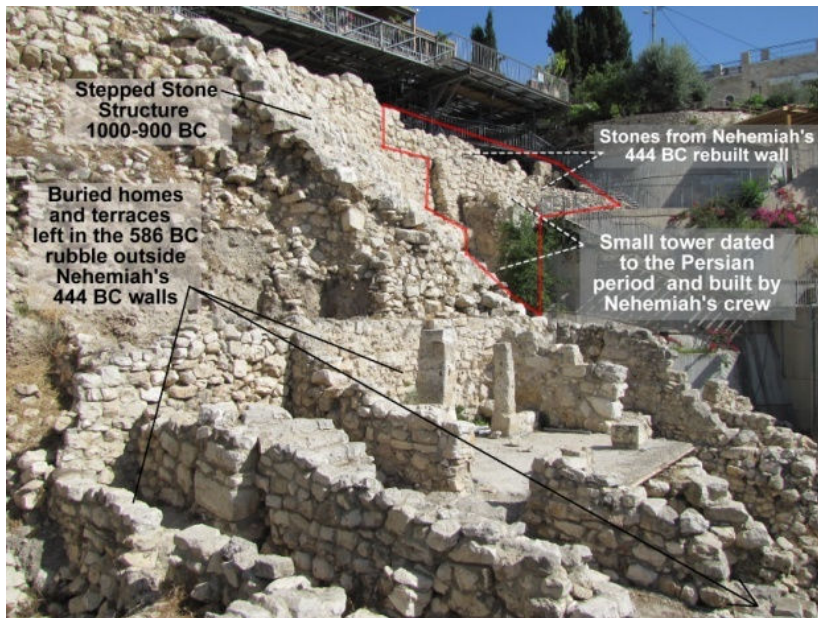


We continue in our sermon series on the book of Nehemiah, *Re-Visioning: Pursuing God's Purpose Through Fresh Eyes*.

Nehemiah was a cup bearer to the Persian King; he was an exiled Jew who had risen to high office and led the 3rd wave of Jews returning to Jerusalem from the Babylon, to rebuild the walls and the people's faith in 445.¹

On November 8, 2007, Hebrew University archaeologist Dr. Eilat Mazar announced the discovery of a 30-meter section the walls of Jerusalem built by Nehemiah.²



¹ Cyrus II sent the first wave of exile returning to Judah/Jerusalem led by Zerubbabel who became the first governor in 538 and laid the foundation of the temple for its reconstruction. Ezra, a direct descendant of Aaron and a scribe well versed in the Law, led the second wave back to Jerusalem in 458.

²<https://www.generationword.com/jerusalem101/27-nehemiah-wall.html>.

We have drawn valuable principles and practical lessons from Nehemiah as we continue in our discerning process of God's purpose for Cornerstone with fresh eyes.

In Neh. 6:15 we read that the walls are built despite continuous threats; in 7:1ff. that the city and people are protected, the necessary organizational/governing structure is set, and the returnees have moved into their dwellings.

"In October when the Israelites had settled in their towns, ¹*all the people assembled with a unified purpose* at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out *the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had given for Israel to obey*. ²So on October 8 Ezra the priest brought the Book of the Law before the assembly ... ³He faced the square just inside the Water Gate from early morning until noon and *read aloud to everyone ... All the people listened closely to the Book of the Law*.⁵ Ezra stood on the platform in full view of all the people. When they saw him open the book, they all rose to their feet." (Neh. 8:1-5 NLT)

It's curious that there's no mention of any grand celebration for the completion of the walls.

It's been pointed out that Neh. 8 is the heart of the book of Nehemiah and that Torah [i.e., the Book of the Law given by God] sits at the heart of both chapter and book.³

It is not by accident that the reading of the Law of Moses happened at Feast of Trumpet in October, celebrating the beginning of a new year.⁴

It is a new beginning to listen to God's word for perspective and wisdom in this new era - 6 hrs. of being open to truth-cleansing.⁵

Although the people are now well-ordered, well-defended, and well-governed, "Nehemiah senses the spiritual vacuum as did the people ... It is not enough to have a well-constructed superstructure if there is little or no life on the inside."⁶

Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem is not just about completing a construction project but restoring broken people.

Just as being physically at a sacred or special place or time doesn't define who and whose we are, completing a worthy assignment doesn't necessarily bring lasting value and life transformation.⁷

³David J. Shepherd and Christopher J. H. Wright, *Ezra and Nehemiah* (The Two Horizons Old Testament Commentary (THOTC)), p. 85.

⁴ Cf. Lev. 23:24-25; Num. 29:1-6.

⁵ "If we hear the Word of God, and it doesn't offend us, then we have not heard it." (Martin Luther)

⁶ Cf. Chuck Swindoll, cited in *Nehemiah 8:1-8 - Living By the Scriptures* by Dr. Steve Viars, https://www.faithlafayette.org/resources/lessons/nehemiah_818_living_by_the_scriptures

"*Then Ezra praised the Lord, the great God, and all the people chanted, "Amen! Amen!" as they lifted their hands. Then they bowed down and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground.* The Levites ...⁸ read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly **explained** the meaning of what was being read, helping the people **understand** each passage ... ⁹**the people had all been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law ..."** (Neh. 8:6-9 NLT)

The people's "weeping" is actually Nehemiah's prayer in 1:5ff. but now "painted on a larger canvas"⁸:

"O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands ... ⁷ We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses. ⁸ "Please remember what you told your servant Moses: 'If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. ⁹ But **if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, **I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honoured."**** (Neh. 1:7-10 NLT)

⁷Both Ezra and Nehemiah begin with building projects that, once completed, allow the focus to shift to the rebuilding of God's people: Ezra 1-6—Rebuilt Temple Ezra 7-10—Rebuilt People Nehemiah 1-6—Rebuilt Wall Nehemiah 7-13—Rebuilt People (James Hamilton, *Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah*, p. 151.).

