

How Should We Then Live?

Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

By Ty Blackburn

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Bible Text: Nehemiah 2:9-20
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Providence Church
2146 Buford Hwy
Buford Hwy, Duluth, GA 30097

Website: www.providenceduluth.org
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/providencechurch

Good morning, Providence Church. It's good to be able to be together again around God's word and I do ask you to turn with me in your Bibles to the second chapter of Nehemiah, Nehemiah 2. We're gonna begin looking at verses 9 to 20. Nehemiah 2:9-20 and the title of the message this morning is "How Should We Then Live?" How should we then live? I borrowed the title from a book by Francis Schaeffer, an outstanding Christian philosopher, 20th century, who wrote a book by that title. He basically was a great Christian thinker who thought about the role of the church in the world in light of the cultural challenges, the moral decay, encroaching moral decay, encroaching spiritual darkness, how should we then live in light of what is happening around us, and so that's the title of that book and the title of the message, which we're asking a similar question. How should we then live in light of what's going on in our world? And I think Nehemiah has some very timely instructive help for us, the entire book, and this passage in particular, Nehemiah 2:9-20.

What we're gonna see is that at this point in the flow of the book of Nehemiah, remember Ezra-Nehemiah are one book, historically they were given as one book divided later into two in our English Bibles but in the Hebrew Bible it was one book, Ezra-Nehemiah. But as we come to this portion of Nehemiah, we see that the emphasis is on building the walls, rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and what I want us to do this morning is to really to come to understand what it means to build the walls of Jerusalem. How does that apply to us? This is a book that has been used probably many times, I know it was used at one church I was at to inaugurate a building fund for the building of a building, Nehemiah, let's build the walls. And so that's not actually the direct spiritual application of this passage. This passage, this book, Nehemiah, this portion of the book Ezra-Nehemiah, it's not about building a physical building. I mean, it is about building the physical walls of Jerusalem but the spiritual food for us that the spiritual point that God had for his people when he gave this book even was not to encourage them to keep shoring up the walls of Jerusalem physically, there's a spiritual reality behind that and essentially we're going to see, I'm gonna suggest to you as we unfold and exposit Nehemiah that the essential, fundamental, spiritual application of building the walls of Jerusalem is about separating from the world. It's about the people of God being holy and that Nehemiah, his contribution to the work of God was to help God's people to establish

a sense of separateness unto God, to be separated unto God. It doesn't mean that you're not in the world, we are in the world but we're not to be of the world.

We are to be holy in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation and so this part of the book Ezra-Nehemiah is particularly aimed at that particular aspect and I'm gonna show you that and this message, how should we then live, is going to be a two part message. I believe definitely next week we'll need to be with it, the same text, 2:9-20. We're gonna read the passage and I'm gonna have an extended introduction which I'm gonna try to show to you the spiritual implications and how I'm connecting building the walls of Jerusalem to holiness. So let's read the text, Nehemiah 2:9,

9 Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. 10 When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that someone had come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel. 11 So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. 12 And I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding. 13 So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire. 14 Then I passed on to the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was no place for my mount to pass. 15 So I went up at night by the ravine and inspected the wall. Then I entered the Valley Gate again and returned. 16 The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; nor had I as yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials or the rest who did the work. 17 Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach." 18 I told them how the hand of my God had been favorable to me and also about the king's words which he had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us arise and build." So they put their hands to the good work. 19 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard it, they mocked us and despised us and said, "What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" 20 So I answered them and said to them, "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem."

Let's pray and ask the Lord's blessing on his word.

Our Father, we come to You this morning keenly aware of our need of grace, aware that You made us to be people who need Your word more than we need the very bread that feeds our bodies, we need Your word to feed our souls. Lord, we not only need Your word, we need Your Spirit to help us understand Your word. These things are spiritually

discerned so we pray that You would give us the Holy Spirit to help us to see and understand, repent and believe the things that You have for us and that we would cling more closely to Christ; that we would love Him more, treasure Him in His work, and exalt Him in our lives and we pray this in His majestic name. Amen.

How should we then live? How should we then live? This is so important when you're studying the Scriptures to interpret the Bible in context, and so I'm gonna do some work today to really get us, this is really gonna be mostly a long introduction to this passage. I'm just telling you that right upfront. We're not gonna be looking a lot at the text I gave you, I want to look at the step back and get the bigger picture so that we can understand and mine the passage for what it really means to us, what God intends it to mean to us, and we need to set it in its appropriate context.

There are two types of context that you need to think about when you're studying the Scriptures. The first is literary context, that is, you think about the text, the passage you're reading in context of the rest of the book of that. It's a reading. So Nehemiah 2:9-20 needs to be put into context with Nehemiah and all he's saying in chapter 1, what goes before and what goes after in chapters 3, 4, 5, all the way to 13, and as we said because Ezra-Nehemiah is one work, it needs to be set in context with what Ezra 1-10 are saying. That's literary context. Context is key to understanding the meaning and the purpose of God in the passage. It's what makes sense out of anything we say. You're always interpreting what someone says, if you interpret it accurately, you interpret in context. That's literary context.

