

Nehemiah

Nehemiah 1:1-13:31

By Phil Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2019-06-16

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I figured out a way to not have to deal with chronology in my sermon. I gave you a two page outline of every date given in the Bible between the first year of Cyrus and the last year of Darius' reign. The BC dates are establishment dates for comparison purposes. Hang on to that because I have not been able to find anything like this in commentaries or online. And I needed it myself since I made at least one mistake last week - on how long the temple took to get built. I think you will find it a helpful guide as you read through the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Those six books are all tightly intertwined. Enough on chronology.

If you have done much reading of books on Nehemiah, you will discover that authors have culled an enormous number of leadership principles from this book. And it is great for that. Gary spent quite a few months going through this book verse by verse, and I won't repeat a lot of what he had to say. But Nehemiah is indeed known best for providing the leadership needed to get the enormous project of Jerusalem's wall finished.

I. Key word: walls

And the word "walls" is the key word of the book. Why would an entire book of the Bible be devoted to building walls? Whether literally or metaphorically, building walls is not a popular concept today. Pope Francis has criticized President Trump repeatedly on the concept of building a wall on the southern border. His first salvo, when he heard that the president was in favor of walls, was to say,

...a person who thinks only about building walls, wherever they may be, and not building bridges, is not Christian. This is not in the Gospel. As far as what you said about whether I would advise to vote or not to vote, I am not going to get involved in that. I say only that this man is not Christian if he has said things like that.

Is Pope Francis correct? Is building walls un-Christian? Whatever you think about building walls on our southern border (and there are good arguments pro and con for walls around a country - I think my bringing up the subject will generate quite a bit of discussion), I think it is crystal clear that God Himself authorized the walls around Jerusalem, and there are walls around the heavenly Jerusalem, and God built spiritual walls of separation around the Lord's Table and around the church, and he wants their to be walls of separation in the marriage covenant - no believers marrying unbelievers and

us staying faithful to our spouse. In fact, I would dare to say that Pope Francis' refusal to have spiritual walls of separation between Islam and Christianity (or for that matter, all religions and Christianity) is blatantly un-Christian. Walls are needed. The hypocrisy of his statement even on the literal side of the equation is that the Vatican has huge walls and huge security barriers. But why were walls needed in this particular case?

I've put a diagram into your outlines that show where the walls of Jerusalem used to exist at six different stages of Jerusalem's history. The early stages of the wall were designed to protect the temple, and not necessarily all the population that lived in the vicinity. To me this indicates that the walls had a primary purpose of protecting the temple. It's a little bit different take on the walls than some people have had. And why would there need to be walls around a city in order to defend the temple? I think there were spiritual and symbolic reasons. But one of the pragmatic reasons was that the temple was a money repository, and without walls it would be easy for armies to come in and steal it. It was a huge repository for state funds as well as ecclesiastical funds. Dr. Fugate's book on taxes does a good job of showing that state and church funds were kept completely separate. He also does a good job of showing how the temple represented God's Lordship over all of life, including church and state. Don't equate the temple with the church. It was God's throne room.

But there is another fact that we need to look at to understand the walls in this book. Most people are ignorant of the fact that the walls had been rebuilt around Jerusalem shortly before the book of Nehemiah started. That's why Nehemiah was so grieved when he heard the report that the walls were broken down. Look at chapter 1:1-3.

Neh. 1:1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.

Commentaries point out that those are words that signal the writing of a prophet. They are identical to how Jeremiah begins - "The words of Jeremiah the son of Hilkiyah." Amos begins, "The words of Amos." So we cannot treat this book as simply the journal of an uninspired man that Ezra somehow incorporated into the supposed one book of Ezra-Nehemiah. Last week we saw that these are two books written by two authors, and that Nehemiah was an inspired prophet. And the reason that is important is that there are evangelicals who have the audacity to say that Nehemiah makes mistakes and that Ezra by inspiration recorded his mistakes that Nehemiah wrote just like he recorded the uninspired decrees of the emperors. That's how they get around contradictions in their false chronology. But that is false. Every word of this book was written by the prophet Nehemiah and

inspired and perfect. Verse 1 continues:

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 [by the way, Hanani is mentioned in one of the Elephantine Papryi as being in charge of Jewish affairs in the time of Darius -] 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.”