⁸ Leslie Allen and T. Laniak, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 125.

It's crucial to recover God's perspective and understand why the exile happened and now moving forward how God's people should live as people who are called to be a beacon of light in a darkened world, a kingdom of priests who reflect God's character, a people belonging to God to bless to all nations so they will come to worship the Lord in the Holy City.⁹

**Every new transition in life requires
fresh alignment with God's Word.**

When people get a glimpse of God's holy splendour and the Word is explained and understood, whatever personal hidden motives or self-serving reasons [such as political influence, selfish gains and material security, etc.] for participation in this venture are now revealed.¹⁰

**God's word unmask any personal agenda for power,
prestige, position, and prosperity.**

The people's "mourning" is a result of their personal encounter with the awesome and living God and the words of the Law; their engagement with God's word is not just

⁹ Ps. 86:9-10; Is. 42:6-7; 46:9; Jer. 3:17; Zech. 8:22.

¹⁰ "For the word of God is alive and powerful ... sharper than the sharpest two-edged sword, cutting between soul and spirit, between joint and marrow. It exposes our innermost thoughts and desires. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God. Everything is naked and exposed before his eyes, and he is the one to whom we are accountable." (Heb. 4:12-13 NLT)

ritual reading, rote learning, or information in-take but clear comprehension and application.

While God's word brings to light personal and corporate deficiencies and defiance, God's truth also directs His people to receive His mercy and forgiveness, instead of wallowing in their guilt and shame.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were interpreting for the people said to them, "***Don't mourn or weep*** on such a day as this! For today is ***a sacred day*** before the Lord your God" ... ¹⁰ "***Go and celebrate*** with a feast of rich foods and sweet drinks, and ***share*** gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared ... ***Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!***" ... ¹² So the people went away ***...to celebrate with great joy*** because they had heard God's words and understood them."

"The joy of the Lord is your strength [fortress/defence]" points to God's own rejoicing over the people's repentance and returning to Him¹¹ as well as His good pleasure in saving, restoring, and protecting His people.¹²

¹¹ Cf. Anthea Portier-Young, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/third-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-nehemiah-81-3-5-6-8-10-2>.

¹² Cf. James Hamilton, *Exalting Jesus in Ezra-Nehemiah*, p. 158.

There is tremendous relief in knowing that His love to me [us] is based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me [us].

J.I. Packer

The reading of Torah underscores the message that just as God had brought His people out of Egypt in the past, He has now brought them back from exile; he wants the best for his people.

**Don't settle with what God saved us from
but pursue what God saved us for.**

¹³On October 9 ***the family leaders*** of all the people, together with the priests and Levites, met with Ezra the scribe to ***go over the Law in greater detail***.¹⁴ As they ***studied*** the Law, they discovered that the Lord had commanded through Moses that the Israelites should live in shelters during the festival to be held that month ...¹⁷ So everyone who had returned from captivity lived in these shelters during the festival, and ***they were all filled with great joy!***" (Neh. 8:13-17 NLT)

The transformative power of God's Word generates in the leaders a hunger to seek after directions for their lives.

Now in Neh. 8 the returnees learn about the joyous celebration of the Festival of Shelters¹³ when God's people

built and dwelled in temporary shelters as a reminder of God's deliverance, protection, provision, and faithfulness, the leaders direct all the people to practice what the Lord has commanded.

The leadership's scripture engagement drives the community-wide practice in obedience to God's Word and trust in His faithfulness.

Listening to God's word is an act of worship, accepting and affirming its truthfulness and authority. Like what the community discovered on the first day, the rhythm of gathering together to take to heart God's word – to study and understand – bring about joy, a deepening sense of trust in His goodness and of peace that all is well in our soul!

It's clear from the study of Moses' teaching that, after God graciously delivered the people out of Egypt and He was leading them toward the Promise Land, the commandments were given "for your own good," not a burden¹⁴— they were redeemed, liberated, set apart to be His treasured possession, to love and serve Him, to enjoy a blessed and fruitful life in the Land of milk and honey, and to be a light to the nations.

¹³ Cf. Ex. 23:16b; 34:22-23; Lev. 23:33-43; Num. 29:12-39, 42-43; Deut. 16: 13-15. See <https://www.gotquestions.org/Feast-of-Tabernacles.html>.

¹⁴ Cf. Deut. 10:12-13.

The commandments provide freedom for the people to love God and to do what's good for others.

Let me conclude with two practical applications:

Sign up for this upcoming semester group taught by our popular bible teacher, Peter McCarroll, <https://cornerstonechurch.ca/how-to-read-the-bible/>]

Pray for our discerning process as we assess the data we collected in the Prayer Re-Envisioning gathering. Cornerstone's Prayer and Re-envisioning is not about adding more people, building a bigger facility, or making a name but to pursue our mission, i.e., to make space for Jesus to grow people and develop servant-leaders together in God's love – to live out our identity and fulfill our vocation as image-bearing disciples of the King!