There's a second important context, type of context that is absolutely essential and is so critical to understanding the purpose of a passage of Scripture and that is historical context. Historical context. Now historical context means that you understand the history and the times of the events described in the text, that's the first part but not the one that I'm gonna talk about in a moment. You want to understand accurately the customs, you know, what the events described on the page, the time that's talked about on the page, you want to think about its historical context, you know, what was going on in the Nehemiah's time? What was happening in Ezra's time? That's part of historical context but there's another important part of historical context that's often completely misunderstood or neglected and that is the historical context of the original recipients of the book, that is, not just what's happening on the page but to realize that all of Scripture, every verse of Scripture was given to a particular group of people at a particular time and in particular circumstances. So we want to think about the historical context of the original recipients of the book Ezra-Nehemiah. What were the original recipients experiencing? What was their situation in life? What were their concerns, what were their struggles, what issues and challenges were they facing, and then how did this text of Scripture address those issues and challenges? And when you understand that, you are right at the point of understanding the purpose of the passage. God gives his word, it's his eternal word that's eternally valid, he gives it at a point in time for a particular application and then from that, understanding that what it meant at the time it was given, then we can then make appropriate trajectory adjustments to then consider ourselves in the light of

redemptive history, how do we connect to what they were experiencing. I hope that makes sense to you.

So what I want to do is think about the historical context of the recipients of the book Ezra-Nehemiah. What were their challenges? What were the issues they were dealing with? And I'm gonna do this under three points this morning and, again, this is really introducing for us, I think the rest of Nehemiah, but particularly our next, we're gonna look at this passage in light of this and we'll really begin to unpack it next time. But three points. The first is the circumstances of the original recipients. The circumstances. The circumstances of the original recipients of Ezra-Nehemiah. The events described in Ezra-Nehemiah end about 430 BC. Chapter 13 of Nehemiah is gonna be about 430 BC. The events of chapter 2 that we're looking at that we read a moment ago are from 445 BC. So it spans roughly a 15 year period, really a 13 year period so it's like 432 is when it really ends but I was just using round numbers.

So about 430 BC is when the events described end so the book could not have been in its final form until after that. Most scholars think it was between 430-400 that the final form of Ezra-Nehemiah was given. So it was given to the generation after the events described in the passage. It's given to the generation after those who rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem which Nehemiah, the portion of Ezra-Nehemiah that Nehemiah deals with, the rebuilding of the walls, and for those people, what were their circumstances? Well, they were very similar to the circumstances of the people in the book. They were continuing to live under Persian rule. This is something that's so important for us to understand and I think it's so helpful for us especially as Americans, because we have this sense, American civil religion, someone has coined that term, that there's this, the moral majority in the 1980s, the idea that America is somehow God's country, that America is the locus of his activity. It's really completely an unbiblical concept. I mean, I love America, I tell you, I think it's the best country that's ever existed in natural terms. It's not the best country. Israel under David and Solomon was the best country that's ever existed, but as far as if you look at just man doing his government, America is blessed and it's blessed because Judeo-Christian principles, biblical principles informed the thinking of the men who wrote the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and so they formed a government that was, there's no parallel to it. I mean, there's a lot of talk about the injustice America, America has failed to live up to its ideals absolutely, Slavery was a blight on America, it was an inconsistency that blighted the beauty of America. Now I'm saying that because I'm not here to preach about America. I'm here to tell you that in spite of all that, that is essentially irrelevant to the kingdom of God. Whether America remains or America falls, the kingdom of God is going to continue and if you have repented of your sins and placed your faith in Jesus Christ, then the issue for you and me is to be about building his kingdom. It's not that we don't try to be salt and light and be a help to people around us and, yeah, be good citizens and vote and all that, that's appropriate, but it's a small thing compared to God's kingdom that is eternal.

So Ezra-Nehemiah relates to us because as Americans there's this tendency for many evangelicals to lament that America has gone away from its, and it's appropriate to some level to lament it like this but not like this; that we're not what we were, the long for the

glory days. That's really not to be a part of the thinking of a Christian and it's exactly identical to the circumstances of the recipients of the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. They longed for political restoration. They had national pride, nationalism. They longed for the days, the glory days of David and Solomon to return. They were under Persian rule, and you think about it, once the Babylonian captivity happened, began in 605, it was Babylon, then it was Persia that they were under. Persia took over 538, so 605-538 they were under Babylonian rule about 70 years. Then from 538 all the way to 331, they were under Persian rule until Alexander the Great and the Greek Empire conquered Persia. Israel was not free, they were not independent, they were still under Greek rule now and they were under Greek rule until about 160 BC, and then they had about roughly 100 years of independence but that wasn't significant in the kingdom of God because nothing about that is in the Scriptures. Their 100 year hiatus was not worthy of being included in the Canon of holy Scripture and what happens then after that brief time of independence, Rome, the rule of Rome comes upon them and Rome is even more dominant upon them than the previous rulers. About 70 AD Rome eclipses all other powers and becomes the dominant world power and overtakes Palestine. 70 BC, I'm sorry. 70 BC so 70 years before the birth of Christ, Rome is now entrenched and so in the early church they're under Roman rule.