Most commentaries think that no walls had been built until Nehemiah arrived in chapter 2, and that this is just a reference to walls that Nebuchadnezzar broke down. On our short chronology, The walls were destroyed about a century earlier. On the establishment chronology it is much earlier. Either way, does his surprise and grief upon finding out that the walls were torn down really make sense? No. So even a few establishment people like Kidner, Brockington, Allen, and Rudolph point out that normal exegesis mandates that this destruction of the walls and gates be a fairly recent event, not Nebuchadnezzar’s event. Nehemiah would not have needed to be informed that Nebuchadnezzar had broken down the walls and burned the gates with fire. Everyone knew that. That was old news. This is new news. And I can’t get into all the details, but let me have you flip to a few passages that show that the walls were indeed built while the temple was being built. Turn first to Ezra 5:3. This occurs during the second year of the reign of Darius.

At the same time Tattenai the governor of the region beyond the River and Shethar-Boznai and their companions came to them and spoke thus to them: “Who has commanded you to build this temple and finish this wall?”

Notice the phrase “finish this wall.” We saw last week that the wall had already been begun under Cyrus and was now being finished. Tattenai sends a letter to Darius, complaining about this, and asking if this had been authorized. He doesn’t just mention the temple. Apparently the walls were being built concurrently with the temple. Look at verses 8 and 9.

8 Let it be known to the king that we went into the province of Judea, to the temple of the great God, which is being built with heavy stones, and timber is being laid in the walls; and this work goes on diligently and prospers in their hands. 9 Then we asked those elders, and spoke thus to them: “Who commanded you to build this temple and to finish these walls?”

If walls were not being built, there would be no official complaint about the walls being built in Tattenai’s letter. But notice again that temple and walls go together. If you are going to have a temple filled with money you are going to need walls to defend it. I think it is crystal clear that the walls started to be built under Cyrus, whom (we saw last week) decreed that temple and walls be built.

Now let's move backward a couple of years to the first king who claimed the title Artaxerxes, namely Gaumata (sometimes called Pseudo-Smerdis because he had killed the real Smerdis and was claiming to be him on the throne). This is chapter 4, and is in the complaint written from the pagan rulers to Artaxerxes Smerdis. Chapter 4:12-13.

12 Let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem, and are building the rebellious and evil city, and are finishing its walls and repairing the foundations. 13 Let it now be known to the king that, if this city is built and the walls completed, they will not pay tax, tribute, or custom, and the king's treasury will be diminished.

Notice that the walls are not completed yet, but are indeed being built. If you count the years from the second year of Cyrus, when the temple was started to the time that this letter was written, they have been working on temple and walls for fifteen years, and neither one is finished yet. They had hoped to finish it earlier, but had not. On your chart you will see that the temple is finished on the last month of the sixth year of Darius and was dedicated on the first day of the first month of his seventh year. So it took a total of twenty years to build that temple, not five years as I accidentally said last week.

And we aren't told if the walls took longer, or if the walls were finished around the same time. But they were certainly getting close to being finished.

So the question comes, "What event resulted in the breaking down of the wall in Jerusalem in Nehemiah 1:3?" And my answer (which will have to wait to be fully developed for next week) is placed at 509 BC on your two-page date-chart. It was the battle of Gog and Magog that is outlined in Ezekiel 38-39 and discussed in the book of Esther. It was a time when it looked like every Jew might be killed in a demonic genocide started by Haman's dastardly decree. And because of the laws of the Medes and the Persians (a law that even Darius could not legally overturn) the best that Darius could do was to give a counter-decree that would allow the Jews to defend themselves. And defend themselves they did. But when you read the death toll in Ezekiel 38-39 you realize that this was a mighty work of God. So many died that it took seven years to find every bone and bury it and to burn all the javelins, spears, bows, arrows, and other equipment that had been brought against Jerusalem to destroy it. The enemies of Israel were demonically driven, and they took Darius' first decree to destroy the Jews seriously. And apparently they were initially successful enough to be able to tear down a great deal of that new wall. After you read Ezekiel 38-39 and Esther, you realize that event was certainly sufficient to have triggered this

ruining of the walls.

