

Rise Up and Build!

Nehemiah 2:1-20

Four months had passed since Nehemiah had found out about the troubles in Jerusalem, as we studied last week in,

Neh.1:1. "It came to pass in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the citadel, 2 that Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. 3 And they said to me, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire."

So remember those events recorded in Nehemiah 1. Nehemiah received the devastating news, and he prayed. He prayed to the God of heaven. He prayed with genuine repentance for the sins of the people, and then claimed God's own promise to gather his people together to the place of his choosing.

Neh.1:11 "O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."

Then four more long months. We can presume that Nehemiah prayed often during those months, that he was often given to fasting. We can presume that the situation and circumstances of his people back in Israel was a devastating discouragement. It was four months before he had the opportunity to bring the situation to the attention of the King. And when he came, the Scripture tells us that he was sad before the King, his face was sad, or literally had fallen. He says, "This is nothing but sadness of the heart."

In a word, it's grief. He was well-nigh overcome with grief. And that was an appropriate reaction. To put it into general terms,

I. THE DECLINE OF GOD'S KINGDOM SHOULD CAUSE US TO GRIEVE.

The people of Israel were the people of God. Their nation was the nation of God, the nation of God's kingdom. And things were not right.

Before I go on this afternoon, let me emphasize that this is real history. These events really took place, in time and space history. But they are more than mere history, for the history of the nation of Israel throughout the OT stands as a model and an illustration of the history people throughout this whole age, even today. And so I will make a direct connection between the circumstances Nehemiah observed regarding Israel and the circumstances that might be seen at any point in the history of God's people. In other words, the kingdom of God in the OT which was made evident in the OT in the nation of Israel is a symbol and prefiguring of the kingdom of God which exists today in the age of the NT. That kingdom today is no longer a kingdom connected with one particular earthly nation, but it is no less a kingdom. And so I will speak of the events of Nehemiah in words that apply to us as well. And so as we study Nehemiah's grief, it is proper to note that the decline of God's kingdom should also cause us to grieve.

And we know of that grief in many ways today, for in many ways, particularly in our country, it can be said that there is a decline in God's kingdom. Throughout the years of the past couple generations, you can note the decline of the influence of the kingdom of God upon the public and private affairs of this nation. We are a nation which, in many ways, has successfully

sought to isolate God from the normal affairs of daily life. We are a nation which has worked hard to remove the influence of Jesus Christ from public institutions such as our schools. We have worked hard to remove all overt references to God in our judicial system, and in our legislatures. The recognition of God's laws and biblical principles of justice and morality are at what might be called an all-time low within our own country. In many ways, the church is seen as obsolete and irrelevant.

And there are many obvious consequences of such a spiritual decline. Violence and crime. Immorality, especially sexual immorality including the acceptance as normal of things that just a generation ago were considered a perversion. The breakdown of the family and the high incidence of divorce, the redefinition of marriage itself. And the increasing number of young people who have no religious bearing whatsoever, so foundation at all in the things of the Lord. And so, in many ways, we should feel this same grief as does Nehemiah, for we are living in a generation in which the kingdom of God is, in many ways, in decline. And,

A. The sorrow of grief is the appropriate reaction to spiritual disorder.

Grief is the deep pain of sorrow, the sorrow resulting from an experience of loss. The most obvious form of grief is that sorrow coming from the death of a dear loved one. But grief is much more comprehensive than merely a reaction to death. It is the sorrow of loss. And in this context, it is the sorrow caused by the loss of spiritual vitality. It is the sorrow of spiritual disorder.

Most families are touched in one way or another by such sorrow, for in many, if not most, Christian families, there are those affected by great spiritual disorder. And if such disorder characterizes your husband or your wife, or your son or your daughter, or your brother or your sister, or even a close friend,

then you know exactly what I mean when I speak of the sorrow of grief. Many of you bear great sorrow as you grieve at the spiritual disorder of someone very close to you.

And then there is the spiritual disorder within the church. To be sure, there is in this city, along with every other city in this country, a great spiritual disorder in the churches. There is a horrible shortage of biblical preaching, a horrible absence of godly exhortations and faithful teaching, and a horrible lack of commitment to genuine godliness and righteousness. The sorrow of grief is the appropriate reaction to spiritual disorder.

When Nehemiah the cupbearer, the official wine-taster, went into the presence of the King, that sorrow was abundantly evident.

v.2-3

We should likewise grieve for the state of the kingdom of God today in this country. But then also respond the way that Nehemiah did.

v.4

Remember, 1:4 "So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven." Nehemiah's grief did not lead him to despair, nor to the hopeless acceptance of the circumstances. No, his sorrow stirred him to pray. As it should for us.

