise to the throne. Just as Cyrus and Darius had done before, now King Artaxerxes would throw his support behind Jewish people. He decreed that Ezra journey to Jerusalem, and provided him with the people, money, freedom, and authority to reinstate the law of Moses.

Having received the king's blessing, Ezra gathered a congregation of people committed to restoring the tepid religious culture of the day. Funded by the king and the royal treasury, he had sufficient financial resources to support this effort. The king granted Ezra and the Jews with the liberty to practice their religion without excessive government interference. He even gave Ezra the authority to enforce God's law upon the people.

III. THE PEOPLE GATHER (Ezra 8:1-20)

As he had done when describing Zerubbabel's return, Ezra now records a second list of families - those who were returning to Jerusalem with him as a second wave of exiles. As he recorded the names, he noticed that no Levites had volunteered to come along on the expedition.

There were some priests among the group, but no Levites to attend to all of the other functions of the temple. Although the priests might have been viewed as most prominent in the temple, Ezra knew he could not succeed without the extensive help of the Levites. The temple needed more than just priests, just as the church needs more than just pastors. Realizing their extreme importance, Ezra sent for several Levites and temple servants to go with them on the trip.

IV. A SAFE RETURN (Ezra 8:21-36)

Having received such a generous provision from the king, Ezra was ashamed to ask him for one more thing - an armed escort. The travelers were carrying a large amount of gold and silver, and were worried that they might be ambushed and robbed along the way. Before embarking on their journey, the people prayed and fasted that God would give them a safe trip.

Ezra selected some priests and Levites and distributed the valuables among them. He ask each of them to be responsible for the transport and protection of their share, until such time as they reached their destination. The trek took about 4 months. God was with them every step of the way and they arrived in Jerusalem safely.

Upon their arrival, three things took place. They gave the offering and utensils that they'd brought with them to the priests who were already presiding over the temple in Jerusalem. Then they offered burnt offerings to God. Finally, they delivered the king's edict to the governors of the region, who then supported them accordingly.

CONCLUSION

Now that Ezra and his followers had arrived in Jerusalem, it was time for him to begin evaluating the spiritual condition of the people living there. Scripture does not indicate why Ezra felt called to do this... perhaps he had received a report that concerned him and suspected that the Jews in Jerusalem needed some help understanding and properly implementing the Law of Moses. Whatever the reason, he had now arrived and his work was about to begin.

Ezra was not the type of person who could be content with half-hearted or faulty service. He simply couldn't allow the people of God to remain ignorant of the Jewish ordinances and customs. He was passionately dedicated to observing God's law properly and fully. He knew that what the people were doing and what they should be doing didn't line up. I'd suspect that his motto was something like this - "If we are going to do this, let's do it right."

As I consider his attitude and apply it to us today, it leads me to ask myself... "Do we take obedience to God's commandments seriously?" We can't "do church" right if we don't abide by His commands. Should we actually expect God to accept and be glorified by our willful disobedience and lackluster worship? Should He be pleased when we give Him less than our best? Should He be honored when we live by "our ways" rather than by "His ways"? After all, what good is a new temple when the people within it are not truly committed to God?

Forsaking Foreign Gods - Ezra 9 & 10

9/28/2014

Do not be bound together [unequally yoked] with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness? Or what harmony has Christ with Belial, or what has a believer in common with an unbeliever? Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, "I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE. "Therefore, COME OUT FROM THEIR MIDST AND BE SEPARATE," says the Lord. "AND DO NOT TOUCH WHAT IS UNCLEAN; And I will welcome you. "And I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to Me," says the Lord Almighty. - 2 Corinthians 6:14-18

This morning we'll continue our series "Rebuilding the Church: Rebuild, Renew, Revive" in Ezra 9 & 10. These are the final two chapters of this short historical book. You will notice that the story being recounted ends abruptly, without any conclusion given. In the original Hebrew Bible, Ezra and Nehemiah were combined into a single book. Thus, the final chapter of Ezra was immediately followed by the first chapter of Nehemiah without any separation. Therefore, writing closing remarks at the end of Ezra 10 would have been unnecessary.

As we discovered last week, Ezra was a highly educated priest and scribe who led the second expedition of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem. He came with a decree from King Artaxerxes to teach and implement the law of Moses. His desire was to reintroduce the proper observance of God's law. Many of the Jewish customs and ordinances had been forgotten or otherwise compromised during the years of captivity.

The identity of the Jewish culture was in extreme danger. Their uniqueness and distinctness as the chosen people of God was quickly fading away. To an ever-increasing extent, the Jews were assimilating into the pagan culture of the "foreigners" who populated Jerusalem. The situation was dire, and Ezra recognized it.

When he became aware of the extent of their spiritual decline, Ezra was greatly grieved and spent several hours in confessional prayer. Then he confronted the people, boldly pointing out their sin and proposing a difficult but necessary solution. Those who were guilty felt strong conviction, and they repented of their unfaithfulness.

It is important to point out before we begin that it is not a sin to marry someone from a foreign nation, or of a different race, or from another culture - for example, Boaz's marriage to Ruth. In the Bible, the term "foreigner" is more concerned about the gods

one serves than any place of origin. The sin of the Jews in these chapters was that, as a result of their mixed marriages, they had followed after other gods.

I. THE CONFESSION (Ezra 9:1-4)

When Ezra arrived from Babylon and introduced himself and those with him, the exiles in Jerusalem must have sensed that change was coming. Knowing that Ezra had come to evaluate their spiritual condition and to enforce the Mosaic Law, they knew he'd soon discover that they were guilty of intermarriage with the pagan women who lived in the region.

Notice that the princes approached Ezra to confess their transgressions, rather than waiting for him to find out. They knew what they were doing was wrong, but until Ezra came no one called them out for it. Knowing that he would, they came forward and divulged their behavior.

The princes, rulers, priests, Levites, and laypeople were all guilty. The sin was not isolated to a particular group. Practically all of the Jews who had been living in Judah for any time at all had married foreign wives.

The sin was not simply marrying foreigners, but rather marrying pagans - those whose religious beliefs were "foreign" and antithetical to Judaism. The abominations of these unbelievers was effecting and polluting the exclusive worship of Jehovah God that the law demands (Deuteronomy 7:1-3).

Notice that twice the Scripture tells us that Ezra was appalled by the rampant unfaithfulness of the people. Our problem today is that we don't find sin appalling - we find it appealing. Perhaps we feel sorry, particularly if get caught, but when is the last time you were actually appalled (shocked, offended, or horrified) by sin?

II. THE PRAYER (Ezra 9:5-15)

Now fully aware of the peoples' unfaithfulness, Ezra falls to his knees in prayer. As a priest, he is praying on behalf of all the exiles. He is ashamed and embarrassed by their behavior, especially as he considers how faithful God has been to them compared to how unfaithful they have been to Him.

Ezra concludes that God is merciful, and that He has not punished the people to the extent they deserve. He asks that the LORD would extend His mercy once again, and not utterly destroy the remnant of Jews who were left.

III. THE PROPOSAL (Ezra 10:1-4)

Ezra's public prayer was so raw and emotional that a crowd gathered. They too began to weep bitterly, perhaps for the first time grieved by their own sinfulness.

Notice that Ezra does not initially suggest that they dissolve their marriages with these foreign women. Rather, it is one of the exiles themselves that makes this proposal. This indicates a type of self-discipline, in which the sinners realize their own error and desire to make the needed corrections.

The plan to "put away all the wives and their children" would be led by Ezra in accordance with the law of God. The people would follow his expert counsel and abide by his instruction as they sought to resolve this problem.

IV. THE ASSEMBLY (Ezra 10:5-15)

Before taking this proposal to the people at large, Ezra makes sure the the leading priests and Levites are on board. He didn't want any surprises when the big assembly came. It is always wise to make sure that the key people are with you before you propose making a change.

Ezra had been granted sweeping authority by the king, so when he called an assembly the people came despite the pouring rain. Having already received the support of the leadership, Ezra now commanded the remaining Jewish remnant to divorce their foreign wives and return their allegiance to God alone. The overwhelming majority of the people agreed that this was to correct course of action.

V. THE ENFORCEMENT (Ezra 10:16-44)

Ezra wanted to make sure that all of the exiles who intermarried were identified and given the same opportunity. Therefore he appointed a committee to investigate and list all of the offenders. Once they finished their task, Ezra could proceed dissolving these marriages.

One by one, the men who guilty of mixed marriage separated from their pagan wives and came forward to make an offering to God. Ezra listed all of these by name, not as an accusation against them but rather as a recognition of their repentance.

CONCLUSION

It is difficult for us to understand why God would command men to divorce their wives and leave their children. After all, the Bible clearly states that God hates divorce. Yet, given the circumstances, this was the best of two very difficult choices. Sometimes our bad decisions leave us with limited options. Either they could stay married and continue to assimilate with the heathen world around them, or they could dissolve their marriages to preserve their Jewish identity and special distinction as the chosen people of God.

This text may make you feel uncomfortable - it makes me feel that way - but we must not miss its significance. If the Jewish remnant had not chosen to put away their foreign wives, the Jewish way of life might have been lost forever. It is through this faithful group that Judaism was preserved and passed down to the generations that followed.

We need to be careful not to misapply this message to our lives today... if your spouse does not believe in God, I am not suggesting that you go out and divorce them this week. But if your marriage is drawing you away from God rather than toward Him, something is very wrong. And if you are unmarried, it is foolish to enter into any serious relationship with someone who is not a Christian. Why take the risk when there are so many single Christians out there?