Ezekiel mentions that it would take 7 years to clean up the land. What is seven years from that Battle of Gog and Magog? Nehemiah chapter 1. Nehemiah may have assumed that with Mordecai in leadership, with Queen Esther's influence, and with the relative peace they were now experiencing under Mordecai's influence, that the walls would have been taken care of by now. But Hanani reports that the people are still being opposed by some and the walls are still in the same mess. They have cleaned up the rest of the land, but they have done nothing for the wall. And part of the reason given is that they still have severe opposition. They are not able to do it.

This stirs Nehemiah's spirit and he prays to God in chapter 1 a beautiful prayer of repentance and petition on behalf of Israel and the city. He realizes that Reformation has begun, but it certainly has not finished. And he will play a key role in the reformation of society.

II. Key theme: reformation of society

So you will see in your outlines that the key theme of the book is the reformation of society. Where Ezra was focused on the reformation of the church, this book goes much broader in its concerns for the need of reformation. Yes Ezra is also involved in this book, so the church renewal in chapter 9 is a very central theme. Without the covenant you have no reformation. But when true Reformation happens, it spreads out into all areas of life.

Let me outline some of the areas of society that this book addresses: labor practices, business practices, politics, administration, communication, marriage, children, a nation's official language, treaties, slavery, immigration, law, travel, work, a civic sabbath, tithing, war, leadership, money, interest rates, food distribution, spies and intrigue, self-defense, militias, temple, church, preaching, international relations, diplomacy, covenant, legal documents, God's call to be angry over the injustices in this world, and other issues. It goes way beyond the limited subjects that most books on Nehemiah are willing to address.

So this is not simply a book on leadership. It is a book designed to stir up our spirits to hate the things God hates in society and to seek to work to do something about those things. Later in this book Nehemiah models to us that there is a time for anger. If you do not get angry over abortion there is something wrong with you. Nehemiah says that there are things that church must get angry over. And in many other ways, this is a book outlining the

difficulties involved in bringing reformation to society. Rarely does that happen smoothly. But because Nehemiah was completely successful by the last verse, we can learn a great deal from this book on how to bring thorough-going reformation to Hungary, Kenya, Uganda, and the United States of America.

III. Key phrase: “Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built” (4:18)

The key phrase is Nehemiah 4:18 - “Every one of the builders had his sword girded at his side as he built.” What a marvelous image. They are laying stones and troweling them with cement, but they are ever ready to defend themselves with the sword. This became the watchword for the reformation that Charles Spurgeon was seeking to bring in England. His magazine was called *Sword and Trowel*. It was subtitled “A record of combat with sin and labor for the Lord.” Matthew Henry said, “Every true Christian is both a labourer and a soldier, working with one hand and fighting with the other.” So Matthew Henry says that the sword and trowel has implications for every Christian.

When you read this book you realize that Christianity is not about mild mannered people teaching other mild mannered people how to become more mild mannered. It is earnestly contending for the faith; earnestly contending for liberties; and earnestly contending against abusive leadership just like Nehemiah did. But we must positively build with one hand while contending with the other.

IV. Key verse: Nehemiah 8:10

The key verse is Nehemiah 8:10 - the one verse in this book that I quote more than any other. It not only shows the Sabbath to be the sign for the church but the sign for true reformation in society. But it makes clear that this sign of the covenant is intended for our joy. Let me read that. Nehemiah 8:10.

Then he said to them, “Go your way, eat the fat, drink the sweet, and send portions to those for whom nothing is prepared; for this day is holy to our Lord. Do not sorrow, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.”

Now, people love to take that last phrase out of context - “the joy of the Lord is your strength.” And it is a true phrase even out of context. But in context it is designed to show the heart of what the Sabbath is all about. The true Sabbath was designed to draw us into the joy of the Lord and to strengthen us. When rightly approached, the Sabbath is not a dreary and legalistic day,

but a day of rest and refreshment for society as a whole.

And Nehemiah certainly treated the Sabbath as being essential not only for the church, but essential for society as a whole. For those of you who don't think that the Sabbath has anything to do with unbelievers, please turn with me to Nehemiah 13, and I am going to read verses 15-22. It's a longer section, but I think it is worth reading.