B. The sorrow of grief should provoke us to pray.

One thing about the decline of God's kingdom today that causes me the much sorrow is the reaction of God's people, the reaction of giving up. The reaction so popularized by that form of teaching called dispensationalism, that caused God's people to

withdraw from our proper place in the world. On a spiritual level, that is precisely what many Christians did, and what many churches did. They withdrew from their proper position of being salt and light, they withdrew their light which was to shine brightly upon a hill, and they retreated in hopeless discouragement into their own bomb shelters, separated from the world and from all contact with the world. And the popular teachings of things like a secret rapture of the church prior to the period of tribulation just fueled that retreat. Let's just hang on until the rapture, and then Jesus will rescue us and we will escape from this evil age.

Well, if your attitude is that pessimistic, then you have a very low view of the kingdom of God in this age, and you will have little in common with Nehemiah, who saw the spiritual disorder of his age as an opportunity to pray. Nehemiah didn't retreat. Instead, he engaged himself in battle, and he began that battle by praying to the God of heaven.

And so must we! Pray to the God of heaven that his kingdom would come and that his will would be done on earth as it is in heaven! Pray with particular reference to the ministry of this church, in the spirit of the prayers Paul prays,

Col. 4:2 "Continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving. 3 At the same time, pray also for us, that God may open to us a door for the word, to declare the mystery of Christ..."

So pray that God would open to us a door for the word! Pray that this church would prosper in our desire to faithfully teach the truth of God as it is revealed in the inspired words of Holy Scripture. Pray that there would be new believers among us. Pray for those ones so dear to your hearts whose lives are in great spiritual disorder. Pray for godly leaders among us, and for a godly seed in the generations that follow us. The sorrow of grief

should provoke us to pray, and so, dear people, when you see evidence of the kingdom of God in decline, devote yourselves to prayer.

And then something else. Devote yourself to the hard work of building the kingdom. The kingdom is not something that awaits a future age. The building of the kingdom is not something that is relegated to a future millennium. It is the work of the church now, as we pray, "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done. On earth as it is in heaven."

And to pray that prayer, you must be willing to work.

C. The sorrow of grief should motivate us to work!

Notice Nehemiah's example, in the connection between verses 4 and 5.

v.4 "So I prayed to the God of heaven. 5 And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it."

Nehemiah prayed for God to rebuild the nation of his people. And he asked the king for permission to be one of the builders! He prayed, and he worked. We see the effect of that work in, v.17-18

"Let us rise up and build!" What a marvelous commitment! Prayer is never an excuse to avoid your responsibility to work. Rather, those things are inseparably joined together. Pray hard, and work hard, for the kingdom. Pray, "thy kingdom come," and work in the church to help bring about the fulfillment of that prayer. Work in the church with all that the Lord has given you, with the encouragement of the Apostle Paul's words in,

1 Cor. 15:58 "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast,

immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

Let’s look then a bit more closely at those two things, first our prayer and then our work. Using Nehemiah’s example. What about our prayer? How should we pray? In a word, boldly.

II. THE DECLINE OF GOD’S KINGDOM CALLS FOR BOLD PETITIONS.

Notice Nehemiah’s boldness, when asked specifically about the difficulties of the work he was about to undertake.

v.6-7

Nehemiah doesn’t just ask the king for permission. He seeks the King’s protection. It was a bold request. And an appropriate one.

A. We should seek safety and protection.

Nehemiah needed that protection of the King, for he would face great opposition as a Jew returning to that land.

v.9-10

It was a direct confrontation, a direct attack upon the mission God had given Nehemiah.

v.19

Likewise, there will be opposition, great opposition to any who give themselves to the work of the kingdom today, and that opposition will come in many forms, but always originating from the same source, Satan himself. Therefore, if you are to pray, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” then you must also pray, “Deliver us from the evil one and lead us not into temptation.”

That prayer ends, of course, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever.”

When you pray, you should seek safety and protection from God. And so we read things like this,

Eph.6:10 “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. 12 For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm.”

Pray for that strength. But Nehemiah’s prayers aren’t limited to praying for protection. He prays for the necessary provisions, as well.

v.8

Now that’s a bold request. And it was granted. In that spirit,

B. We also should seek an adequate supply of resources.

So, in our church, we often pray for leaders. More leaders. We pray for more leaders, more officers, and now especially, more deacons.

We also pray for more workers. More people with more gifts of service, for a more effective ministry. And we can appropriately pray for more money, that God would stir up the hearts of all his people to give, as we have seen that blessing even in the difficulties of last year. We ought to pray with the great promises of Malachi 3 at the forefront of our minds,

Mal. 3:10 “Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, That there

may be food in My house, And try Me now in this,” Says the LORD of hosts, “If I will not open for you the windows of heaven And pour out for you such blessing That there will not be room enough to receive it.”