Here's the bottom line... our first love should be God Almighty. If we are in any type of covenant relationship (whether it be marriage, a business partnership, or whatever) with someone who consistently pulls us away from Him and leads us to love other gods, then we are living a lifestyle of unfaithfulness. Our covenant relationships with other people should strengthen our relationship with God, not weaken it.

Nehemiah's Return - Nehemiah 1 & 2

10/5/2014

And David spoke the words of this song to the Lord in the day that the Lord delivered him from the hand of all his enemies and from the hand of Saul. He said, "The Lord is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer; my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge; my Savior, You save me from violence. "I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised, and I am saved from my enemies." - 2 Samuel 22:1-4

Over the past several weeks we have explored the post-exilic era of the Jews as told in the Bible. The people of God had been overthrown and carried away captive to Babylon for 70 years. But in 539 BC the Persians conquered the ruthless Babylonians and allowed the exiled people to return to their homeland.

We have already studied the first group of exiles who returned with Zerubbabel and rebuilt the temple in Jerusalem. We've also spoken about the second group who journeyed to Jerusalem led by the priest/scribe Ezra who was intent on renewing the worship of the remnant by reinstating the proper observance of the Law of Moses.

Today we will introduce Nehemiah, who would lead a third expedition of exiles to Jerusalem. We will discover that he felt an intense burden to revive the downtrodden city by rebuilding its walls. Nehemiah also enacted several reforms to energize and refocus the people of God on the plight of others around them.

In these 3 men, I believe we can see three key elements in God's plan for rebuilding a dying or struggling church. There must be an emphasis on rebuilding or renovating the facility, on renewing and restoring vibrant and reverent worship, and on reaching and reviving the people of the surrounding community.

Nehemiah came to Jerusalem in 445 BC, some 13 years after Ezra. These two men knew each other personally, shared many common experiences, and served several years together as leaders in Judah - Ezra as the high priest and Nehemiah as the governor. Both men were commissioned by King Artaxerxes, who himself was quite sympathetic to the Jewish cause.

Turn in your Bibles to the book of Nehemiah. We will be reading from chapters 1 & 2 this morning. Our outline has five major points - Nehemiah's Burden, Nehemiah's Prayer, Nehemiah's Request, Nehemiah's Journey, and Nehemiah's Preparation.

I. NEHEMIAH'S BURDEN (Nehemiah 1:1-4,11c)

Nehemiah was the son of Hacaliah, a Jew by birth. He lived and worked in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire, where he served as the cup-bearer for the king. He is the author of much of the book Nehemiah, though it was likely added to and compiled by Ezra.

Some men came from Judah to Susa, where Nehemiah served in the king's court. He asked them about the state of affairs in Judah and they told him that things were not going well for the Jewish remnant living there. They informed Nehemiah that the city's wall was "broken down" and its gates "burned with fire".

Like Ezra had done, when Nehemiah heard of the desperate condition of the city his first response was heartfelt prayer, fasting, and mourning. His intense grief went on "for days". We can learn from his example that our first response to trouble and hardship should be prayer!

II. NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER (Nehemiah 1:5-11b)

Nehemiah began to pray, including himself in his confession, acknowledging that both he and the Jews had sinned against God by breaking His law. He didn't make any attempt to sugarcoat or downplay their actions.

Nehemiah recalled the enduring faithfulness of God, who promised to gather the scattered exiles, bring them back to their homeland, and restore their nation - that is, if they first returned to Him and were obedient to His commands.

Nehemiah could not allow things in Jerusalem to remain as they were. He felt that he must go there and rebuild the walls. Of course, this meant that he was going to have to ask the king for permission. He prayed that the king would be agreeable to his request.

III. NEHEMIAH'S REQUEST (Nehemiah 2:1-8)

For some reason, Nehemiah was fearful that the king might not grant his request. For several months, he had kept his mourning a secret. But his sadness showed on his face and in his actions, and the king picked up on it. There are many people around us who live silently in sadness. We need to be more perceptive of their condition.

Notice that just before he asked permission to return, Nehemiah said a quick prayer. Have you ever done that? He had put off approaching the king for 4 months and was likely very nervous, but when the moment came God gave him the boldness to speak.

The king agreed to let him go, but only for a limited time after which Nehemiah was expected to come back to work.

Nehemiah had initially been hesitant to speak to the king, but now that he had received the king's favor he also asked for the assurance of his safe passage to Judah and for the provision of timbers to rebuild the walls and gates of Jerusalem. The king readily agreed. All of his fears had proven to be unfounded. Isn't that often the case with us? Scripture teaches us not to worry - God has everything under control.

IV. NEHEMIAH'S JOURNEY (Nehemiah 2:9-10)

Nehemiah and those with him were sent with a military escort. When they arrived, they informed Sanballat and Tobiah of the king's commission to rebuild the walls. Both of these officials were upset that Nehemiah had come seeking to help the Jewish exiles. Unlike the first 2 expeditions of Zerubbabel and Ezra, those who came with Nehemiah are not listed.

V. NEHEMIAH'S PREPARATION (Nehemiah 2:11-20)

Three days after his arrival, Nehemiah and a few others went out at night to inspect the walls of Jerusalem in order to get an idea of how badly they were damaged. He did not tell anyone what he was doing or why.

After seeing the damage, Nehemiah knew what needed to be done. So he announced his plan to the people and invited them to join him in rebuilding the city's wall. The people cheerfully accepted his invitation.

Before they even began the work, the officials of the region "mocked" and "despised" them. Nehemiah shook off their ridicule and told them that the wall would be rebuilt regardless of their displeasure. He further stated that this was his homeland, not theirs, and that they had no say in the matter.

CONCLUSION

The wall that surrounded Jerusalem had provided more than simply protection from outside enemies. The security it offered alleviated fear and created a brighter atmosphere within the city. Walled cities were generally more prosperous and vibrant during ancient times than wallless ones. They held a place of distinction and honor.

Symbolically speaking, the wall represented the safeguarding of God. The hedge of protection that the LORD had placed around Jerusalem had been removed - both

literally and symbolically. The enemies of God had free reign and access to the inhabitants, and were causing significant damage.

As Nehemiah looked around, he saw a city in great despair. It was without walls, defenseless and vulnerable to the enemy. He knew something had to be done. That said, what do you and I see when we look at our city today? Isn't it also in great need? The Enemy freely comes and goes as he pleases. Something still needs to be done, and we as believers are the ones to do it. We have to carry the hope of the Gospel to our city - to "rebuild its walls" by sharing the message of Jesus Christ with our neighbors.

Jerusalem's Gates - Nehemiah 3

10/12/2014

Therefore Jesus said again, "Very truly I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who have come before me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep have not listened to them. I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." - John 10:7-10 (NIV)

Last week we introduced a new character in our story of the return of the Jews from Babylon to Jerusalem. His name was Nehemiah, and he led a third expedition of exiles back to the holy city in or around 445 BC. Nehemiah had a desire to rebuild the wall around Jerusalem, which had laid in ruins for almost 140 years since its destruction by the Babylonians.

Upon his arrival, Nehemiah went out at night and inspected the fallen wall carefully, after which he formulated a plan to rebuild it. He then shared his proposal with the exiles and recruited volunteer workers from among them to begin the construction.

In chapter 3 of his book, Nehemiah lists the various assignments given to his workers. It reads almost like a 'program' that you might buy at a high school football game. A sports program lists all of the team's players by name and position. Likewise, Nehemiah lists all of his laborers by name and indicates the position or area of the wall for which they were responsible during the rebuilding.

It might be easy to overlook this chapter and move on with the rest of the story beginning in chapter 4 - after all, on the surface this passage seems pretty dry and boring. The action seemed to be heating up at the end of chapter 2, so why insert a list here? It seems to break the story's momentum. Could there be something valuable for us hidden here?

This chapter provides readers with a detailed description of the wall around Jerusalem, starting at the Sheep Gate (v1) and traveling all the way around the city back to the starting point (v32). Along the way we find that there are 10 gates in the wall - the Sheep Gate, the Fish Gate, the Old Gate, the Valley Gate, the Refuse/Dung Gate, the Fountain Gate, the Water Gate, The Horse Gate, The East Gate, and the Inspection Gate. These gates will be the topic of our study this morning.

I. THE SHEEP GATE (Nehemiah 3:1a)

The Sheep Gate was used to lead sheep into the city to the temple where they would be sacrificed on the altar. Therefore, it speaks to the need for a sacrifice to be made in order to attain forgiveness for sin. Jesus himself is the Sheep, our sacrificial lamb who died on the cross of Calvary that we might be forgiven of our sin and have life everlasting!

II. THE FISH GATE (Nehemiah 3:3a)

The Fish Gate was used by fisherman coming from the Sea of Galilee, the Jordan River, or elsewhere to bring their fish to the market. It speaks to us about evangelism, the need to share the message of Christ with others. Jesus called us to “fish for people”, by spreading the Gospel message far and wide. As we do so, many will be “caught” in His nets and receive the priceless gift of salvation.

III. THE OLD GATE (Nehemiah 3:6)

The Old Gate was one of the original gates of the city. Some scholars state that it stood during the days of Melchizedek in the ancient city of Salem (Genesis 14:18), which later became Jeru-salem. It speaks to our need to cling to the old, unchanging truths of God. We have a tendency to discard the old, preferring instead to replace it with something new. But there is no replacement for the timeless truths of God. Though His unchanging Word will endure for all eternity, it will never grow old.

IV. THE VALLEY GATE (Nehemiah 3:13a)

The Valley Gate opens to the west of the city. It was through this gate that Nehemiah began his inspection of the wall back in chapter 2. The origin of its name is uncertain. It can be assumed that a person entering the city through this gate had just passed through a valley. Life is filled with trouble - seasons of darkness and hardship. Yet as believers, we have the certainty that God is always with us. He will see us through even the most difficult days. He will walk with us, and sometimes may even carry us, through the valleys of life.