Neh. 13:15 In those days I saw people in Judah treading wine presses on the Sabbath, and bringing in sheaves, and loading donkeys with wine, grapes, figs, and all kinds of burdens, which they brought into Jerusalem on the Sabbath day. And I warned them about the day on which they were selling provisions. 16 Men of Tyre dwelt there also, who brought in fish and all kinds of goods, and sold them on the Sabbath to the children of Judah, and in Jerusalem.

Neh. 13:17 Then I contended with the nobles of Judah, and said to them, "What evil thing is this that you do, by which you profane the Sabbath day? 18 Did not your fathers do thus, and did not our God bring all this disaster on us and on this city? Yet you bring added wrath on Israel by profaning the Sabbath."

Neh. 13:19 So it was, at the gates of Jerusalem, as it began to be dark before the Sabbath, that I commanded the gates to be shut, and charged that they must not be opened till after the Sabbath. Then I posted some of my servants at the gates, so that no burdens would be brought in on the Sabbath day. 20 Now the merchants and sellers of all kinds of wares lodged outside Jerusalem once or twice.

Neh. 13:21 Then I warned them, and said to them, "Why do you spend the night around the wall? If you do so again, I will lay hands on you!" From that time on they came no more on the Sabbath. 22 And I commanded the Levites that they should cleanse themselves, and that they should go and guard the gates, to sanctify the Sabbath day.

I know that is a controversial topic, but so is the whole book. Christians don't like to think about reformation of society and they don't like to think about the Sabbath as being an absolutely essential law for civil society. You know that society has gone through a true reformation when it keeps the Sabbath. The last Blue Laws (or Sabbath laws) up in Canada were removed from the books when I was still a teenager. I remember as a teenager that quite a few business owners spent time in jail trying to challenge and overturn that law. And sadly they succeeded. But many Reformed people are not sad about that because they reject the Sabbath for today. In my books that is like rejecting the joy of the Lord; it's ridiculous. The Sabbath is a great gift.

And because it is a great gift, Nehemiah was outraged when merchants sought to steal that gift from society in chapter 13. He was outraged. You cannot escape the conclusion that the Sabbath was intended by God to be imposed upon believers and unbelievers alike. It was intended to be a blessing on society as a whole. I am absolutely in agreement with Greg Bahnsen on that point. Even the way it was written into the fourth

commandment makes it clear that this was not just the sign of the covenant for the church (as Meredith Kline falsely claimed); it is the sign of the covenant for the entire society. Deuteronomy 5:12-15 says,

Observe the Sabbath day, to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. 13 Six days you shall labor and do all your work, 14 but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your ox, nor your donkey, nor any of your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates, that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. 15 And remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out from there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath day.

So Nehemiah was not being legalistic when he enforced the Sabbath on the foreign merchants who came to trade in the land. He believed in free trade, but only within the confines of the law. And the Sabbath law is a law for families, employers, employees, cattle, and even the strangers who are within your gates. Not just within your homes, but within your gates.

Do you know why the Pilgrims left Holland and came to America? It was because the Christians in Holland didn't keep the Sabbath. And the Pilgrims knew that sooner or later when a society despises the sign of the covenant, the covenant as a whole will be despised and all God's laws will be despised. And they were right. Holland went bad much more quickly than any Sabbatarian country did. So I believe that Nehemiah 8:10 is the key verse of the whole book because the sabbath is at the heart of the covenant that was at the heart of the reformation for that society. The sign of whether Reformation has fully come to a country is whether they keep the Sabbath in the joy of the Lord.

V. Key chapter - Neh. 10

The key chapter is Nehemiah 10. It shows an entire nation renewing covenant with God, much like the Scottish Covenanters did. Perhaps the most famous covenants were the Scottish National Covenant and the Solemn League and Covenant. In those covenants both the church and the state covenanted with God much like happened in chapter 10 of Nehemiah. Reformed Churches have pointed out that the very nature of God calls for covenanting. He is a covenant God and He calls us to be a covenant people. It has been fashionable in libertarian Christian circles to abandon the covenant in favor of contract and/or to treat the covenant as if it is identical with a contract. It is not. We will never see full-blown reformation until we see the full ramifications of the covenant lived out by family, church, and

state in every area of social life. Most Baptists don't have sufficient means to produce a Reformation because they truncate the covenant and limit it to church, and sadly the Presbyterians who should know better aren't using the means that they do have. The covenant is central; but it must be applied.

