

Route Sixty-Six

Part Sixteen

Nehemiah

(John 5:39; Nehemiah 4:17; 8:10)

With Study Questions

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Part Sixteen

Nehemiah-The Sword and the Trowel

(John 5:39; Nehemiah 4:17; 8:10)

You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of Me (John 5:39).

Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon (Nehemiah 4:17).

Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength” (Nehemiah 8:10).

Introduction

At the end of World War II, there were seven border walls or fences in the world. By the time the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, there were 15. Today there are at least 77 walls or fences around the world – many erected after, and in response to, 9/11. Historically, borders walls were necessary due to threat of invasion. They also protected trade routes and helped monitor immigration and refugees. Prior to 9/11 most nations felt comfortable with mere sign or a lift-gate. Things have changed.

This is not a speech for or against our current discussion about a wall on the southern border of the United States. It is rather an explanation of what a wall signifies, nationally, culturally, historically, psychologically and biblically. There is a great deal of talk about how people build walls in their hearts, hindering relationships. Pink Floyd’s famous song, *The Wall*, spoke of how the educational system was yet another brick in the wall, ostensibly contributing to the generation gap, which was a popular cultural concept at the time. Walls can be thought of negatively and positively.

Even the “**holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God**” is said to have “**great and high**” walls and gates (Revelation 21:10, 11). This

paints a picture of exclusion of those who die apart from redemption found in Christ, who names aren't written in the Lamb's Book of Life (Revelation 21:8; 27).

I open with this because Nehemiah teaches of the building of the walls around the city of Jerusalem. In Ezra we saw the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel and the restoring of worship under Ezra. In Nehemiah we learn of the reconstruction of the walls of the city of God's covenant people.

This should not be thought of as a mere history lesson in the fortification of an ancient city. The temple taught us of Christ and our worship of Him. But what does this wall represent? In an intimate and personal sense, it should represent our own souls. We, with resolute hearts, should be protective of what we allow into our minds and morals.

Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals (1 Corinthians 15:33).

Whoever walks with the wise becomes wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm (Proverbs 13:20).

In a corporate sense these walls represent a communal mission. The antagonists of the gospel serve a ruthless master. There is a guise of wholesomeness under which lies cruel and sharp fangs. And the targets are young and old, weak and strong. There is a portion of Nehemiah where he is preparing them for battle and seeking to instill courage. He informs us what is at stake:

Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses (Nehemiah 4:14).

How Nehemiah teaches of today's Christian faith and Christian battle will not be a difficult connection to make. But first, a brief survey.

Survey of Nehemiah

Nehemiah is the cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes (445 B.C.). We should not think of a cupbearer as a menial office. It was quite a lofty

and important post at the time. The books open with Nehemiah being informed of the condition of the wall of Jerusalem, which is broken down and the gates destroyed by fire. Nehemiah weeps and prays at this news. The sorrow is not governed by nostalgia, as in the closing of a favorite restaurant or the tearing down of a childhood home. His people are left vulnerable and the faith under attack. Think of beloved missionaries exposed to evil and oppressing atheistic despots.

The king notices that Nehemiah is downcast. This was quite dangerous for Nehemiah. He was **“very much afraid”** (Nehemiah 2:2-see also Esther 4:2). It was apparently a capital offense to appear sad in the presence of royalty. Nonetheless, the king is gracious toward Nehemiah (which speaks fondly of their preexisting relationship) and grants that Nehemiah might rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

That the king granted this request did not mean Nehemiah would not be met with resistance. It has been said, “Whenever the saints say, ‘Let us arise and build,’ the enemy says, ‘Let us arise and oppose.’” It was in his perhaps greatest work¹ that J. Gresham Machen opined:

In the sphere of religion, as in other spheres, the things about which men are agreed are apt to be the things that are least worth holding; the really important things are the things about which men will fight.

Nehemiah was in for a fight. And though we should not be looking for a fight (Nehemiah would have been quite content to have been left alone to reconstruct the walls), we should not back down either. In a quote, generally attributed to Edmund Burke, we are told that...

...evils triumphs when good men do nothing.

Or in the Apostle Paul’s words:

Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them (Ephesians 5:11).

Was not our Savior’s entire ministry marked by confrontation?

¹ Christianity and Liberalism.

Nehemiah is one of the more wise and faithful Christians we read of in Scripture. The resistance he encountered was never met with fear or lethargy. He would pray and continue working. He was a supreme example of the words of Cromwell, "Pray and keep your powder dry." Trust in an Almighty God is never an excuse for lethargy. The picture we are given in chapter four inspired the title for Charles Spurgeon's periodical, *The Sword and Trowel, A Record of Combat With Sin and Labour for the Lord*. It reads:

Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon (Nehemiah 4:17).