V. THE DUNG OR REFUSE GATE (Nehemiah 3:14)

The Dung or Refuse Gate opened out toward the Valley of Hinnom, the place where waste was discarded and burned. People used this gate to “take out the trash”. It reveals our need to dispose of the former sinful ways we once lived in and be truly changed by Christ. The things of this world constantly snare us in their grip, but they are

rubbish. We need to rid ourselves of the sinful clutter of this life, and instead focus upon the things of God.

VI. THE FOUNTAIN GATE (Nehemiah 3:15)

The Fountain Gate was located near the Pool of Siloam on the southeast side of the city. In John chapter 9 Jesus sent a blind man there to wash and receive sight. It beckons us to consider the fountain of the Holy Spirit which lives in us. Once we accept Christ, God takes up residence in our lives through the presence of the Holy Spirit. He serves us our comforter, our helper, and our guide. He becomes our source of sustenance, an ever-flowing fountain of living water.

VII. THE WATER GATE (Nehemiah 3:26)

The Water Gate opened out to the Gihon Spring, which was to the east of the city. This spring served as the main water source for Jerusalem. Spiritually speaking, it leads us to consider the water of God's word. It is God's word that washes our sins away, by revealing to us what Christ has done for us. We need to be in the Bible everyday, allowing it to cleanse us and sanctify us through every circumstance.

VIII. THE HORSE GATE (Nehemiah 3:28)

The Horse Gate was located near the king's stable and overlooked the Kidron Valley. Soldiers would ride out of this gate on their way to war. Not surprisingly, this gate causes us to think of warfare and battle. As Christians, we are engaged in spiritual warfare against the Enemy. We are called to fight the good fight of faith by putting on the armor of God. In the end we will be victorious in Christ. If God is for us, who can be against us?

IX. THE EAST GATE (Nehemiah 3:29b)

The East Gate opens toward the Mount of Olives. The Bible teaches that when Jesus returns, He will enter through this gate. For this reason, nonbelievers have sealed it shut in a futile attempt to prevent the Lord's return. This gate represents the hope we have in Christ and His second coming. When Jesus returns He will set foot upon the Mount of Olives and enter into Jerusalem via the East Gate. We have a living hope in the person of Jesus Christ. He is coming again!

X. THE INSPECTION GATE (Nehemiah 3:31)

The Inspection Gate is so named because it is here where King David would meet his soldiers after they returned from battle to evaluate their condition as they entered the city. It reminds us of judgment, that one day we will all be inspected by the King. Jesus will judge all people, from the greatest to the least. Those who have trusted in Him will be saved and inherit eternal life, and those who have rejected Him will be condemned.

CONCLUSION

Next week we will continue our story as Nehemiah and the people face numerous obstacles while trying to rebuild the city's wall. But for now, let's close by quickly reviewing the 10 gates of Jerusalem and their application to our lives. I call it the "Gospel of the Gates".

THE SHEEP GATE - We need the salvation offered through the Lamb of God.

THE FISH GATE - We need to be fishers of men, telling others about Jesus Christ.

THE OLD GATE - We need to rely on the old, unchanging truths of God's word.

THE VALLEY GATE - We need to walk in certainty, knowing that God is always with us.

THE REFUSE GATE - We need to abandon worldly dung, living instead for God alone.

THE FOUNTAIN GATE - We need to be led by the Spirit, drinking from the fountain of God.

THE WATER GATE - We need to read the Bible daily, continually being washed by its water.

THE HORSE GATE - We need to live victoriously, conquering our enemies by God's power.

THE EAST GATE - We need to have hope, eagerly anticipating Christ's coming again.

THE INSPECTION GATE - We need to act rightly, knowing that all we do will be judged.

In John chapter 10 Jesus told the people that He was the gate, the door through which a person could come into the presence God. He stated that all who came to God through Him would be saved, and that there was no other way of salvation. He further promised that all who entered through the gate - that is to say, accepted Jesus Christ as the Lord and Savior - would have abundant life both now and forever.

Have you entered the gate? In other words, have you given your life to Jesus? If not, would you go through the gate today? Would you ask Jesus to forgive you of your sins, to come into your heart, and to give you eternal life? I pray that you will.

Rebuilding the Wall (Part 1) - Nehemiah 4 & 6:1-14

10/19/2014

“Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward in heaven is great; for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you. - Matthew 5:11-12

We live in a day and age in which Christianity seems to be on the decline, particularly in America. It seems that the persecution against Christians is constant and ever increasing. The morality of our society and its institutions has and continues to suffer great decline. In the face of such an environment, many believers have given up - some having forsaken the faith altogether and others cowering in fear, too intimidated to live as bold and unyielding testimonies of Christ.

Statistics reveal that church membership and activity, along with the number of baptisms, are dropping year after year. Many churches have plateaued or are in decline, and most who do attend are aged. The younger generations appear more and more averse to the gospel. Thousands of churches, including some in our area, have been forced to close their doors in recent years. But for the grace of God, we at Calvary would have had to do the same.

But the LORD was not finished with us yet... and I believe that He wants to use us in a mighty way here in Seymour and beyond. Believing this, we have embarked upon a series through the Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah called “Rebuilding the Church”. We have discovered God’s blueprint for resuscitating the struggling church - rebuild the facility, renew the worship and practice, and revive the city. Using this as our guide, we intend to rebuild our church that we might again become a brilliant lighthouse shining His glory for the lost and hurting around us to see.

In 445 BC Nehemiah led a third expedition of Jewish exiles to Jerusalem. Upon his arrival he inspected the fallen wall of the holy city, and devised a plan to rebuild it. Nehemiah recruited hundreds of volunteers, assigned them various positions of responsibility along the wall, and oversaw one of the largest construction projects recorded in Scripture. As you might expect, he encountered several problems that threatened the rebuilding.

This morning we will begin a 2-part sermon as we examine these difficulties. Our focus today will be upon the external issues that Nehemiah faced - next week we will look at the internal issues he dealt with. There are three major methods in which outside

enemies sought to undermine Nehemiah and the work he was doing - through mocking and ridicule, through direct threats, and through lies, deception, and trickery.

I. MOCKING AND RIDICULE (Nehemiah 4:1-6)

Sanballat and Tobiah attempted to discourage the Jews by publically belittling them and their efforts to rebuild. Sanballat taunted, "Do these poor, insignificant exiles actually believe that they'll be able to rebuild Jerusalem's wall? Haugh... that's funny." Tobiah echoed, "Even if they did, their wall wouldn't be able to withstand anything!"

Have you ever been openly mocked or ridiculed? How does it feel to be made fun of in public? Did the verbal abuse cause you to quit or lead you to withdraw? The Devil is a master of discouragement, constantly mocking the people of God.

Nehemiah turns to God in prayer, asking the LORD to deal with their hateful behavior. Notice that the builders were demoralized, but they did not stop working. Nehemiah chose not to respond directly to these bullies, but rather he stayed focused on the task at hand and let their comments roll off his back.

II. DIRECT THREATS (Nehemiah 4:7-23)

When they realized that their taunting wasn't enough stop the rebuilding of the wall, the enemies of the Jews turned to threats of physical violence. They conspired to ambush the builders when they were least expecting it. Whether this threat was genuine or not, rumors began to spread amongst the people and they became very afraid.

Again, Nehemiah's first response is prayer. If only we consistently responded to our problems in this way! After seeking the LORD, Nehemiah temporarily halted the work in order to set-up a 24-hour security watch. He took the threat very seriously.

Recognizing their apparent fear, Nehemiah encouraged the people whom he had stationed by family to fight against the attack. He urged them not to fear, but to remember the LORD and to defend their loved ones.

The temporary stoppage ended, and the people went back to work. Half built while the other half protected them, and even those working kept weapons on them or nearby in case of an ambush. They would rotate in shifts back and forth, sometimes as builders and then as guards.

Nehemiah recognized that the people were spread out along the wall for a long distance. As such, they were vulnerable. So he devised a plan - "if your section of the

wall is attacked, sound the trumpet and we will all rally to your aid". There was a team mentality and everyone stood ready to defend everyone else.

Nehemiah requested that all of his volunteers, even those who lived elsewhere and "commuted to work" each day, spend every night inside Jerusalem until the reconstruction was complete. He knew that they would be safe there.

Nehemiah led by example. He did not sleep, except perhaps short naps here and there, staying awake day and night. He remained alert and prepared for battle at all times, setting the standard for the onlooking people.

III. LIES, DECEPTION, & TRICKERY (Nehemiah 6:1-14)

Their direct threats against the builders also failed, and the wall was now nearing completion. Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem, and the others devised a scheme seeking to harm Nehemiah by luring him into a trap. Despite their multiple attempts to trick him with their lies, Nehemiah knew they were up to no good. He refused to attend their "meeting". He knew better than to place himself in a risky position.

Exasperated, now Sanballat began to accuse Nehemiah of intentions to rebel. This was an outright lie, which becomes almost laughable when you remember that Nehemiah was the cupbearer for the king - his most trusted servant. Nehemiah dismissed Sanballat's ridiculous comments, saying "You are just making this stuff up." He knew what was going on, and Nehemiah wasn't having any part of it. Notice that again he went to the Lord in prayer.

Sanballat and Tobiah hired Shemaiah to pose as Nehemiah's friend and try to convince him to retreat into the temple. Perhaps they wanted to ambush him there, or more likely they just wanted to scare him, cause him to sin, and smear his reputation. Again Nehemiah evaded the trap, this time recognizing the deception and refusing to go into the temple. Remember, he was not a priest and was therefore not to enter the temple itself. Nehemiah basically said, "I am not a person who runs from my problems. I will not back down. Nor will I sin, even to protect myself."