Well, the fact that they had this going on was a troubling thing and it wasn't just their nationalistic pride, their political independence, it brought about spiritual confusion, biblical confusion truly, because the Scriptures had said some things about what was gonna happen after the exile. Remember that the story of Ezra-Nehemiah is the story of the return from exile. They were exiled in 605 BC, as I mentioned, they had come under Babylonian rule and they were exiled from the land, cast out of the land of Canaan, the land flowing with milk and honey, the land that God had promised to Abraham as an everlasting possession. Cast out of that land for 70 years, they come back in 536 or so, 538 is when the Cyrus edict and they're back in 536 and they start rebuilding the temple. So they come back to the land, the exile ends and Ezra-Nehemiah records the return from exile. That's the big picture of Ezra-Nehemiah. There are three installments of the return from exile. So God has cast his people out of the land because of their idolatry and their sin and now he's gathering them back to the land and he does it in three installments and this is the literally context of our passage is to see how Ezra-Nehemiah as a whole, what's the message of the whole book of Ezra-Nehemiah.

Well, let me remind you if you were with us, you will remember but those of you who weren't and it's always good to have a reminder, chapters 1-6 were about the first return. So there's a three installment return from Babylon and Persia to Jerusalem. The first happens under Zerubbabel and Joshua and the purpose of the first return is to rebuild the temple. That is the purpose of God for his people in sending them back is rebuild the temple. The Cyrus edict recorded in Ezra 1 tells us that. Cyrus says, Cyrus the Persian says, "God, the God of heaven has appointed me to build a house for Him," so he issues a decree that anyone of the Jews who want to go back can go back and build the house and he sends them with some financial support to build the house of God, to restore and rebuild the house that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed, the Babylonian king had destroyed in the Babylonian captivity. And the first six chapters record the challenge of building the

temple. That's the first part of Ezra. Then chapter 7 to 10 records the second installment of that return. Remember it's three installments. The second installment happened in 458 BC about 80 years after the first return under Cyrus, under Zerubbabel and Joshua who came back to rebuild the temple. The second return under Ezra himself comes back to restore the law of God to the people of God. We see how Ezra is a man skilled in the Scriptures, Ezra 7:6. He's a scribe, a priest skilled in the word of God. He had set his heart to study the law of the Lord. This is Ezra 7:10, chapter 7, verse 10. He had set his heart to study the law of the Lord and to practice it and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel. So he's sent back, in fact, by the king, the Persian king, chapter 7, verse 25 says, "Teach the law to those who don't know it." And so the purpose of Ezra's return with a second group of exiles that are now coming back to the land is to restore the word of God to the people of God. The first return, rebuild the temple. Second return, restore the word of God.

And what we have said as we unpacked Ezra, that those two realities, we don't apply it by building a building, we apply it by building that which the physical temple was a type of. A type. The physical temple was a type first of Christ. Jesus said, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it." He was speaking about the temple of his body, John 2, because Jesus' body was the meeting place of God and man. And so the Old Testament temple was a type of that but then the temple becomes all those who were united to Christ. What does it mean to become a Christian? It means you repent and believe, you place your faith in Jesus and you are united to Christ and you are in Christ. That's the favorite way the New Testament speaks about Christians, the favorite term to describe the believer is not believer, it's not disciple, it's not Christian, it is those who are in Christ. Read through the epistles of Paul, you see it again and again and again, "In Christ. In Christ. In Christ." Okay, when you repent and place your faith and you now become in Christ, you are now being built into the temple which he himself is the cornerstone, Ephesians 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:4-5. He's the choice cornerstone. You are being built as living stones into this temple and it's a place for God to offer sacrifice, for there to be sacrifices offered to God. True worship happens in this temple so that the physical temple has been replaced by the antitype which is the spiritual temple, that is what the spiritual, the physical temple was picturing was when God would make a spiritual temple to dwell in among his people.

So when you are rebuilding the temple, when we talked about when we're building the temple, we're building up the body of Christ. That's what Ezra, the first six chapters of how they apply to us and so essentially what this book Ezra-Nehemiah is saying, how should you live in the midst of times where political instability, you'll never be what you thought you were going to be? How do you live? You build the temple. You build, for God's glory you build up other believers and you yourself devote yourselves to worship and to becoming what God wants you to be, a place for his glory to dwell in the midst of a dark world. That is how this book was to be interpreted for them because they really, they were struggling. I mentioned they were confused. They were confused because the messianic promises or the promises of what would happen after exile were confusing to them.

Let me show you an example of this. Turn to Ezekiel 37. Now Ezekiel, he was an exilic prophet, that is, he prophesied at the beginning of the exile. He was actually taken himself into exile in 597 BC. Nebuchadnezzar's second time he sacked Jerusalem, first in 606-605, then second time 597. He took captives in 606-605 a number of people. Daniel was in that first group that went into exile. In 597 he took another group of captives. Ezekiel was in that group that went. While Ezekiel is in Babylon, God's Spirit comes to him and he anoints him a prophet and he begins prophesying to the exiles who were in captivity and part of his message is, the essential message is what you are experiencing is God's, exactly what God told you he would do if you became an idolater, he would spit you out of the land and what you've gotten is what we deserve. But then he also has a message of hope, that is, after the exile God is going to gather you back.