In Spurgeon's own words:

We would ply the Trowel with untiring hand for the building up of Jerusalem's dilapidated walls, and wield the Sword with vigour and valour against the enemies of the Truth.

Again, this can be applied individually and corporately. Individually, the temple of my own soul should ever be committed to the Lordship of Christ. And as that temple is being built, I must be ready to "**make a defense**" for the hope that is in me (1 Peter 3:14, 15). Corporately we must recognize that we are "**living stones...being built up as a spiritual house**" (1 Peter 2:5).

In these pursuits, we are to keep our sword and trowel at work. Ministerially, this is not a call to take up physical arms and build a literal structure (although there may be a context for those types of things). With the trowel we build up the body of Christ, the city of God, essentially the Great Commission. With the sword we battle falsehoods

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. ⁴For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. ⁵We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against

the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Corinthians 10:3-5).

Nehemiah's detractors came from without and within. In this challenging enterprise there was oppression of the poor and needy from within the covenant. There was **"a great outcry of the people against their Jewish brothers" (Nehemiah 5:1)**. The church must ever work toward an uncompromising unity. This is no easy task.

The wall is finally finished (Nehemiah 6:15) and the Old Covenant church will engage in the study of Scripture. We learn a great deal about worship in chapter eight. The unity of corporate worship as the people gathered as **"one man" (Nehemiah 8:1)**; Ezra stood upon a platform to deliver the lesson (Nehemiah 8:4); We read of a corporate **"Amen"** as the people and the people stood at the opening of the book (Nehemiah 8:5). They bowed their heads, lifted their hands and they wept as the instructors helped the people **"understand the Law" (Nehemiah 8:8)**.

The Law of God can be so undressing. It was in response to the weeping at the reading of the Law that Nehemiah, Ezra and the Levites encouraged the people that **"this day is holy to the Lord"** and they need not **"mourn or weep" (Nehemiah 8:9)**. They were to rather celebrate with good food and sweet wine (helping the poor to do the same) ...

...for the joy of the Lord is your strength (Nehemiah 8:10b).

What is the meaning of this wonderful verse? There are certain people in our lives, who, when it is well with them, we are invigorated. As I sat at my computer, I noticed my wife had left an unexpected note of affection. It was quite transformative in terms of my day.

Yet how much more for the Christian to know we have found favor with our Father in heaven! That our lives are marked with this glorious pardon and benediction- **"your faith has saved you...peace be with you" (Luke 7:50; John 20:21)**.

It is a lifelong pursuit to ensure that the joy of the Lord be our treasure-that it is center-stage with all rivals briskly shuffled into the wings. This is seldom an easy task. The trowel is ever building and the sword of the word and truth ever sharpened and active.

Christ in Nehemiah

Where is Christ in Nehemiah? Jesus is the temple and the city belongs to Him. The extent to which all cities will be blessed by the ever-expanding city of God is a matter of eschatology (end-times) which we cannot take up here. But the source of everlasting light, life, peace and strength is found in Christ alone. It was in reference to the gathering recorded in the eighth chapter of Nehemiah that we read the uplifting and strengthening words-words that can be applied when the body of Christ gathers:

Because the day is holy to the Lord, they are to desire it with holy joy. It is a joy founded on the feeling of communion with the Lord, on the consciousness that we have in the Lord a God long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth. This joy is to be to us (them), a strong citadel or refuge, because the Almighty is our (their) God.²

May our hearts be so strengthened as we participate in that Communion together this morning!

² Keil, C. F., & Delitzsch, F. (1996). [*Commentary on the Old Testament*](#) (Vol. 4, p. 146). Peabody, MA: Hendrickson.

Questions for Study

1. In what sense can walls be good or bad, necessary or unnecessary? What do walls teach us (pages 2, 3)?
2. What does the wall of Jerusalem represent in the life of a Christian? What does it mean individually and corporately (page 3)?
3. Why was Nehemiah sorrowful? Why was he afraid to show sorrow before the king (page 4)?
4. What can Christians expect when they seek to advance the Kingdom of God? Give examples of this in your own life (page 4).
5. What are some examples of how a sword is used in a spiritual sense? How is a trowel used in a spiritual sense (pages 5, 6)?
6. How did the people respond to the reading of the Law? How were they comforted (page 6)?