As we have already seen numerous times in this story, Nehemiah prayed once again. It is obvious that his incredible boldness and impeccable character can be attributed to God. His faith is truly remarkable.

CONCLUSION

Sanballat, Tobiah, and their buddies were nothing but bullies. They sought to intimidate Nehemiah and his builders with mockery, threats, and lies. But, other than words, Scripture doesn't record that they ever did anything physically to prevent the reconstruction of the walls. They were full of hot air - and, like most bullies, were themselves the cowards.

Nehemiah repeatedly responded to them with prayer. He did not ignore their words, but he disregarded what he could and chose to remain focused on doing God's will. He made preparations to combat their more serious threats and was always on the alert. Nehemiah did not allow himself to be tricked, and avoided putting himself or his people in compromising situations.

Like Nehemiah, we need to be on guard against the enemy's attacks. As we strive to do the Lord's work, we must be ready to fend off the Devil and his demons who are constantly trying to thwart us. I pray that God will give us an awareness and a readiness to resist our enemies, so that we might advance His kingdom in our city and beyond.

Rebuilding the Wall (Part 2) - Nehemiah 5 & 6:15-19

10/26/2014

“Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” - Ephesians 4:1-3

Last week we began a 2-part sermon called “Rebuilding the Wall”. We are discussing Nehemiah, one of the most remarkable leaders in the entire Bible. As you might recall, the Jewish remnant in Jerusalem had begun the monumental task of rebuilding the fallen wall that surrounded the city. It had laid in ruins for almost 150 years, having been destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar way back in 586 BC.

Nehemiah and his builders faced numerous obstacles as they sought to rebuild. The Samaritan and pagan population of the region was very much opposed to their efforts. Their leaders - most notably Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem - exerted extreme pressure on the Jews in hopes it would frustrate and prevent them from rebuilding. These adversities against the people of God were coming from their enemies, or from “the world”. They were external influences that came in the form of mockery and ridicule, direct threats, and lies, deception, and trickery.

This morning we will examine other hurdles that stood in the way of the reconstruction. Not only were the Jews feeling the pressure from without, but there were also problems within. These internal issues threatened to derail their work just as much, if not more, than the external issues. All too often the greatest danger to the church and Christians is not what our enemies might do to us, but rather what we do to ourselves and one another.

In my experience, I have discovered that we as Christians can and often do inflict greater wounds on each other than what the outside world does to us. We tend to destroy ourselves with gossip, bitterness, resentment, rivalries, and a host of other negative behaviors within the Body of Christ. Church-goers can be some of the most vicious people in the world... and unfortunately our own internal problems severely hamper Christianity and render us weak and ineffective.

This phenomenon was true in Nehemiah’s day as well. The remnant who strived to rebuild the wall was divided into factions, with some taking advantage of others. This created conflict and separation within the congregation, and led to feelings of

apprehension and distrust. As their leader, Nehemiah knew that he must deal with these intrinsic issues, in order to restore the people's unity and goodwill toward one another.

I. THE PROBLEM (Nehemiah 5:1-5)

There was a famine in the land during the time of the reconstruction. The common people were struggling to put food on the table, and were poor and increasingly desperate for money. There were those who had no land with which to grow crops, others who had to mortgage their land in order to make a living, and still others who had to borrow money in order to pay their taxes and meet their financial obligations.

The people began to cry out. Their complaint was not against the secular money lenders or mortgagees who were benefiting as a result of the people's hardships, but rather against other Jews who were taking advantage of the situation for financial gain. The wealthier class of the Jews were issuing high interest loans to their own kinsmen, effectively forcing them to sell their families into slavery in order to pay the debt.

II. THE SOLUTION (Nehemiah 5:6-13)

Upon hearing what was happening, Nehemiah became angry and confronted the Jewish nobles and rulers. He called a great assembly to discuss the issue and to deal with it once and for all. He laid the charges out against the wealthy Jews, and reminded them of their religious responsibility under the Law of Moses to redeem their kinsman rather than to sell them as slaves to foreigners. To paraphrase, he accused them of "selling out their own brothers in order to make a buck". They were speechless before Nehemiah, and their guilt was exposed.

Nehemiah urged the Jewish lenders to stop charging interest on their loans to fellow Jews. He held himself and those with him out as examples, stating that they were lending without interest. He further insisted that they immediately return all of the property, goods, and even a portion of the money that they had taken from their brothers.

The Jewish creditors agreed to Nehemiah's request, and stopped charging interest on their loans to fellow kinsman. They returned the land that had been mortgaged and the money that had been taken. As a result, there was great joy among the people and they joined together in praise to the LORD.

III. THE EXTRA MILE (Nehemiah 5:14-19)

Nehemiah remained in Jerusalem serving as governor of the province for 12 years before returning to the king. As governor, he was entitled to charge his citizens a “food allowance” that would be used to supply his administration. This had always been the practice of the leaders before him. But, recognizing the great need of the people and their severe difficulties that they were facing, Nehemiah chose not to collect the “food allowance” during his term. Rather, he found alternative ways for acquiring the provisions he needed rather than passing this burden onto the people.

IV. THE RESULT (Nehemiah 6:15-19)

The same walls that had remained destroyed for almost 150 years were completely rebuilt in only 52 days, which is less than 2 months. What an astounding feat! It was crystal clear that this accomplishment was the work of God Almighty, an observation that led the enemies of Israel to become fearful and nervous.

Still the Jewish nobles continued their relationship with Tobiah, one of the men who had strongly resisted Nehemiah’s attempt to rebuild. Many were related to him, because he had married a Jewish woman and had a family by her. One of his sons had married a Jew as well. Thus, the nobles kept trying to talk him up, insisting to Nehemiah that he was a good guy (though Nehemiah knew better). Likewise, they would tell Tobiah everything that Nehemiah would say about him. Obviously, Nehemiah and Tobiah were not on speaking terms.

CONCLUSION

Often times the greatest deterrent against the people of God is the people of God! We constantly shoot ourselves in the foot by injuring one another. The army of God is wrought with casualties caused by friendly fire. Inner turmoil within the church in whatever form it may take stands as our most significant barrier.

Yet, if we can resolve our internal differences and come together as a people, there is no limit to what God can accomplish through us. Unity among the congregation, and mutual respect and appreciation for one another, is critical if we are to function healthily as the Body of Christ.

As we seek to rebuild our church, to renew its worship, and to revive our city we must realize that the greatest threat to our success is discord amongst ourselves. When we practice genuine brotherly love for one another, it is cause for celebration and praise. It is a sign of good things to come...

Do we have unresolved conflicts between people here in our church? Do we have folks trying to control, manipulate, or use one another? Do we make unreasonable demands of one another? Have we run people off because of our own unrighteous behavior? If so, we need to seek and offer forgiveness to and from each other. We will never move forward as a church until these internal problems are resolved and relationships are restored. So make them right... do it today.

The Last Revival - Nehemiah 8

11/2/2014

Restore us, O God of our salvation, and cause Your indignation toward us to cease. Will You be angry with us forever? Will You prolong Your anger to all generations? Will You not Yourself revive us again, that Your people may rejoice in You? Show us Your lovingkindness, O LORD, and grant us Your salvation. - Psalm 85:4-7

Nehemiah and the Jewish remnant overcame incredible obstacles, both from without and within, and rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem in an astounding 52 days! This was a spectacular accomplishment, so great that it caused the enemies of God to become fearful. It was obvious to all that the LORD was indeed with His children, blessing and prospering their efforts. In the wake of their great success, a mighty revival broke out among the people. It would be the last such spiritual awakening recorded in the Old Testament.

Ezra the priest had returned with a second group of exiles approximately 13 years prior to Nehemiah's arrival. He had ministered faithfully in the temple for all of these years, teaching the Jews to observe the Law of Moses correctly and urging them to forsake foreign gods. When Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, it is likely that Ezra supported him and may have even helped to rebuild a portion of the city's wall. Following its completion, Ezra led the great revival that erupted.

The events described in Nehemiah chapters 8-10 took place over the course of about 4 weeks, but it is probable that the spiritual renaissance of the people continued for some time afterward. In this passage, we discover some of the characteristics of a genuine, transformational revival. By identifying these descriptors and applying them specifically to our church, it is my hope that we might experience a mighty move of God also.

If there is one thing that our cities need - that our nation and world needs - it is revival. There hasn't been widespread awakening or sweeping move of God in America for over 100 years. If we intend to reverse the course our nation is on and to avoid the certain judgment of a holy God, we desperately need revival. And as we seek to rebuild our church, we must understand that a rebuilt church is a revived church - a people on fire for God who are busy igniting others with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I. PAY ATTENTION TO THE WORD OF GOD (Nehemiah 8:1-9)

All of the people gathered in the square near the Water Gate where Ezra stood before them on a podium that had been built expressly for the occasion. It was the first day of

the seventh month, which is regarded among the Jews as New Year's Day. Could there be a better day for revival to begin than on the first day of the new year?

Ezra began reading from the Law of Moses at sunrise and continued until midday. Several others stood beside him, translating the words he read from Hebrew into the people's native tongue. Besides simply translating, these men also explained the words as Ezra read so that the people could understand. For several hours the entire congregation listened attentively, stirred by the words of God. At times they rejoiced with hands lifted high, and at other times they worshiped on their knees with faces down.