VI. The outline of the book is in two parts: 1) Restoration of the wall (1-7) and 2) Restoration of the covenant (8-13)

The outline of this book is unbelievably simple. Chapters 1-7 show restoration of the wall and chapters 8-13 show restoration of the covenant. The wall separated the covenant people from its enemies and the restoration of the covenant set up spiritual walls that kept people from falling.

VII. Christ of Nehemiah

A. Temple, priests, sacrifices, Festival days (10:1 - 12:47; etc.)

Contrary to the opinion of some, Christ is also richly displayed in this book. Jesus said that He is in every book of the Bible. The priests all pointed to the priesthood of Christ and because the nation was called to be a nation of priests, the citizens pointed to the universal priesthood of believers. The sacrifices and festival days also pointed to Jesus here just like they do in other books.

B. Nehemiah (there are many more parallels, but here are a few:)

But the type of Christ that I want to focus on is Nehemiah.¹ There are actually far more parallels between Nehemiah and Jesus than I have put into your outline, but for sake of time, these will have to suffice.

Wept over Jerusalem and interceded for her (1:4; Mark 6:34; Matt. 23:37-39; Is. 53:3)

In chapter 1:4 Nehemiah wept over Jerusalem. It says, "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." Jesus not only wept over

¹ There are very few allusions to Nehemiah in the New Testament (John 5:2; 1 Cor. 14:16; 1 Tim. 2:8; Luke 24:27; Rev 14:7; Rom. 7:12; 1 Cor. 10:1; Gal. 3:12 would represent some), but commentators on the Gospels show how the Gospel deliberately display images of Nehemiah in Christ. This is one of the types that is not explicitly said to be a type, but rather is displayed in more subtle ways in the Gospels.

Jerusalem and prayed for its elect children, but he wept so frequently that Isaiah 53:3 says that He was “a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.” Nehemiah’s intercessions are passionate types of Christ’s intercessions for His church.

Lowers himself from position of glory to identify with his suffering people (2:1-6; 5:14-19; Phil. 2:6-11)

Like Christ, Nehemiah lowered himself from a position of glory - next to the emperor Darius and with all the comforts of life, to a position that involved huge sacrifices and very little comfort. He refused to take the taxes that the emperor had allowed him to take, refused to take provisions from the people that were his due, and sacrificed hugely for the kingdom. He did so because he identified with the sufferings of his people. He wept over them in chapter 1 and in later chapters he was greatly zealous on their behalf.

And Jesus left His glory and humbled himself to be incarnate as a man, born in a manger, to be maligned in life, and maligned in death. He did so because He identified with His people.

Empowered and resourced by emperor (2:8; Luke 10:22; 22:29)

In chapter 2:8 the king tells him that he can have anything he desires to take with him. He is empowered and resourced for his mission even as the Gospel of Luke says that Christ was empowered and resourced for His mission by the Father. Luke 10:22 says, “All things have been delivered to Me by My Father.” He was empowered and resourced.

The nations rage against him (Neh. 4:1-3,7;etc.), mock him (4:1), and plot against his life (Neh. 6:2,10-13). (See Psa. 2:1-3; 22:1-21; Matt. 27:27; John 10:39)

Nehemiah chapter 4 shows the absolutely irrational hatred that the nations around Jerusalem had for Nehemiah. And I say that it is irrational because of the fact that the emperor and queen were favorable to the Jews. What gives? That doesn’t make sense politically. There is something spiritual going on behind the scenes.

These enemies attacked him, mocked him, plotted against his life, slandered him, and in every way they could think of opposed his work. And in this he stands as a type of Christ who also experienced the irrational hatred of the world. This hatred for Christ is so irrational that Psalm 2 begins with a “Why?” “Why do the nations rage, and the people plot a vain thing?”

Psalm 22 describes the enemies of Christ treating Him as a worm, mocking

Him, raging and roaring against Him, pursuing Him like a pack of wild dogs, and seeking to kill Him.