Look at Ezekiel 37:21-28 and think about how people would have been struggling with this in Ezra-Nehemiah's day and the day of the people that received the book of Ezra-Nehemiah. Look at Ezekiel 37:21, "Say to them, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I will take the sons of Israel from among the nations where they have gone, and I will gather them from every side and bring them into their own land.'" This is talking about the restoration from the exile. God is going to go gather his people from their land, from the lands they've been sent to and bring them back to their land.

Verse 22, "and I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king will be king for all of them; and they will no longer be two nations and no longer be divided into two kingdoms. They will no longer defile themselves with their idols, or with their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. And they will be My people, and I will be their God.'" There's not gonna be two, it's gonna be like it was, it sounds like it's gonna be like it was before the kingdom of Israel was split into two kingdoms after Solomon died, the northern kingdom, the southern kingdom. It's gonna be like it was under Solomon, under David.

Look at verse 24, "My servant David will be king over them." When Ezekiel writes this, David's been dead for 450 years. He's talking not about David but about a son of David. "My servant David will be king over them, and they will all have one shepherd; and they will walk in My ordinances and keep My statutes and observe them. They will live on the land that I gave to Jacob My servant, in which your fathers lived; and they will live on it, they, and their sons and their sons' sons, forever; and David My servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will place them and multiply them, and will set My sanctuary in their midst forever. My dwelling place also will be with them; and I will be their God, and they will be My people. And the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forever."

Think about how if you lived 400 BC and you were a Jew and you were living in the land of Judea around Jerusalem or in Jerusalem and it came time to go to the synagogue, to the temple and they read that passage, how would you interpret that? "Lord, You've gathered us from the lands, You've brought us back to Your land, we've restored the temple, we

not only rebuilt the temple, You've restored the law of God to us through the teaching ministry of Ezra and now the priests are teaching the word, and Nehemiah rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, where is the Davidide King? Where is the descendant of David to rule over us?" This was the source of the messianic hope and it was this element of confusion where they were looking for a natural king to come and rule over them. They interpreted this in the way that you would naturally as you first look at it think. It's gonna be just like it was in David's time. And they also could look back at 2 Samuel 7:12-16 where David was promised by God through Nathan the prophet, when David said, "I want to build the temple," essentially God said to him, "No, you're not gonna build Me a house, your son will build My house. I'm gonna build you a house. There will never be a time when your son is not reigning over the kingdom forever."

What we see is that there is this movement through Scripture from the physical and visible to the spiritual and invisible. They were wrestling with this. This was a real practical concern and source of struggle for faithful followers of Yahweh in the 5th century BC. How do we make sense out of this? How should we live in light of the promises of God and the fact that we're still subjugated to ungodly Persian rulers, we're subject to the whims of ungodly governors like Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem, and we're continually troubled all around us. We see moral decay, spiritual darkness. How should we then live? That's the question and it's pressing upon them in the most practical fundamental way.

What they were gonna have to see and what God was leading them to see, he was leading them to ask these kinds of questions. This is the wonderful thing about the Lord, he works in your life and Ted was sharing that great quote from J. C. Ryle how he uses our circumstances to awaken us and we need, we desperately need difficulties, we need to be confounded. In fact, Luther said that one of the essential ingredients in sound hermeneutics, think about this, one of the essential ingredients in sound Bible interpretation, how do you interpret the Bible. He said there are certain ingredients in sound biblical hermeneutics, sound biblical interpretation and he lists a number of them that you would find in any textbook that you have, but one he lists that I don't think I've ever seen in a hermeneutics textbook, but he lists the ones like, you know, well, you've got context, literary context, historical context like we talked about; you've got to look carefully at the words on the page and syntax; and you know, you've got to consider the cultural issues, all those kinds of things. But he said the one thing that he said that was essential that stands out that if you really want to interpret the Bible well, you must suffer. You must suffer. There's something about suffering that leads to a perplexity of soul that causes the soul to go out and hunger after God. You see it in the Psalms. As Ted shared earlier about David and his being confounded that he's anointed king and then he spends more than a decade running for his life. God anoints him king and then he spends years running for his life. What's up with that? God was working through his suffering to make a man who already had a heart for God, a heart disposition for God, to make a man who was enraptured with God; to make a man dig into the purposes of God, the plan of God, the word of God. So you had this treasury of Psalms because the Lord let David suffer and David is wrestling with God and wrestling with his ways.

So that's exactly what God was doing with the people in Nehemiah's day. The people who received the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, they're wondering, "Look at the promises," and we could go place after place in the prophets to show what it's gonna be like when you come back from captivity, what God's going to do but we don't have a Davidic king. Zerubbabel, the governor on that first return was a descendant of David but he didn't rule over anything. He was just the governor of a little tiny postage stamp. The country is a postage stamp of what it had been. The focus and what's happening is God is showing the focus of his kingdom work is narrowing. It's no longer the nation of Israel being this, you know, showing by its glory and its success that it belongs to God, it's now this narrowing focus to Jerusalem and to the temple as if God is saying, "Keep your eyes on Jerusalem and the temple," because that's where his Messiah is going to come, and his Messiah is going to have a very different kind of ministry than you expect. And you see, if people had been listening, reading Ezra-Nehemiah correctly and thinking correctly about it, they would have understood Jesus' ministry was going to be very different than most people expected.