Pray for an adequate supply of resources! Pray that God would rebuke the devourer, that is, that our resources would not be dissipated or lost, but prosper. Pray that God would make this church known as a place where God is at work, that the people around us might call us blessed. Pray that God would use this place, this church, you and me, in the work of the kingdom of Jesus Christ. And pray that God would give us the necessary provisions, and people, to be able to succeed. Because, if you understand the example of Nehemiah in the context of all that the Bible teaches about the coming of the kingdom, you will agree that,

III. THE DECLINE OF GOD’S KINGDOM WILL BE REVERSED.

Now, here is where your particular view of eschatology, or the last things, has many specific and practical applications. The question which you need to consider is what will be the state of God’s kingdom at the end of this present age. Many people have a very pessimistic view, and see the kingdom primarily as a future entity, something that will flourish and prosper not in this present age, but in an earthly millennium to come. And such pre-millennial views do tend to produce very pessimistic expectations of the growth of God’s kingdom today, particularly the especially false views of that system of doctrine called dispensationalism, which specifically teaches that the kingdom does not and will not come in this age. It belongs entirely to the future.

But that doesn’t seem to fit with the overall scheme of biblical revelation. Consider,

1 Cor. 15:20 “But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 21 For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. 22 For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. 23 But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ’s at His coming. 24 Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. 25 For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. 26 The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.”

The resurrection of Jesus Christ is directly connected to our resurrection, and the resurrection of our bodies at the end of this age will signify the end, when Jesus will “deliver the kingdom to God the father.” And in a reference to this present age, Jesus “must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet.”

Jesus is reigning now, and that work is going on now! Jesus’ enemies are being put under his feet now. That is the work of the church to which we have been called. And so we read in,

2 Cor. 10:4 “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, 5 casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, 6 and being ready to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled.”

And we shall win that war, because this is true about Jesus Christ,

Phil. 2:9 “Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, 10 that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, 11 and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of

God the Father.”

So it is that the decline of God’s kingdom will be reversed. And getting back to the point I made earlier from 1 Cor. 15, we should be encouraged in our kingdom work.

1 Cor. 15:58 “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.”

And what is the basis of that encouragement? We know from Nehemiah’s example that,

A. The good hand of God is upon his people.

We’ve seen that before. And again,

v.8b “And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me.”

v.17-18

What a tender way of expressing gratitude to God. Nehemiah realized that the king granted his request, “I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good.”

May we say the same thing as a church. May we look upon the work of God in building the church, and make that same declaration. When we see new people, when we see God at work in people, when we see repentance and a change of life brought about by the power of the gospel, be quick to declare, “I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good.”

And may we look to the future with that sense of God’s sovereign goodness. And I will be very clear about my intentions, as was Nehemiah, wanting to motivate you to hard work for the sake of the kingdom by reminding you of God’s good hand upon

us. I will exhort you to work hard for Christ’s Kingdom by proclaiming to you the goodness of God’s hand upon us.

Take note of Nehemiah’s testimony.

v.17-18

I am convinced that the decline of God’s kingdom will be reversed, and I am convinced that such a reversal will come through the faithful preaching of the word. And it will come to those who pray. It will come to those who believe. Those who trust. Those who wait upon the Lord like Nehemiah, for,

B. God will be with his people who wait upon him.

Look at what Nehemiah did.

v.11-12

Why the secrecy? I think the best answer to that question is simply to note that Nehemiah would wait upon the Lord for the success of his mission. He didn’t go to draw attention to himself. He didn’t go to marshal human forces to accomplish a work in his own strength. He went to accomplish that which the Lord had laid upon his heart, to rebuild the wall of the great city of Jerusalem, and he would do it in the Lord’s strength alone.

So he spent three days waiting upon the Lord as he surveyed the situation in person. And he didn’t seek the help of man, for God would have to stir their hearts, as he did.

v.13-16

Before he went forward with his plans, before he publicly called upon others to follow, he waited upon the Lord. And only when he had adequately sought the Lord did he seek to enlist the help of other men.

How dangerous is the sin of impulsiveness, and the sin of presumption. Of doing things, of taking action, before an adequate commitment to wait upon the Lord. How often we make terrible mistakes, awful errors of judgment, simply because of our own impulsive impatience. And I don't want to stir up that impatience, even as I proclaim to you the power of God to build his kingdom under the rule of King Jesus. Still, it is our place to wait upon the Lord, and only then to experience the truth that,

C. God will prosper the work of his servants.

God will prosper the work of his servants. He will prosper your work, and the work of our church. He will. We have Nehemiah's example.

v.20

And we have God's own promise,

Mat. 16:18 "...on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

We also have Jesus' own words,

Mat. 28:18 "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

The church of Jesus Christ shall prevail in this age, and when Jesus returns, he will hand the kingdom over to the father that God might be all in all. And therefore, that exhortation I read earlier is so perfectly appropriate for us,

1 Cor. 15:58 "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."

God will prosper the work of his servants, so give yourselves to the work of his kingdom. The good hand of our God is upon us, and God will be with us as we wait upon him. And he will prosper the work of our hands. For his glory. For his kingdom. Therefore, people of God, dear friends in Christ, therefore, heed this exhortation, "Let us rise up and build."