He set slaves free and remove burdens (5:5-11,18; Is. 61:1; Matt. 11:30; Luke 4:18-19)

In Nehemiah 5 Jesus went to bat for the people who had been enslaved and he freed them and declared a year of Jubilee for them. In a similar way, Jesus quoted Isaiah and said,

18 “The Spirit of the LORD is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.”

And the acceptable year of the Lord that He referred to was the year of Jubilee. So this is a book that speaks of Christ’s liberating power extending not just to invisible things, but even to tangible things like economics. Those who follow God’s law find more and more liberty even in society.

He came not to be served but to serve (5:14-19; Matt. 20:28)

In chapter 5:14-19 Nehemiah says that he did not come to be served, but to serve. Even though he had a right to the governor’s provisions like the previous governors had, he did not take that right. There is something very deliberate here, and I think it is sovereignly done because of the typology. Instead of taking finances, Nehemiah hugely financed the kingdom himself. Let me read verses 14-19.

Neh. 5:14 Moreover, from the time that I was appointed to be their governor in the land of Judah, from the twentieth year until the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes, twelve years, neither I nor my brothers ate the governor’s provisions. 15 But the former governors who were before me laid burdens on the people, and took from them bread and wine, besides forty shekels of silver. Yes, even their servants bore rule over the people, but I did not do so, because of the fear of God. 16 Indeed, I also continued the work on this wall, and we did not buy any land. All my servants were gathered there for the work. Neh. 5:17 And at my table were one hundred and fifty Jews and rulers, besides those who came to us from the nations around us. 18 Now that which was prepared daily was one ox and six choice sheep. Also fowl were prepared for me, and once every ten days an abundance of all kinds of wine. Yet in spite of this I did not demand the governor’s provisions, because the bondage was heavy on this people.

Neh. 5:19 Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people.

He’s not bragging. Keep in mind that prophets never spoke by their own will but were moved by the Holy Spirit to write every word. And the Holy Spirit directed us to know about Nehemiah’s sacrifices because he was a type of Christ.

Did not flee when his life was threatened (6:11; John 12)

Though Nehemiah's life was repeatedly threatened, he always refused to flee. One time when someone encouraged him to hide in the temple, he said, "Should such a man as I flee? And who is there such as I who would go into the temple to save his life? I will not go in!"

And in the same way, Jesus faced His persecutors rather than fleeing from them. In the Triumphal Entry, Jesus went straight into the lion's den, so to speak.

He cleanses the temple and land (13:1-31; Matt. 21:12-13)

But Nehemiah was also a temple-cleanser. In chapter 13, Nehemiah was absolutely outraged over the fact that Eliashib the high priest had been bought with the pagan Tobiah's money and had not only entered into an alliance with him, but had made a large room for Tobiah within the courts of the temple. Here is the enemy of God's people (an anti-Christ so-to-speak) who was living in the temple. This was compromise on a level of the compromises that Caiaphas the High Priest made in Christ's day. So chapter 13:8-9 says,

Neh. 13:8 And it grieved me bitterly; therefore I threw all the household goods of Tobiah out of the room. 9 Then I commanded them to cleanse the rooms; and I brought back into them the articles of the house of God, with the grain offering and the frankincense.

In this he stands as a type of Jesus whose zeal for the house of God ate Him up, and He twice cleansed the temple of the compromisers who were there.

He had to return to the emperor (13:4-6; John 16:5-7)

Chapter 13:4-6 also records that Nehemiah had to return to the emperor for a while just as Jesus said,

But now I go away to Him who sent Me, and none of you asks Me, 'Where are You going?' 6 But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your heart.

Re-instituted true Sabbath rest (8:9-12; 13:19; Heb. 4:1-11; Matt. 28:1; Mark 16:2; Luke 24:1; John 20:1; 1 Cor. 16:1-2)

And finally, Nehemiah 8:9-12 restored the truly joyous Sabbath-keeping that God had intended and Nehemiah 13:19 enforced that Sabbath observance as an ordinance for even unbelievers in the social order. This is because the Sabbath was a creation ordinance given to Adam and Eve (or as Jesus said, "the Sabbath was made for mankind") and as a creation ordinance is just as long-lasting as marriage and work are. The Sabbath was said in the Old Testament to be an everlasting sign of the everlasting covenant (Ex. 31:16-17; cf. Ezek. 20:12,20; Is. 55:3; 56:1-8).

