

Build the Wall

St. Mark Lutheran
Three services

Pastor Ken Welsh
Sept. 30, 2018

Then I (Nehemiah) said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruin with its gates burned. Come, let us build the walls of Jerusalem, that we no longer may suffer derision." And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work. (Part of Nehemiah 2:11-18)

Grace and peace to you this morning from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Today we dig into Old Testament history and discover more marvelous activities of our God as he works in history to direct things to turn out in the way that he wishes. You may recall that God had permitted his people to be conquered and displaced because of their disobedience. Most of them were taken away to the city of Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar during the years of what is called the Babylonian captivity.

Then, even more astonishing, God worked through at least four Persians kings over a period of years to bring his people back to Jerusalem and Judah, to have the temple rebuilt, to have the walls of Jerusalem rebuilt, and even have most of their possessions returned to them. This took a number of years, and there was resistance that needed to be overcome along the way, but God got the job done mostly through the reign and favor of four Persian kings: Cyrus, Darius, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes.

With that little background and review, you can better understand what was taking place in our Old Testament reading this morning. The Book of Nehemiah shows God's grace and power particularly through its chief character, Nehemiah, who was still in exile and serving King Artaxerxes as a cup bearer, a position of high honor.

Nehemiah heard about Jerusalem's problems when he was still in exile in Babylon. The walls and gates were broken down and burned. The city was open to attack without the protection of walls. Chapter one tells us that Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed. Nehemiah confessed the sins that he and other Israelites had committed. Then he prayed that God would remember the Jewish remnant in Jerusalem and grant Nehemiah success in getting help for them.

Nehemiah waited for the time when he would be called before the King to serve him again. He used that opportunity to bring his concerns before the King. Artaxerxes noticed that Nehemiah was sad and asked him about it. Nehemiah was a little afraid, but he had prayed about this and he said, "May the King live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and the gates have been destroyed by fire?"

There is much to indicate that what the text says in Nehemiah 2 is true. Nehemiah is quoted there as saying, "the hand of my God has been upon me for good..." For Nehemiah secured permission from the king to go back to his home. He asked for an official letter for safe travel and materials to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, and he received that and even more.

Nehemiah traveled to Jerusalem and for three days scouted out the city. At night he surveyed the walls and made an analysis of the situation. Then he addressed the problem with the Jews, priests, and nobles and officials who would need to do the work. He said, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruin with its gates burned. Come, let us build the walls of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision."

The response of the people to Nehemiah's leadership was dynamic. They said, "Let us rise up and build." They did that, and great things were accomplished. But don't miss a very important point here. Through spirit anointed leadership, obstacles to doing the work of God and protecting his people were overcome. They had had these problems for quite some time and not much was being done about them. Spirit-filled leadership can be used by God to overcome apathy and indifference.

Why are we talking about this today? We are talking about it because from the life of Nehemiah, we can learn principles on how to build lives and how to provide protection for God's people. In particular, I would like to look at his life and try to apply some of these principles to men and to fathers in our society today.

We have a problem ministering to a lot of men in our society today, and that problem is affecting family life and is also Christ's church. Statistics show that men make up forty percent or less of the typical Christian church. Added to this, the family is under attack in today's society in the United States. The walls are down. Lives are being destroyed. There is an epidemic of drug use in our society. Some university teachers are boldly saying that we don't really need the nuclear, that is to say the traditional family at all. Some teachers go even farther. They want to remove sexual identification and the usage of the terms "him" or "her" from the public arena! How far will this madness go?

Any attack on the traditional family unit is an attack on something that was created by God. God not only created the family unit, he set up a structure for it. There is a husband, a wife, and children. They live together as one unit. Sure, others can be adopted into it. But at the head of that unit is the husband. God has given to him the role of leadership in the family. That's what it says in Ephesians 5:23: "For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior."

Now if the husband does not believe in God, or if he believes there is a God but is not very serious about his relationship with him, then there is likely to be a problem. His wife and his children are going to be affected by his unbelief or his being hard headed about going to church. For the words of Ephesians 6 specifically tell us this morning, "Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

Studies, both overseas and here in the United States, strongly support this statement: "Basically, if fathers go to church, most of their children will when they grow up. If fathers don't, most of the children won't." A father has tremendous influence on the spiritual development of the children in a family. In one study, there is a fifty percent difference (for the good) when the father assumes his role as the spiritual leader of the household! There is a spiritual principle at work here.

And fathers can learn a lot about how to be the spiritual head of the home by looking at the life of Nehemiah. Nehemiah cared about his people. He knew they had enemies and that they were vulnerable. He wept, he mourned, he fasted, and he prayed. Then he went out to do something about it. He led the third return to Jerusalem after the exile, and with his leadership they completed the walls of Jerusalem in fifty-two days. It was an awesome accomplishment, and it had a great effect on the surrounding nations, because they knew this could not have been accomplished without the help of God. (Neh. 6:15-16)

There is a wall that needs to be built by caring fathers today. It is not a wall of stone and mortar, but it is a wall none the less. It is a spiritual wall. Fathers need to build sacred walls to protect their wives and children and bring unity to their families.

How is this done? Here are some suggestions inspired by the example of Nehemiah:

1) It is not enough to just believe there is a God. John 17:3 clearly tells Christians what our relationship with God is to be like. Jesus said, "And this is eternal life, that they KNOW you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." You get to KNOW the Lord by learning his word. Fathers shouldn't just drop the child or the wife off at church. They need to be in church themselves. They would do well to study Luther's Small Catechism with their family. That's why it was written.

2) Raising a Christian family in today's society may be just about as difficult as was raising a wall around the Temple Mount and the City of David. It was a huge challenge. There were those who opposed Nehemiah. How did Nehemiah tackle the problems? He started off with confession of his own sins and prayer. Men need to cultivate a good relationship with God to be effective spiritual leaders.

3) Last but not least, Nehemiah guarded the holy Sabbath. The neighbors around the city had moved in and considerably changed what the believers were supposed to be doing on the Sabbath. Nehemiah insisted on the people obeying the decrees and laws of the Lord. Likewise, a Christian father should set reasonable guidelines to see that the worship of God and study of God's Word is not eliminated from his family's life by the demands and practices of our society. Feel free to consult with the pastors if you need some help.

I truly believe that the greatest thing a Father can do is to model and lead his family in the way of the Lord. Let us all remember the words of Psalm 127:1: "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain." Amen.