He was not coming to be a political deliverer. No. What did Jesus say in John 18:36? Remember when he was before Pilate what he said? Pilate's basically said, "I have the power to release you. Why aren't you answering my questions?" And Jesus says, "You have no power over Me but such as has been given to you by My Father in heaven." He goes on to say, "My kingdom is not of this world." He's explaining to Pilate why he, the king, is under Pilate's authority. "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would be fighting for Me, but My kingdom is not of this realm." You see, God is building a spiritual kingdom. He's always been about building a spiritual kingdom and the physical types are passing away. All is being fulfilled in Christ and in Ezra-Nehemiah's day they could've been understanding this and the point of Ezra-Nehemiah is to tell them this.

So now let me share with you, I said there's three returns, the circumstances of the... Well, let's actually, yeah, the circumstances of the people we've said, basically they're longing for political independence, national restoration, they're spiritually confused and what's their fundamental need? Second point: the fundamental need. Here's another brief, this is a briefer point, the second point. We considered the circumstances of the original recipients, now the fundamental need of the original recipients. If we're not to be restored like we were before, how should we then live? That's the question. How do we bring glory to God? How do we live for God in these dark days? What do we do?

This is where we can find great comfort as Americans because if America continues to go down spiritual decline, if America becomes tyrannical, if socialism takes over, whatever, you know, whatever it is, whatever happens or if there's God shows kindness to us and we continue to be free people and free to worship openly and all that, whatever happens, how should we live as people of the kingdom? We should be people who realize that God's kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, it is not of this world. It's really far secondary, it's not unimportant, the issues of the world has great impact on people's suffering, yes, and those things are important but it's far secondary to the primary concern of the Christian which is to build the spiritual kingdom.

So the fundamental need is to know how should we then live and that brings us to the third point which is really the essential message to the original recipients. That's the third point. The circumstances of the original recipients, the fundamental need of the original recipients, and the circumstances, I mean the essential message to the original recipients, the third point, the essential message. And the essential message is seen in the three outline points of the book which essentially follow the three returns. You have the first return, the second return and the third return, each has a slightly different focus and each has an application for the original audience and therefore for us.

The first return we mentioned earlier was under Zerubbabel and Joshua and it was to rebuild the temple. It was essentially saying and what is that message to the people who were asking how should we then live. This is what God was saying to them, in times of political instability, in times of moral decay, social unrest, in times of distress, in times of blessing, good times, bad times, what are you to be about? You are to make the worship of God the center of your life. You are to put the community, for them they were to put temple worship at the center of their life. They were to rebuild their lives around the worship of God. They were to take part in the regular worship at the temple. They were to be there every time they were supposed to be there. They were to make the sacrifices they were to make. They were to seek God in his temple.

Now the second return. Let's think about them, continuing to think about them, we'll think about the application to us in a moment. The second return is the second main point. The essential message to them in Ezra-Nehemiah is build the temple, which is make the temple and worship the central focus of your life, the second return was to restore the law of God to the people of God; to make it so the second message was in times of uncertainty, times of blessing, times of difficulty, whatever the circumstances, we are called to make the word of God also the center of our lives. The way that we seek God in worship and we build our lives around him is to conform our lives to his word.

So make temple worship the center, make the word of God the center, and the third return, how did that speak to them? The third return under Nehemiah is about building the walls. So now the recipients of the book, the temple is built and the walls are build so it doesn't, they can't be about building the temple anymore or physically building the walls, the spiritual message is be separate. It is be holy.

You know, think about what the walls do. The walls of Jerusalem, the gates that are burned with fire, the walls that are down, it means that enemies can come in at any time and bring bondage. There's no defense against the enemies. You build the walls, you close the gates and there's a distinction between those who are in and those who are out. You think about that personally, what's a man like, there's a proverb that says a man who, an angry man is like a city with no walls. Think about that: an angry man is like a city with no walls, just the slightest thing can lead him into evil. There's no protection. He flies off the handle, flies off the handle, flies off the handle. There's no sense of godliness in his life. That's what the walls are, the walls are the protecting separation from sin, from evil. Physical separation, physical protection.