This was not elaborate and captivating sermon, but rather a direct recitation of God's Word which was interpreted in a manner that the people could comprehend. There were no gimmicks, no flashy presentations, no catchy high-definition videos, no eye-popping theatrics... nothing of the sort. On the contrary, Ezra's approach seemed quite ordinary by today's standards. Yet, it was effective.

If we are going to experience true revival, we must reject the philosophies of men and return ourselves fully to the Word of God. We must revere it above all else, and hold it up as the only source of truth and righteousness. We must get back to the Bible, and allow it to cleanse us and renew us again.

II. POSSESS ATTITUDES OF JOY (Nehemiah 8:9-12)

Throughout the worship service that morning, conviction fell upon the congregation and many wept openly. But when it ended, Ezra and those leading the assembly exhorted the people to rejoice and to celebrate because God had made himself known to them through his word.

Way too many Christians today seem gloomy and downcast. The atmosphere that permeates many modern day churches is, in a word, sad. There is a foreboding sense of guilt and shame, which at times may be appropriate and justified, but it leaves me to wonder - where is the joy? Sure we are imperfect, but we are also the blood-bought children of Almighty God. We have an unfading inheritance awaiting us in heaven and a living hope which rests in Jesus Christ. Now that's something to get excited about!

If our churches and cities are ever to experience real revival again, we as believers must exhibit genuine and abiding joy. The world is somber and discontented enough already. We as Christians need to stand out. We need to display in and through our lives the joy that can only come through knowing Jesus. The world simply can't offer it, the lost are desperately seeking it, and only we can show it to them.

III. PRACTICE ACTS OF OBEDIENCE (Nehemiah 8:13-18)

On the second day of the revival, the priests and Levites found that the Feast of Tabernacles was to be celebrated during the seventh month (Leviticus 23:33-36). Quickly they issued a proclamation throughout the entire area, instructing the Jews to observe the ordinance in accordance with the Mosaic Law. For the first time since the days of Joshua, the people lived in booths for an entire week as a memorial of the exodus and God's deliverance of Israel.

Upon hearing and understanding the words of God, the people put them into practice. They joyfully implemented the LORD's commandments. To say it plainly - they obeyed. Listening attentively to God wasn't enough. Responding joyfully to Him wasn't enough. If there was to be revival, it would also require obedience.

The behaviors of the people changed. The holy words resulted in actions, and the hearers became doers. This is where the rubber meets the road - will we actually apply the Word of God to our lives and live by it? If we won't, then what is the point really? Revival won't happen apart from obedience.

CONCLUSION

Now let's take a few minutes and make this passage personal. This past year we have seen God do amazing things here at Calvary. He has miraculously turned this church around, and has given us all cause to celebrate and rejoice. Next week we have a great opportunity to do just that during our annual Fall Revival.

A true revival will affect the Christian's attention, attitude, and actions. There will be a renewed focus on the unadulterated, unfiltered Word of God. This will be accompanied by a pervasive attitude of joy throughout the congregation. Together, these will result in a careful adherence to the LORD's commands. While there are certainly many other characteristics of a revival, these three provide us with a great description.

If you are within driving distance, we warmly invite you to worship with us during next week's revival. But even if you are not nearby, please be in prayer for our revival and for an even greater revival to break out across our entire nation. Let it begin in you...

A Covenant Results - Nehemiah 9-10

11/16/2014

If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth. - Numbers 30:2

After having completed the rebuilding of city's wall in less than 2 months, widespread revival broke out among the Jews in and around Jerusalem. It was a spontaneous occurrence that resulted as the people began to acknowledge God's mighty hand upon them. The revival was not preplanned by the priests, Levites, or other leaders. Rather, the people themselves called for it.

So beginning on the first day of the seventh month, Ezra the priest led the Jewish remnant in worship. Standing in the city's square, before a large assembly of the congregation, he read from the Law of Moses. As the people listened, they fell under conviction and began to repent. This simple pattern continued for the next several weeks - the Word of God would be read for a few hours in the morning, the gathered people would listen attentively and joyfully, and then they would respond obediently to what they had heard.

For 23 days this went on, finally coming to a pivotal moment on the twenty-fourth day of the month. It was on this day that the people decided to draft a written covenant. During the weeks of revival, the Jews had been confronted with their sinfulness, had repented of it, and had vowed to forsake it. They had verbally committed individually and as a body to make wholesale changes that would lead the fallen nation back toward God. Their spoken pledge was of paramount importance - so much so, that they formalized it in a document which was signed by several of the leaders and heads of families.

A covenant is a solemn agreement between two or more parties to abide by certain specified parameters. There are several examples of covenants instituted by God found in the Bible such as His covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, and David. The word "Testament" means covenant, and so the Bible actually consists of the "Old Covenant" (based upon the Law) and the "New Covenant" (based upon grace). When God establishes a covenant with mankind, He always keeps His end of the agreement.

This covenant was different - it was to be held among the people themselves. It was a mutual pledge by the entire congregation to abide by certain statutes and commands as recorded in the Word of God. It would be more akin to a modern day "church covenant", which is held by the members of specific congregation toward one another.

I. THE PEOPLE ASSEMBLE (Nehemiah 9:14)

I am amazed when I consider the condition of the peoples' hearts as they assembled for worship. First off, the people were fasting - they were abstaining from food in order to wholly devote themselves to prayer. They had redirected their hunger toward God, choosing to focus completely on Him and His provision. It was an act of discipline, of devotion, and of faith. Fasting helps us to gain spiritual clarity to better hear the voice of God.

Secondly, they dressed in sackcloth with dirt upon them. This was the customary attire of someone in mourning or great grief. It indicated a deep state of repentance and humility. They weren't dressed this way because they didn't have nicer clothes... they dressed this way on purpose as a visible reminder of their spiritual depravity and utter wretchedness before a holy God.

Thirdly, they separated themselves from foreigners (those who were contrary to God). In other words, they sanctified themselves from the ways of the world. They set themselves apart from the carnal activities of the pagan culture around them. They did not assimilate with or blend in to the sin-sick society, but instead stood apart in stark contrast as a light shining in the darkness.

Lastly, they were readily confessing their own sins and the past sins of the nation. They were not stubbornly refusing to repent, but rather were responding to God with conviction and brokenness. Their hearts were pliable, and open to discipline and correction. They were quick to confess, to say "I'm sorry", and to ask for forgiveness.

II. A MESSAGE IS PREACHED (Nehemiah 9:5-37)

The Levites preached that God made the heavens and the earth. He instituted a covenant with Abraham, the patriarch of the Jews, and promised to give to his descendants the land of Israel. Centuries later He led His children out of Egyptian captivity, but they refused to enter the Promised Land. When their children finally took the land, God drove out their enemies before them. Yet they too quickly forgot His faithfulness and forsook Him to chase after other gods. Even then God sent judges to deliver them, followed by prophets and kings. Time and time again the people would repent and be delivered only to slide back into their sinful ways.

As the people heard this message, they must have realized that they too had recently been rescued from the bondage of Babylon. Once again God had been faithful to His children, even though they had wandered far away from Him. As they considered their own deliverance, they vowed not to repeat the same mistakes as their fathers. They

would finally break this cycle of rising and falling that had characterized their history from its very beginning.

III. A COVENANT RESULTS (Nehemiah 9:38-10:27)

The people were so serious about the commitments they were making to God and to one another that they decided to write them down. This written agreement was signed by the spiritual and civil leadership of the people. It was sealed as an indication of its official nature and authority.

While the almost month-long revival had certainly produced many results in the lives of the individual Jews and their families, this written covenant would stand as the culmination of it all. It was the unified pledge of the entire Jewish remnant to obediently follow the commands and ordinances of God. It was their solemn, written promise.

IV. THE CONDITIONS OF THE COVENANT (Nehemiah 10:28-39)

The covenant itself began with a general commitment on behalf of the people to follow all of the Law of Moses, and invoked a curse upon themselves should they fail to do so. It went on to name three specific areas of obligation, as these had proven to be most problematic for the Jews.

They pledged not to allow their children to be involved in mixed marriages with nonbelievers. They further promised to honor the law of the Sabbath both by not transacting business on the Sabbath day, and by allowing their land to lay fallow and forgiving debts during the Sabbath year. Lastly, they made various commitments regarding the provision of the temple, the priests, and the Levites.

CONCLUSION

I strongly believe that Christians should live with commitment. We should be people of our word who honor the vows that we make. We should be trustworthy, dependable, and faithful. We should be “promise-keepers” to the greatest extent possible. In other words, we should exhibit a covenantal spirit. To this end, we should desire to live in obedience to God and in harmony with each other to the very best of our abilities.

That said, the Bible provides us with numerous warnings about covenants. It doesn't teach that they are wrong, but it does advise us to approach them with extreme caution. God knows that we tend to break our promises, no matter how hard we try to keep them. When we fail to honor our vows to the LORD or to His people we invite His

cursing upon us. It is better not to make a promise at all than to make one and not follow through with it. God takes covenants very seriously, and so should we.

I have no doubt that these Jews wholeheartedly and sincerely entered into this covenant. I believe that they were passionately committed to it at the time they wrote and signed it. But, can I ask you to speculate - how long do you think they were able to keep it? Have you ever made a promise to God or to the church that you failed to make good on? I have... more times than I'd care to admit.

I am so thankful that my salvation does not rest upon my abilities to keep my promises to God, but rather upon His ability to keep His promise to me. And what exactly is His promise? If any person will sincerely place their faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior, God will forgive them of their sin and give them eternal life. This is the LORD's covenant with us. My hope rests in His promise...

