

THIS WEEK'S MESSAGE

SEPTEMBER 4TH - 5TH, 2021 // BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

THE WALL'S COMPLETION AND A CENSUS (NEHEMIAH 7:1-73)

So the wall has been rebuilt (vs. 1) - now what?

- The wall around Jerusalem was not an end in itself, but rather a necessary defense for the people of God living in the city.
- The question now was, "who's going to live in Jerusalem, the city of God"? AND "how will they be protected as they live within the city?"
- Nehemiah had been faithful in building the wall and restoring the city, now his calling was to be vigilant in keeping God's people pure and protected.

ENLISTING LEADERSHIP (VS. 1-3)

One of the first things Nehemiah did was to establish two key leaders - his brothers Hanani & Hananiah (vs.2).

- He also gave directions about when the gates were to be opened and he appointed guards to keep watch for any potential danger (vs. 3).
- We all have a need to be under Godly spiritual leadership.

Within the Church, God has appointed elders/pastors/overseers to, "shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:28).

- Heb. 13:17 says to, "Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account."
- God has appointed loving leadership within the Church for our spiritual protection. Do we trust the leaders God has put over us?

ESTABLISHING CITIZENSHIP (VS. 4-69)

The residents of God's city, Jerusalem, had to be Jews with verifiable Hebrew heritage.

- Verses 6-69 are the genealogical records of those Jews who had been the first to return to Jerusalem (Ezra 2).
- For Jerusalem to be pure, the identity of the true people of God had to be validated.

If the spiritual Jerusalem, the Church, is to be pure and the place God's presence dwells - the identity of the true people of God has to be validated also.

- "Examine yourself to see whether you are in the faith" (2 Cor. 13:5)- so much time can be wasted trying to get spiritually dead people to care about spiritual things!

ENCOURAGING WORSHIP (VS. 70-74)

Leadership and citizenship can establish a people, but it takes worship of the one true God to make them into the people of God.

- Verses 70-74 describe the gifts the people gave to the work of God in Jerusalem as acts of worship.
- Our love for God as His people is primarily expressed in our obedience (Jn. 14:15), sacrifice (Rom. 12:1), and generosity (1 Jn. 3:17-18).

READING THE LAW (NEHEMIAH 8:1-12)

Jerusalem's wall had been built, its citizenship & leadership established, and its citizens engaged in committed worship to the Lord.

- The people of God then looked to the Word of God to form them into who they are to be.
- Ezra, the scribe, who had been commissioned by King Artaxerxes to structure the Jewish community around God's law, brought the Law of Moses to a gathering of people (vs. 1).

One the first day of the 7th month (Jewish New Year), Ezra stood on a wooden platform near the Water Gate facing all of the men, women, and those who could understand in the city of Jerusalem, and read from the Book of the Law from early morning until midday (vs. 2-4).

- 13 men, who might have been leaders representing the tribes of Israel, stood beside him as he read (vs. 4).

Out of reverence for God's Word, the people stood while the law was read (vs. 5).

- In response to the Law being read, Ezra "blessed the Lord", and the people worshipped by lifting up their hands and bowing with their faces to the ground (vs. 6).
- Then we see 13 Levites who probably intermingled within this large assembly to help the people understand the Law (vs. 7).

These Levites, "read from the book...clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the meaning" (vs. 8).

- Some people treat the Bible like a book of magic, or a Talisman - that it just changes people and circumstances if it's recited.
- But here we see that God's Word must be understood before it can enter the heart and release its life-changing power.

When the people began to understand the meaning of God's Word, they began to weep and mourn! (vs. 9)

- Why? God's Word is sharper than a sword and it discerns the true thoughts and intents of the heart (Heb. 4:12).
- When we truly understand the truth of God's Word, we understand how broken we are and how much we need God.

But God's Word also give us hope!

- As the people began to weep and mourn because of their sin, Ezra told them to "not be grieved" and not to, "mourn or weep" (vs. 9-11).
- Rather, they were to celebrate, feast, and rejoice in the joy of the Lord, because the day was to be kept holy by rejoicing in God's hope (vs. 12).
- The right response of weeping and repentance over sin makes way for celebration.

The Bible invites us to contemplate the reality that we are far more broken, sinful, and corrupted on our own apart from God than we ever dared to imagine.

- But it also tells us that God is far more loving and far more willing to forgive, restore, and give us a future than we ever dared to hope.
- Until we're willing to believe what it says about us apart from God, we'll never desire what God is offering us through Christ.