So spiritually this is the same idea. To rebuild the walls is essentially Nehemiah bringing to us the message, "Be holy for I am holy." And so back to the people in Ezra-Nehemiah's day, we're not going to be ruled by David, we're gonna experience continued dominion of the nations. In fact, you see this also, let me just point this out and I encourage you to read this this week, Daniel 2 and Daniel 7. When I taught through Daniel a few years ago, I think I did 50 some odd messages on Daniel 4, 5 years ago, maybe 6 years ago, when I taught through Daniel and Daniel was a contemporary of Ezekiel, he was an exilic prophet, he lived through the exile. I mentioned earlier he was taken captive as a teenager in 605-606 BC and he lived in captivity until the end of the captivity. He outlived the captivity and he was actually still in Babylon under the first Persian rulers Cyrus and Darius. Well, Daniel gets visions that show him what the future's going to be for the people of God and in chapter 2 and chapter 7, he has visions that are basically mirror images of one another. They're identical, just separate. They're very different images but they tell the same fundamental message. In Daniel 2, Daniel sees a statue that's made up of four different types of metal. It has a head of gold. This statue is a great statue, has a head of gold, it has arms and shoulder and chest of silver, it has thighs of bronze, and it has lower legs and feet of iron, and the toes are iron and clay mixed together. But basically four metals: gold, silver, bronze, iron. And Daniel interprets, this is actually a dream Nebuchadnezzar had that Daniel interprets for him and he tells him about the dream and he tells him what the dream means and he says, "There are four kingdoms: Babylon, then the Medes and Persians, and then another kingdom is gonna come along," he doesn't tell him exactly who they are at the time but he says one kingdom is gonna come along, another kingdom, then another kingdom, and in the days of that fourth kingdom, what happened was there was the statue, the four, it was made of these four metals, then there was this little stone that is taken out of a mountain, a little tiny stone and it is thrown against the statue and this little tiny stone shatters all the whole statue and Daniel's message is, "Those four types of metal on that statue are four great kingdoms. You, O King, are the head of gold. Babylon is the head of gold. After you will come another kingdom, Persia, silver. After you will come another kingdom, Greece, bronze. After you will come another kingdom that's even more terrible than that, the iron of the Romans, and in the days of that kingdom, a little rock will be taken out of the ground and will be cast against that statue and the statue will shatter and that rock will grow up to fill the whole earth." That rock is the Lord Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God.

Chapter 7, he does the same thing. Daniel now has a vision himself and he sees four great beasts. He sees the first beast is a lion with wings of an eagle, and it is reigning and ruling over the world. And then after that, another beast, a bear with two heads raised up, or no, I can't remember actually. I think it's the bear. It's either the bear or the leopard. Anyway, read it and you'll see. But it's the Medo-Persian Empire. And then thirdly there is another leopard that is, I think it's a leopard, is Greece. And then finally there's a beast he can't describe. The first three he's described with something close to things he sees in nature. The fourth he says is a dreadful and terrifying beast, had 10 heads and it had multiple horns and stuff, and it was devouring and tearing up, and he said he was so distressed as he saw this beast. He kept focusing on that beast in his discussion with the angel who's

interpreting the dream for him and the angel says, "These are four kingdoms that will come, and in the days of that fourth kingdom, that fourth dreadful kingdom, the Son of Man will come and God will set up His kingdom."

So the message of Daniel is this, "Listen, Israelites," and it's given around 530 BC, 100 years before Ezra-Nehemiah. They had that in their Canon when they're now looking at Ezra-Nehemiah wondering, "Hey, we're in the land but we're not a free nation. We're not independent. What's happening?" They had Daniel as well and Daniel says to them, "We're going to be under the dominion of other kingdoms and we're not to be all bent out of shape about that, we're not to be all bent out of shape about the political intrigues that are going on in the world, and we need to anticipate the day when God sends His King in the days of that fourth kingdom, and if we keep our eyes on that kingdom and we do what He's doing to build that, what we can do now to build that kingdom now, that spiritual kingdom, we will be faithful to God and we will make a difference in the world."

So how do you build that kingdom? You place the temple at the center of your life. You place the word of God at the center of your life and you make holiness the central pursuit of your life. That is what God is calling us to do. That's what he was calling them to do and that's what he's calling us to do, to put worship at the center, to make our priorities in these days the building up of the body of Christ. That is, that includes evangelism because in evangelism you're adding new stones to the temple and you glorify God by bringing more people in as worshipers of God. And evangelism essentially is you're taking someone who is an enemy of God and God by his power, you speaking the Gospel, loving the person, trusting in the power of God and the Spirit of God to do the work, he takes someone who is a hater of God and makes them a worshiper of God. Salvation is essentially to go from darkness to light, from running from God to worshiping God, what we were always created to be. And you build the temple by continuing to build one another, using the word of God, getting involved in each other's lives, speaking the truth in love, and when you're doing that, you are making an earth-shaking impact on the world around us.

This is the point. Rather than fight directly against the world and what's happening in the world, God says make your focus what I am doing spiritually. Build the temple. Build the word of God into your life. Memorize the Scripture. Meditate upon the Scripture. Do like Ezra, study the word of God so that you can obey the word of God and then teach the word of God. Study it, practice it, teach it. As we are doing that and we're building the word of God, we're building our lives around worship, we're seeing that worship is what life is all about, that what I want to do every moment of every day is worship Jesus Christ, wherever I am, whatever I'm doing, my life is about worship. It's about building others and it's about worshiping God and if it's about worshiping God, the thing that I must have to help me worship God is the word of God. So I'm continually abiding in the word, I'm worshiping no matter where I am. Things are going to, you know, haywire around me, it doesn't matter, my mission is worship Jesus Christ. Nothing changes that and the most powerful thing that you can do is to worship Jesus Christ in any moment, no matter what your circumstance. That is the most powerful impactful thing you can do.