Taking Back the City - Nehemiah 7, 11, & 12

11/23/2014

For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. So, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come. - Hebrews 13:11-14

We are nearing the end of our current sermon series called “Rebuilding the Church Rebuild, Renew, Revive”. Up to this point in the study we have seen the Jews rebuild the temple and renew their worship practices. They have already taken some initial steps toward reviving their city, and this morning we will see them go even farther.

The people of God living in Jerusalem and the surrounding region had been enjoying a season of revival and spiritual renewal, the likes of which had not occurred in centuries. Led by Ezra, the priests, and the Levites, they had recommitted themselves to the Law of Moses and had even written and signed a covenant pledging their obedience to God.

This spiritual awakening would continue for the next decade. During these years, Nehemiah implemented a plan to repopulate and rebuild the city of Jerusalem. Despite the fact that both the temple and city wall had now been rebuilt by the Jews, the city itself remained largely in ruins and sparsely populated. This was about to change... the exiles were determined to revive their city.

Though it was functionally complete, during these years the new wall continued to be fortified and expanded. Towers and houses were built all along it. The gates were embellished and upgraded. Within the city itself entire neighborhoods were resurrected from the rubble. The roads and streets were cleared and cleaned. Economic activity began to increase. Jerusalem was reborn...

Under Nehemiah’s careful watch, the people continued to worship and faithfully serve God. Having stayed for 12 years in Jerusalem, he finally left his Jewish kinsmen and returned to serve King Artaxerxes - the same man who had commissioned his trip to begin with. As you might recall from earlier in his memoirs, Nehemiah had only been granted a limited leave of absence to go and rebuild. Thus, when his work in Judah was completed he was obligated to return to his service in the king’s royal court.

We will see that Nehemiah returns a second time to Jerusalem, but these first dozen or so years that he spent there were extra special. It was during this period that the Jewish

remnant reclaimed their city, taking back much that had been lost. They went on the offensive, no longer content to be victims in their own land. In so doing, they modeled the attitude that we as Christians should have.

I. A CITY IN RUINS (Nehemiah 7:1-4)

Jerusalem had been utterly destroyed by the Babylonians in 586 BC. Nebuchadnezzar's army looted and demolished the entire city, leaving little more than a ruinous heap. Over the course of the next century, its few inhabitants made only meager attempts to rebuild. Even after Zechariah led the first wave of Jewish exiles to reconstruct the temple, the area remained largely unpopulated.

When Nehemiah arrived almost 150 years after its destruction, he described Jerusalem as "large and spacious", yet still having "few people" and houses. In other words, there was plenty of room for more people to move in, but before they could do so the rubble would need to be removed and the homes rebuilt. The city was in shambles, a mere shadow of the glorious place that it had once been.

II. A CITY REBORN (Nehemiah 11:1-2)

The Jewish remnant developed and executed a plan to repopulate Jerusalem and the surrounding area. It required one-tenth of the people who were living outside the city to move into it. This would serve to dramatically increase Jerusalem's population, and also the percentage of Jews therein. Thus, families were chosen by lot and these "volunteers" relocated. The plan also prescribed similar measures for other towns throughout Judah.

Jerusalem is the most prominent city in the Bible, and had long been the capital of Israel. It was, as always will be, God's chosen city. It belonged to the Jews not to the Babylonians, the Persians, the Samaritans, or anyone else. And it had laid in ruins long enough the time had come to take back this holy city. And so, over the course of the next several years, the Jews strategically resettled their ancestral homeland.

III. A CITY REJOICES (Nehemiah 12:27,31,38,42b-43)

For over a decade the rebuilding continued until finally the Israelites decided to hold a dedication ceremony for the fully renovated city wall. Most likely, this event commemorated much more than just the new wall but also the revitalization of the entire area. Although still under Persian control, the identity and presence of the Jewish people had been reestablished and their land resuscitated. It was cause for a great celebration.

Two enormous choirs were organized. They stood atop the city's wall starting at the temple and proceeding in both directions, one to the right and the other two the left. These singers, along with accompanying musicians, effectively surrounded Jerusalem and sang over it. The entire city rejoiced so greatly that the sound of joy was heard from afar. What a magnificent day that must have been!

IV. A CITY'S REGRET (Nehemiah 13:6b-7a)

Not long after the dedication service, Nehemiah returned to Persia. He had completed the work that he'd been called by God and commissioned by Artaxerxes to do. It had taken 12 glorious years. Nehemiah had originally been given a temporary leave of absence, with the understanding that he would return to serve the king when he finished. And so, this is exactly what he did. Unfortunately, his departure would mark the ending of Jerusalem's resurgence.

CONCLUSION

Oh how I wish our story ended here... on such a high note. But sadly, it doesn't. As was the case for the generations before them, in the absence of their spiritual leader the people of God would quickly begin to slip back into their old sinful habits. We will look at their decline starting next week, but for now let's enjoy this brief renaissance.

In order to fully rebuild our church we must also seek to reclaim our city. Our God is the sovereign ruler over His entire creation, including Seymour, Texas. This town and its people belong to Him, whether they acknowledge it or not. As we sang about earlier this morning... "He is the God of this city, the King of these people, and the Lord of this nation".

These are 7 practical strategies that we can employ to reclaim our city for Jesus.

1. Pray continually for the people in our city.
2. Become involved in the activity of our city.
3. Utilize whatever influence you have to move our city toward Christ.
4. Become leaders and/or informed decision-makers in our city.
5. Work to clean up our city (both materially and morally).
6. Support the ministries and needy in our city.
7. Share Jesus with people in our city.

It is time for His children - it is time for you and I - to quit cowering in the shadows and to recapture that which belongs to our King. Our city has been overrun by the enemy, and we have allowed him to seize that which is not his. In the name of our conquering Lord

and supplied by His great strength, the hour has come to launch a counterattack. The Devil and his minions can't have Seymour anymore... we are taking this city back in Jesus name!

But You Say... - Malachi 1-3

11/30/2014

"To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The Amen, the faithful and true Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God, says this: 'I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth. Because you say, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked," - Revelation 3:14-17

Nehemiah first came to Jerusalem in around 445 BC. While there he led the Jews to rebuild the holy city, starting with its fallen walls. He also implemented several religious reforms, and held the people accountable for their actions. Under his headship, the Jewish remnant enjoyed over a decade of revival and renaissance. But in 433 BC, about 12 years after his arrival in Jerusalem, Nehemiah returned to Persia and left his kinsman to continue without him.

It is uncertain how long Nehemiah stayed in Persia before returning to Jerusalem a second time. Historical records indicate that King Artaxerxes ruled until 423 BC, at which time Nehemiah may have been released from his royal service. Following this theory, the logical conclusion is that Nehemiah traveled back to Jerusalem upon his "retirement" from the king's administration. If so, he would have been away from Judah for almost 10 years.

During Nehemiah's absence, the Hebrew children quickly reverted to their previously sinful ways. The miraculous works that God had done through them were all but forgotten. The promises that they'd made to Him and to one another were widely disregarded. The covenant that they'd written and sealed as a congregation was badly broken. In Nehemiah's presence the people had reached a spiritual mountaintop, but in his absence they descended into a pit of disobedience and unfaithfulness.

During this decade of severe moral decline, a prophet known as Malachi rose up and spoke out against the Jewish remnant. He boldly confronted them with their sinfulness and warned them of God's impending judgment. Malachi also foretold the coming of the Messiah, who would be heralded by a forerunner similar to "Elijah". Malachi was the final Old Testament prophet, and following his oracle God remained largely silent for the next 400 years.

Malachi's literary style is marked by a series of declarations followed by sarcastic questions. The text reads like a sassy mouthed kid talking back to his parents! In most

instances, a response is given to silence the disrespect and to reaffirm the original statement. These questions usually begin with the words, "But you say...". There are 7 separate occurrences of this pattern in Malachi's short book.

We will use these "But you say..." questions as the framework for today's message. Each of them uniquely reveals an area of doubt that the people held toward God. These doubts contributed to the spiritual decline. Perhaps by identifying them, we can guard against a similar outcome in our lives.

I. THE PEOPLE QUESTION GOD'S LOVE (Malachi 1:2-5)

The book opens with God declaring His love for the Jews. Not only does He love them presently, but He has always loved them throughout history. After all that the LORD had done for his children, it is hard to believe they'd ask God to justify his love. But they did, asking Him to prove that He truly loved them.

As descendants of Jacob (Israel), the Jews were (and are) God's chosen people - unlike the descendants of Esau who had been rejected by God. The Edomites would never be allowed to rebuild, yet God's children had just finished rebuilding. What more proof of God's love did they need?

II. THE PRIESTS QUESTION GOD'S WORTHINESS (Malachi 1:6-10)

God provided two illustrations - a father and son, and a master and servant. Using these examples, God declared that the priests lacked respect and reverence for Him. The priests were serving defiled food on the altar. In other words, they were knowingly offering tainted and unacceptable sacrifices to God.

God asked if they would offer such second-rate gifts to their governor. Most certainly they wouldn't. He concluded that He rather not receive any sacrifices at all than these profane and useless ones. Their lackluster offerings revealed that they didn't believe God was worthy of their best.

III. THE PEOPLE QUESTION GOD'S FAVOR (Malachi 2:13-14)

The people were grieving because God had rejected their offerings. While God continued to love them, He did not approve of their behavior. The people asked, "Why won't you receive our gifts?" This question wasn't posed as a sincere attempt to discover their sinfulness, but rather as a challenge to God to accept their sinful behavior as it was.

The LORD leveled two related charges upon the people. First, they were continuing to engage in mixed marriages which inevitably led to worshiping foreign gods. Second, they were dealing treacherously with their wives which was leading to widespread divorce.