THE FEAST OF BOOTHS (NEHEMIAH 8:13-18)

On the 2nd day of the month, a smaller group assembled: the heads of fathers' houses (vs. 13).

- In this more intimate and intensive study of the Law led by Ezra, their attention was drawn to a portion of the law they had not been aware of - the proper observance of the Feast of Booths (vs. 14-16).
- The Feast of Booths is also called Sukkot.

Sukkot, or the Feast of Tabernacles, is a harvest festival that commemorates the years the Jews spent in the desert on their way to the Promised Land and celebrates the way in which God protected them.

- Even today, observing Jewish families will build open air structures (that have a roof to where you can still see the sky) in which they live during the holiday.

The Feast of Booths is meant to remind the Jewish people that there is only one real source of security and protection, and that is God.

- When they dwell in a portable structure with an open roof exposed to the heavens, they're supposed to direct their attention towards heaven as their only source of security.
- It's reminder of the vulnerability and insecurity of life, and how homes, city walls, locks and doors don't really protect us - God does.

Apparently, the practice of properly observing this holiday had been lost from the time of Joshua up until this point (vs. 17).

- But as the people returned to God's Word as their guide for how to live, they discovered this incredible celebration that they observed faithfully for 7 days (vs. 16-18).
- And as they did, there was "great rejoicing" as they remembered the faithfulness of God.

Sukkot was to be a Shabbat holiday where most work is forbidden.

- For 7 days, the Jewish people were to cease from work and spend time with their families in feasting and worshipping before the Lord.
- We have very few holidays like this in our culture, and we struggle to rest AT ALL for even a day or a weekend!
- Rest is an invitation to trust God.

Sukkot was a time of feasting and rejoicing.

- The world's joy is temporary and artificial, at best. But the, "joy of the Lord is our strength" (vs. 10).
- It's right for us to be people who know how to properly rejoice and celebrate God's provision.
- Feasting is simply the proper enjoyment of God's gifts as an act of worship.
- God has given us things to enjoy as gifts because He's good - do we know how to stop and enjoy them as an act of worship?

Sukkot was a time of remembering, reflecting, practicing gratitude, and worshipping.

- Think about the significance of Sukkot for the Jews in Jerusalem that year.
- God has given them success in allowing them to rebuild Jerusalem's walls, He'd protected them from their enemies, and He'd allowed them to come together again as a people.
- What has God done for you this past year?

GETTING ISRAEL OUT OF BABYLON...AND BABYLON OUT OF ISRAEL.

For over 70 years, Israel had been enslaved as exiles in a land that was not their own, exposed to all the pagan practices, culture, and false gods of the Babylonians and later the Medo-Persians.

- Even though God allowed Israel to get out of Babylon, it would take a while for Babylon to get out of Israel.
- All of the past customs, habits, and practices of being exiles and slaves had to be replaced by a new way of living as the people of God.

As Christians who have left behind our "Babylon", the challenge we face is learning how to be who we are in Christ.

- So often we return to our sin and we forget that we're not slaves anymore because we have the freedom through Christ to be free from it.
- So often we return to the mindsets, ideologies, and philosophies of Babylon instead of remembering who we are as God's people.

LIVING IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH (CH.7)

The Babylon of our day says that community can only be found among people who are identical to ourselves - and if they mess up, they must be punished, ridiculed, or canceled.

- God's community of faith is made up of broken people led by fallible leaders who know Jesus and are committed to practicing His love, grace, and mercy.
- Are you engaged? Do you trust the leaders God has put over you? Have you received God's grace in Christ?

LIVING IN THE LIGHT OF GOD'S WORD (8:1-12)

The Babylon of our day says that truth is ultimately decided by YOU - if you don't like what the Bible says, you can simply decide it's not true.

- When we read God's Word at face value, understand it, and apply it our lives- it changes us.
- It calls us to admit our brokenness and invites us to call upon the Lord to receive His redemption.

LIVING LIVE OF GRATITUDE, CELEBRATION, AND ENJOYMENT OF GOD'S FAITHFULNESS (8:13-18)

The Babylon of our day focuses our attention on everything that's wrong, all we don't have, and who needs to be blamed for every mess.

- Meanwhile, there's a lot we do have and a lot that God's done that we so often ignore.
- Do you practice gratitude and worship for God's faithfulness? Or simply look to assign blame on Him and everyone else for all that's wrong?