That's what he was saying to them. Put worship at the center. It's all about worship. Put the word at the center. It's all about the word. Abide in the word. Live in the word. Feast on the word. Dwell on the word. Continually speak the word. Let the word loose. The most powerful thing you could do is speak the word into this darkness, as having a heart that is now being, the word transforms our heart where we're no longer mad at unbelievers because they're messing up our well-being. That's such an ungodly thing, isn't it? And we are all tempted to that. I mean, I get tempted when I watch the news and you know how you see what people are doing in Congress or you listen to what folks in the media are saying and you're like, "What in the world? What are they doing?" And there's a legitimate point of being godly righteous indignation to say that, you know, wickedness is wickedness, it's ugly, it's evil, and we should be, you know, if you have opportunity, speak to that. "You know, what you're doing is really bad for the nation. What you're doing is harmful." But not out of a sense of hatred that says, "I'm really upset because you're taking something away from me." No, the Christian is just passing through. You're not taking anything away from me because I don't need anything in this world.

Christians are called to be meek, "Blessed are the meek." I love that, "Blessed are the meek." Do you know what meekness means? Meekness is an attitude, it's an outward manifestation of an inward attitude. The outward manifestation is gentleness, that is, that you don't react, you don't come back harshly to people. They can offend you and you don't respond quickly. It's the opposite of that angry person I was talking about. You can be offended and you're slow to take note of the offense. You're not provoked. You're not easily provoked. It's also an expression of love, but meekness is that sense of just gentleness but it comes from an inward attitude that sees God in control of everything in my life and submits to his righteous reign so that the meek person is thinking in terms of, "When someone tramples on me, what is God doing in this? What is God's purpose in this person now interacting with me in this harsh unkind way? What is God's purpose." And the fact that they're even thinking that way makes them gentle. They're not reacting immediately to defend themselves, they're looking to God. What is God doing? Because I have no rights. The meek person doesn't have any rights. He's not always concerned about people respecting him, people treating him fairly. That's the opposite of a Christian mindset.

"Blessed are the meek." I love how the Lord, the blessing that comes to the meek. "Blessed are the meek." What's the other half of that verse? "For they shall inherit the earth." Isn't that astonishing? The meek person is a person who basically goes through life with an open hand and says nothing belongs to me. I'm not holding onto anything. If you trample on my honor, well, I mean, what's God doing here? I'll speak the truth to you but I won't do it from a sense of anger. I may have to say, "You know, you're being very unkind. What's going on in your life right now? What's happening?" I may have to, you know, be even more forceful than that but there's an inward attitude that is gentle. But the meek person is saying, "I have nothing. I don't need anything. I just need God." And when you open your hand, that means nothing, too many of us go through life with a closed fist around our blessings. We want this. We want that. And when people start messing with that, we get angry, but a meek person goes through life with an open hand. Whatever God gives me, I have my hands open. He can take it away at any time and I'm

not gonna fight him. I'm just gonna say, "What are you doing? What's up with this? What are you trying to accomplish in my life? How can I glorify You in this circumstance? Your name is what I'm about, not mine."

And if you have an open hand, think about this, if somebody wants to give me something right now, put something in my hand, can they? My hand is closed fist. No, they can't put anything in my hand. But if I do this. You live your life like that, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." The Lord just starts piling blessing upon blessing upon blessing upon blessing and the reality is when you know that you don't need to own anything, that nothing belongs to you, that you're the slave of Jesus Christ and if that is the most, the highest honor that you could have is to be the slave of Jesus Christ, when you know that, you have everything in Christ.

So the Lord wants us to live that way. He wants us to build the word of God into our lives and then to pursue holiness. Rebuilding the walls is adding to that thing of making worship the very center of your life. All you live to do is to worship. All you live to do is to walk in the truth. All you live to do is to be holy. This is the essence of what distinguishes the true Christian is a yearning to be holy and it's so easy for us to lose sight of this. I confess it myself, that how easy it is to forget this is what we're here for. We don't pursue holiness to earn God's favor. That's not it. You can't do that. It's impossible. The only hope of attaining God's favor is to recognize that we are completely unholy, unworthy and to cling to Christ. Jesus Christ became sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God in him. And so you cannot clean yourself up. Sinner, you cannot clean yourself up to come to Christ. You come as you are, filthy as you are, and you surrender to him in faith, and as you unite yourself to Christ, you find the work of repentance and the gift of repentance being given to you so that you're able to turn from sin more and more over time, and if you keep uniting yourself to him and clinging to him and loving him and seeking him, what will happen is you will develop more and more a yearning to be like him which is you will develop more and more a yearning to be holy. In this God is telling the people in Ezra-Nehemiah's day that it's not enough – listen to this – it is not enough to make worship the center of your life and the word the center of your life, that is not enough, that is not the Christian life. The follower of Jesus Christ must also make holiness his chief goal. To be holy, for I am holy.