IV. THE PEOPLE QUESTION GOD'S JUSTICE (Malachi 2:17)

The Lord was tired of the people's talk. It was nothing but whining, complaints, grumbling, gossip, lies, idle chatter, slander, and so on. He had grown weary of hearing it. The people asked, "What did we say?". Surely they knew that their speech was inappropriate and unacceptable, but they remained unrepentant.

The people were promoting that false idea that God accepts and even delights in evil doers. In other words, "sin all you want - God is okay with it." This flawed philosophy contradicts the LORD's perfect justice.

V. THE PEOPLE QUESTION GOD'S FAITHFULNESS (Malachi 3:7)

God urged the Jews to turn back to Him, and promised that if they would do so He would likewise return to them. The context of their reply indicates that the people were not really concerned about returning. Rather, they were insinuating that they couldn't return because they had never left. They were accusing God of leaving them - saying "it was all His fault".

God chose not even to respond to their ridiculous accusation. They had the gall to question His faithfulness, while they themselves had been so unfaithful? God would not even dignify their suggestion - His silence is all the answer that was needed.

VI. THE PEOPLE QUESTION GOD'S PROVISION (Malachi 3:8-10)

God declared that the people were stealing from Him - they were taking that which is God's and keeping it for themselves. The people again challenged God to justify His statement. Obviously they did not understand that all things belong to God, and that we are all mere stewards of His possessions.

The people were not giving their full tithe and other offerings as instructed by the word of God. As such, they were cursed. God challenged them to give the entire tithe and see the bountiful blessing that would come as a result.

VII. THE PEOPLE QUESTION GOD'S ADVANTAGE (Malachi 3:13-15)

The people were making statements that were directly against God. These were not challenges to His character, but rather direct assaults on His divine Person. God called out their arrogance and they responded, "What did we say?". Apparently, they didn't think that their comments were offensive, or more likely they didn't care.

The people looked at their circumstances and reasoned among themselves that it was of no benefit or advantage to serve God. This thinking proved to be the final straw. In the next few verses God acknowledged a small, faithful remnant who did not share this same sentiment, promised that they would be saved, and then became silent.

CONCLUSION

The book of Malachi highlights the childish and insolent behavior of the children of God. Not only had they become disobedient, but they were also rude and disrespectful. Is it any wonder why God became so fed up with their behavior? He did not have to tolerate this mistreatment from His own people. He was their Creator, not the other way around...

The had Jews questioned God's love for them, God's worthiness to receive their best offerings, God's disfavor for their rampant unrighteousness, God's just nature, God's faithfulness to them, God's provision for them, and what advantage it was to serve Him. Their doubtful attitudes had become so vile and distasteful that they were an affront to God.

This detestable behavior wasn't that of the lost and wicked pagans - sadly, it was the behavior of the church. God's own people railed against Him, charging Him with all sorts of indiscretions. And so, completely disgusted by them, God simply stopped speaking. His silence would last for the next 4 centuries, until the birth of John the Baptist.

Let me close with a frightening observation - all too often, the behavior of the modern church is just as objectionable as the Jew's was in the days of Malachi. And should God choose to go silent again, I believe it would be accompanied by the removal of the Holy Spirit and would mark the beginning of the tribulation. We, as God's children, need to revere our Father as we should.

The Old Testament Ends - Nehemiah 13

12/7/2014

For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment handed on to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, "A DOG RETURNS TO ITS OWN VOMIT," and, "A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire." - 2 Peter 2:20-22

Last Sunday we learned that Nehemiah left Jerusalem in 433 BC. He returned to Persia to serve King Artaxerxes, just as he'd originally sworn to do. While he was gone, the Jews reverted to their former ways. During this time a prophet known as Malachi emerged and spoke out against their sinful attitudes and behaviors. He warned them that God would soon send purification and judgment.

Sometime later, Nehemiah asked leave of the king and made his way back to Jerusalem for the second time. It is uncertain how long he'd been gone, but based upon the vast change in the Jews' conduct it must have been quite a while. Historians debate on the exact time of his absence, but I suspect it was almost 10 years. I believe that nearing the end of King Artaxerxes reign, Nehemiah retired from his position and returned to Judah, probably around 424 BC.

What is certain is that when Nehemiah arrived, the atmosphere in the Holy City was completely different than when he'd left. Nehemiah had left a people enjoying revival and spiritual renewal. He came back to find the people practicing all sorts of misconduct, severely backslidden and distant from God. Oh how they had fallen in such a short period of time!

Have you ever left something one way and returned later to discover that it had changed? I like to drink coffee in the mornings. It helps energize me to face the new day. Occasionally I'll get busy with some activity or distraction and set my cup aside. When I come back to finish drinking it later, the coffee has grown cold and disgusting. It has changed for the worse...

Nehemiah must have been appalled by the moral downfall of his people. I am certain he felt angered and disappointed that they had become so disobedient and irreverent toward God while he was gone. Nehemiah quickly implemented several reforms in an effort to correct and discipline the peoples' behavior. These reforms will serve as the

basis of today's message and they make up the final chapter in the chronological narrative of the Old Testament.

I. PROMISES MADE (Review from Nehemiah 10)

After completing the wall, a mighty revival had broken out among the children of Israel. As you may remember, the congregation fell under strong conviction and all pledged to adhere to a written covenant. This would have been about 20 years earlier. They made 3 solemn promises...

They said that they would not engage in mixed marriages. This had been an ongoing problem throughout Jewish history, dating back to the days of Moses. Mixed marriages (with pagans) had been already addressed at least once with these Jews by Ezra before Nehemiah arrived.

They swore not to violate the Sabbath. The people were allowing merchants into the city and temple in order to transact business on the Sabbath day. They themselves were also buying and selling. They committed to stop this practice once and for all.

The vowed not neglect the Temple. The people were not providing for the needs of the Temple, the Levites, and priests as commanded in the Law of Moses. They were also failing to make acceptable and proper sacrifices to God.

II. PROMISES BROKEN - THE NEGLECT OF THE TEMPLE (Nehemiah 13:4-14)

The people had pledged not to neglect the house of God. But when Nehemiah returned from Persia, he found them doing so. The high priest had allowed a non-Jew (who had been their enemy) to repeatedly use a chamber in the temple courts as his own. In addition to this, the people had neglected the tithe and many of the Levites had left.

Back in chapter 4, Tobiah was one of the leaders who had ridiculed and tormented Nehemiah and the people unsuccessfully trying to prevent them from rebuilding the city wall. In chapter 6 we saw the Jewish nobles continuing to converse with him despite his antagonistic behavior. Tobiah was an Ammonite, but had married a Jewish woman. Tobiah's son had also married a Jew, and thus he was related to many of them. Nevertheless, he had no business in the temple and Nehemiah promptly threw him out. The items that had been removed to make room for Tobiah were put back in their rightful place.

Portions of the tithes had not been given. The Levites and singers relied on these tithes as income, to help support their ministry. Because the people withheld them, many of

the Levites and singers were forced to return home in order to make a living. Nehemiah took steps to resolve this issue so that these temple servants could return.

III. PROMISES BROKEN - THE VIOLATION OF THE SABBATH (Nehemiah 13:15-22)

The people had pledged not to violate the Sabbath day. But when Nehemiah returned from Persia, he found them doing so. They were conducting all kinds of business on the Sabbath, in clear violation of both the Law and their covenantal promise.

Nehemiah sternly reprimanded the people for their actions. He then prevented merchants from entering the city on the Sabbath to buy and sell. When they continued to come anyway, he warned them that he'd use force if necessary to keep them out. The merchants took his threat seriously and quit coming on the Sabbath day. Notice that Nehemiah's strategy for eliminating the sin was to remove the source of temptation.

IV. PROMISES BROKEN - THE ALLOWANCE OF MIXED MARRIAGES (Nehemiah 13:23-29)

The people had pledged not to allow mixed marriages with foreigners hostile toward God. But when Nehemiah returned from Persia, he found them doing just that. As such, the Jews were already beginning to lose the cultural and spiritual identity that they had just reestablished. Their allegiance to God alone was again being compromised.

CONCLUSION

The people had sworn not to practice mixed marriage, but they were. Strike one. The people had sworn not to violate the Sabbath, but they were. Strike two. The people had sworn not to neglect the temple, but they were. Strike three.

Isn't it uncanny? The same three things that the Jewish remnant had vowed never to do again were the exact same things that Nehemiah found them doing. Astonishing! Their willpower to stop sinning, which at one time was very strong and sincere, had proven to be woefully insufficient. They just couldn't help themselves from sinning... because they were sinners.

Although they were weak, and doomed to repeat their same mistakes again and again, still Nehemiah was right to reprimand them and call them to live righteously. Their inability to avoid sin was not an excuse to willingly practice it. As God's children, they had the responsibility of living as obediently as possible and repenting when they fell short.

It is easy to see that we are much like the Jews in Nehemiah's day. We too make promises to God, then break those promises. We too rise to lofty heights, only to fall back into familiar valleys. We too vow to make changes, but they seldom last. And still, despite our shortcomings, God desires our obedience. His grace is not a free pass for us to sin and those who truly saved will never be continually indifferent about their sin.

This remains the great paradox of our faith. God calls us to do something that he knows we can't do. He demands perfection of us, which is a standard no person can reach. Why would He do this? Is it because he delights in watching us fail, or is it to teach us that without Him we can never succeed?

Our God is a big god. What he wants us to accomplish is much greater than anything we could ever do on our own. We need Him. We need him for salvation from our sins. We need Him for our daily living. We need Him so that we can successfully do all that He calls us to do. Beloved, we can't do this on our own - we need God!

What Have We Learned? - A Conclusion

12/14/2014

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in the midst of it we hung our harps. For there our captors demanded of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." How can we sing the LORD'S song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy. Remember, O LORD, against the sons of Edom the day of Jerusalem, who said, "Raze it, raze it to its very foundation." O daughter of Babylon, you devastated one, how blessed will be the one who repays you with the recompense with which you have repaid us. How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock. - Psalm 137

This morning we will conclude the sermon series "Rebuilding the Church: Rebuild, Renew, Revive". For the past 5 months we have explored the postexilic period of Jewish history, from approximately 539 BC until 420 BC. This century-long span began with the fall of the Babylonian empire and the subsequent release of the Jewish exiles from captivity and ended with the prophecy of Malachi and the reforms of Nehemiah following his second arrival in Jerusalem.

Although we began our study in Daniel, we've focused primarily on the historical books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Along the way we have examined the prophecies of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. In addition to these, we've included related passages from Isaiah, Jeremiah, 2nd Chronicles, and the Psalms. Though we did not review it, we did mention that the story of Esther also took place during this period of history. It is my sincere hope that this series has helped us all to better understand how these books are connected and fitted together in the narrative of the Old Testament.

That said, if all we've done over these past several weeks is increased our intellectual knowledge of the Bible then we have failed miserably. The paramount purpose of this series has always been to discover and then apply God's plan for rebuilding the church. Following decades of Babylonian dominance, the Jewish religion was all but destroyed. Yet by God's great power and in accordance with His divine providence, a remnant of His children were able to resuscitate a faith that which was almost dead. Their story presents us with a Biblical model for church rebirth.

In today's closing message, we are going to look back over this entire series and identify seven specific principles for rebuilding the church. They will serve as our blueprint for growth and restoration moving forward. It is my hope that you will write

them down, become familiar with each of them, and help hold us accountable to them as we strive to rebuild our church in the years to come. If we do it God's way, I believe He will grant us great success!

I. OUR CHURCH BUILDING IS IMPORTANT (Ezra 1-6)

Beginning with the tabernacle in the days of Moses, God has always had a "house" among His people. Centuries later King Solomon built the first temple, which was then rebuilt and renovated on occasion throughout the Bible. By the time of Jesus' birth, there were synagogues located in most of the cities. After His death and resurrection, Christianity began to spread and churches began to be formed. While many met in homes, over time church buildings were constructed to provide a place for believers to gather and worship. Centuries later, there are numerous church buildings found in communities all over the world.

Zerubbabel knew the significance of having a location to serve as God's house. This is why he was so burdened that the Temple had been destroyed. He understood that while though God is not contained in a particular place, His presence is often more perceptible in the church building. Take a moment to consider all of the work that God has done within the walls of your church - the souls that He has saved and the lives that He has changed. Can you imagine how your life might be different if there was no place for you to go to church?

II. WE MUST NOT NEGLECT CARING FOR THE CHURCH BUILDING (Haggai & Zechariah)

The church building is God's special dwelling place among us, but often we become more concerned with our own house than with God's house. It was this sentiment that inspired King David to lay the groundwork for building the first Temple. When the exiles postponed rebuilding the Temple, it was Haggai and Zechariah who reminded them not to neglect God's house for the sake of their own.

The condition of our church building is a reflection upon what we believe about God. Would we gladly live in a house that is dirty and in disrepair? Would we not do our best to make it clean and beautiful both within and without? How much more then should we care for the house of God! He is worthy of all praise and worship, and our church facility should be indicative of the great love and reverence we have for Him.

III. OUR WORSHIP & PRACTICE MUST BE AUTHENTIC (Ezra 7-10)

While the building itself is important, what goes on inside it is much more so. What good is an immaculate structure if the atmosphere inside is cold and indifferent? This was the issue that Ezra dealt with upon his return to Jerusalem. He found that the nice, new Temple was being abused and defiled by a spiritually ignorant and often disobedient people.

When we come into the church, it should be with sincerity and brokenness of heart. The worship that goes on here should be deep and meaningful. We should not come to be entertained, but rather to have a transformational encounter with God. The activities that occur in this church are sacred. It is not enough to practice some sort of superficial religiosity - our worship and practice must be genuine.

IV. OUR ATTITUDE MAKES ALL THE DIFFERENCE (Malachi)

It has been said that our "attitudes will determine our altitude". Without a proper attitude, we will never rise to great heights. Though this saying is not found word for word in the Bible, it contains substantial spiritual merit, and Scripture has much to say about our attitudes as believers. In the final years of the Old Testament, the prophet Malachi contended with the people about their attitudes.

More often than not it is our attitudes that dictate our actions. If we embrace bitter and hateful attitudes then we will never be able to display Christ to this lost world through our words and deeds as we should. Our attitudes should be characterized with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

V. OUR PROMISES SHOULD BE KEPT (Nehemiah 8-10,13)

Following the rebuilding of Jerusalem's fallen wall, the people made a covenant with God. They vowed to be obedient to His statutes and commands. For a while they kept their word, but it wouldn't last. I believe that it was their broken promises that contributed to God's silence for the 400 years between the Old and New Testaments.

When we make promises, God takes them seriously and expects us to do our best to keep them. He knows that we will fail at times, and offers forgiveness when we stumble, but that does not negate the significance of our vow. If we cannot be trusted to keep our word, how can we be trusted with the precious blessings of God?

VI. OUR CHURCH IS THE PROTECTOR OF OUR CITY (Nehemiah 1-6)

Darkness cannot dominate in places where the light is shining. But when the light fades and flickers out, the darkness spreads. The church is to be a light to the world, to shelter it and protect it from the blackness that lingers all around. The church is to be a wall of defense around the city, and Christians are called to be the watchmen on the wall who dutifully warn their fellow citizens of any coming danger.

But when the church has lost its influence, the walls come down. It is then that the forces of darkness invade our cities and prevail over our people. Therefore, it is fair to say that the judgments of God upon this world are a direct result of the failure of the church to shield the people.

VII. OUR CHURCH SHOULD IMPACT OUR CITY (Nehemiah 7,11-12)

Nehemiah understood that the people of God had the responsibility of reviving their city. Not only did he lead the Jews to rebuild the walls, but he further led them to restore the entire community. Through their efforts, Jerusalem was reborn. The spiritual life that was evident within the people of God was poured out upon the entire city.

As God's church, we are called to take the life-saving message and ministry of Jesus beyond the walls of our church building. We should be affecting our community and leading it ever closer to Christ. We should be metaphorically standing on the walls, singing and praying over our city every single day. We have been called to make a difference in this lost and dying world.

CONCLUSION

We can summarize these 7 principles using only three words - "rebuild, renew, and revive". Zerubbabel was called to rebuild the temple, Ezra to renew the worship taking place inside of it, and Nehemiah to revive the city outside of it. I believe that this is God's prescription for rebuilding the dying church...

In the months and years to come, we must commit the necessary time and resources to renovating and modernizing our aging church building. We must not quit, no matter how long it takes us. It took the Jewish remnant 20 years to finish rebuilding their Temple, and it may take us that long as well. Still, we will remain committed to the task.

Secondly, we must put away all pretense and semblance of worship and get back to the real thing. We must guard against a tendency to perform rather than to praise. We must resist the temptation to become entertainment focused, in hopes of drawing a crowd.

God isn't impressed by numbers, but by sincerity of heart. It is my challenge as pastor to maintain and foster this type of worship.

Lastly, we must constantly reach out and minister to the people of Seymour. Their well-being is our responsibility, and until we accept that we will never take this obligation seriously. As your pastor, it is up to me to encourage our congregation to be outwardly focused. A dying church is one that is fixated upon itself, but a living church is consistently looking out for others.

By applying these principles, we can rebuild our church. I hope that this series has been meaningful to you and that the LORD has spoken directly to your heart through these messages. He certainly has to mine. May His richest blessings be upon you.

"Rebuilding the Church" Timeline of Events

(all dates are approximate)

c. 700 BC The prophet Isaiah predicts that Cyrus will allow the Jews to rebuild

THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

612 BC Nabopolassar conquers Nineveh ending the Kingdom of Assyria and beginning the rule of Babylon as world power

605 BC Nebuchadnezzar takes first deportation of Jewish exiles to Babylon

597 BC Nebuchadnezzar takes second deportation of Jewish exiles to Babylon

586 BC Jerusalem is destroyed; Temple is levelled; third deportation to Babylon

THE POST EXILIC PERIOD

539 BC Babylon falls to the Medo-Persian Empire; The final Babylonian king is Belshazzar; Daniel interprets the writing on the wall (Daniel 5)

538 BC King Cyrus allows a remnant to return to Jerusalem under Sheshbazzar and/or Zerubbabel

536 BC The altar is rebuilt and Temple foundation is laid; sometime shortly thereafter opposition leads to the suspension of reconstruction

520 BC In response in Haggai's and Zechariah's prophecies and encouragement, the Temple reconstruction resumes, still led by Zerubbabel, during the reign of King Darius

516 BC The Temple reconstruction is completed

c. 480 BC Esther becomes Queen of Persia (wife of King Ahasuerus) and rescues the Jews from a sinister plot to annihilate them

458 BC Ezra returns to Jerusalem during the reign of King Artaxerxes and reinstates the proper observance of the Law

445 BC Nehemiah arrives and rebuilds Jerusalem's walls, as commissioned by King Artaxerxes; a decade of revival begins

433 BC The reconstruction of Jerusalem is celebrated; Nehemiah returns to Persia

c. 430 BC Malachi rebukes people for returning to their sinful ways; he prophesies of the coming Messiah to be preceded by "Elijah"

424 BC Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem a second time and confronts the peoples' sinfulness

c. 420 BC THE OLD TESTAMENT ENDS