I want to show you this in 1 Peter 1. Holiness is separation. The essential root word of the Hebrew word "kadosh" means "to be separated; separated unto divine purpose; to be holy is that which is no longer common or profane." The separate between the common and the holy would be like a good illustration would be a silversmith makes two silver forks. One he sells to someone to use in their house. The other he offers to the temple. This, this fork, they were both made the same but this fork has been set apart unto God. It belongs to God. It is not to be used to eat a salad or to eat any food. It is to be used for God's purposes. It no longer belongs to the common usage. You and I belong to God. We no longer, if you have been born again, if you have repented and placed your faith in Jesus, you are not your own.

I love how God says this in 1 Corinthians 6:19, "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own for you have been bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your body." That's right after the exhortation to flee immorality. How can you give yourself to immorality. Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own for you have been bought with a price. The blood of Christ has purchased you. Therefore glorify God in your body. Your body exists for holy purposes, not for the profane common purposes of the world. So be different from the world.

And we see this in 1 Peter 1 where he says, verse 13, "Therefore, prepare your minds for action, keep sober in spirit, fix your hope completely on the grace to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance." You see separating yourself from the former lusts in your ignorance. Look what he says, "As obedient children, do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance, but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves also in all your behavior; because it is written, 'You shall be holy for I am holy.'" And then he shows us the path to holiness in the next few verses. "If you address," verse 17, "If you address as Father the One who impartially judges according to each one's work, conduct yourselves in fear during the time of your stay on earth." God is holy. He judges all things impartially. He sees everything in your life. He knows everything that you're doing, every moment. He knows every post that you post to Facebook or to Instagram. He sees it all. He knows what's in your heart. He knows the clicks that you make on your computer. He sees everything therefore conduct yourselves in fear, that is, in reverence, because you have a Father that will discipline you, a Father who loves you enough to discipline you conduct yourselves in fear. "Be holy for I am holy," he says. Don't be conformed to your lust.

Then he says, verse 18, conduct yourselves in fear "knowing that you were not redeemed with perishable things like silver or gold from your futile way of life inherited from your forefathers, but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the blood of Christ." The reason you conduct yourselves in fear, the reason you are holy is because you've been bought with the blood of Jesus Christ. The reason you can be holy is because Jesus has paid his blood for you and he's united you to himself, and in abiding in Christ and resting in Christ, you can overcome sin. There's no other way. You cannot fight sin in your flesh. It's just futile. If you overcome it in one area, it'll pop up another area. There's no way apart from the cross of Christ.

The Christian is called to apply his heart to holiness and so rebuilding the walls, what are we to do in this day? We are to make worship the center of our lives. We realize that what we are to do no matter what happens, no matter what happens, if we get a diagnosis and we find ourselves on a respirator in the hospital and such an awful situation, people are going in the hospital on a respirator and I've been grieved about this thinking about how hard it must be for people who are on the respirators when the nurses and doctors come in in their protective gear, not even seeing a human face, not seeing their loved ones, how hard that must be, how awful that must be for unbelievers who do not know

God is with them, who are about to enter into eternity separate from him. How hard it would be even for any of us as Christians to be facing that kind of life and death situation and to not be able to see our loved ones, to hold their hands, to not even see the doctor's face or the nurse's face except through this mask. They need to be wearing those, of course, but to know that God is with you, to know that your Father is holding your hand, and know that the Lord Jesus Christ is there with you, walking with you, that he will help you and in that moment our purpose is not to be overwhelmed by the crazy things that are happening around us, what am I to do? I'm to worship the Lord Jesus Christ on this hospital bed as I die. I'm to worship Jesus Christ. I'm to meditate upon his word. I'm to be different from the world. That's my mission. "God, help me all the way to the end to be what You've called me to be." The clarity that God's word gives us, he wants it to liberate us and in circumstances like we find ourselves today where life is uncertain, it is to set our eyes on eternity and to build his kingdom in the here and now because we can accomplish incredible things if we will follow his plan. May God help us do that.

Let's pray together.

Our Father, how grateful we are for Your word, how grateful we are for the clear instruction You give us. There's a beautiful simplicity to life when we see it through Your revelation when we put on the lenses of the spectacles of Scripture to look at our lives, it comes into focus. Lord, we confess how much we tend to forget these things. We confess our sinfulness. We confess that we don't worship You continually as we ought. We build our own kingdoms rather than build Your kingdom. We focus on our own gods of comfort and ease and pleasure. We don't build our lives on Your word as we ought, Lord, we fill our minds with other things and, Lord, we are not diligently pursuing holiness as we ought every moment to be doing that. As so, Lord, we come confessing our great need. We see that Your word calls us to these things. We want to surrender ourselves to be obedient and to follow You and to follow Your blueprint for our lives. Have mercy on us because of Christ. Let our hearts be united to Him and let us in our oneness with Him create more of a yearning to be holy. Lord, let that be the one thing that comes from these next months, however long this crisis is around us, whatever circumstances You bring us through. Let that be what comes forth in our lives is a greater longing to be holy and show us through the book of Nehemiah how to do that. We ask this in Jesus' name and for His glory. Amen.