In the same way, Jesus repeatedly bucked and overturned the Pharisee's distortions of the Sabbath and re-instituted a proper observance of that day. He returned the joy of the Lord to that day. And keep in mind that the faulty Sabbath rules that Jesus bucked were civil laws. He doesn't just bring reformation to the church. He brings reformation to society and society's laws. Though this sign of the covenant points us to a heavenly rest according to Hebrews 4, Hebrews denies that Jesus did away with the Sabbath. Instead, it explicitly says, "There remains therefore a sabbath-keeping for the people of God."

Ever since the resurrection of Jesus, when the seventh day Sabbath was forever done away with and the first day Sabbath was instituted, Jesus restored what was lost to Adam - a joyous resting in God's finished work before we take our week of dominion. 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 says, ...as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: 2 On the first day sabbath let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper...

VIII. Overview of the book

With all of this background material, let me give you an overview of the book. We have already seen Nehemiah's weeping over Jerusalem and intercession on behalf of his people in chapter 1. Let's pick up at chapter 2. I'm going to spend much more time in chapters 2-4 because they are critical to understanding the rest of the book.

And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, I won't repeat myself on why I believe this particular Artaxerxes was Darius² rather than Longimanus, as the establishment claims. On our chronology, Ezra would be 85 years old in this chapter and Nehemiah would be 65 years old. Both were quite old on even our chronology, but they would have been impossibly old on the establishment view, with Ezra being 141 years old (with another 12 years of ministry to go) and Nehemiah being 121 years old (with another 12 years of ministry to go). In any case, I believe

2 The Elephantine Papyri give additional evidence to what I presented last week. There was an island in the Nile called "Elephantine" in Greek, and there was a Jewish colony in Egypt on that Island. Archaeologists have uncovered a number of legal documents and letters addressed to various persons in the Persian empire from this colony. A number of them are dated in the years of Darius, and these letters refer to the following people mentioned in Nehemiah: Bigvai (Neh. 7:19); Johanan the high priest; Hanani (Nehemiah's brother - Neh. 1:2); Sanballat (Neh. 3:1) (Papyri 21-22, 30-34). Because the present scholarly opinion is that Ezra and Nehemiah lived in the time of Artaxerxes Longimanus, it is assumed that the Darius of the Elephantine Papyri must be Darius II, who followed Longimanus. In terms of the short chronology, however, these letters should be understood as having been written in the time of Darius the Great. It is interesting to notice that in Elephantine Papyrus No. 21 we have a letter to the head of the Elephantine colony, Yedoniah, from Hananiah, who might be Nehemiah's brother. The letter instructs them that King Darius had ordered in his 5th year that the Jews were to celebrate Passover. This squares with Ezra 5.

both internal and external evidence forces us to the conclusion that this Artaxerxes is Darius. He continues:

when wine was before him, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before. 2 Therefore the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart."

Because of the fear of assassinations and poisoning, kings always looked for any signs of problems by reading body language. Nehemiah was a cup bearer. In addition to many public duties, a cup bearer drank from the king's cup to prove there was no poison in it. So it says,

So I became dreadfully afraid, 3 and said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?"

Nehemiah was appealing to the results of a decree that the king himself had made seven years before, that had then been countered with another decree through Moredecai and Esther. This is not distant history. Haman's decree had resulted in this destruction and the king had saved the lives of many citizens, but had not averted problems completely. So this immediately piques the king's interest. Verse 4:

Neh. 2:4 Then the king said to me, "What do you request?" 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."

The king no doubt knew that Nehemiah had been there before under his predecessor Cyrus, but this was still a bold request. Nehemiah was going to be asking for a twelve year absence from the king - a king who depended hugely upon him. Verse 6:

Neh. 2:6 Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him), "How long will your journey be? And when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me; and I set him a time.

On the shorter biblical chronology, the queen sitting beside him was Queen Esther. That's who I believe it is. Again, with a proper chronology, the last three historical books interpret each other. God favored Nehemiah, and it pleased the king. Maybe it pleased him because the queen was sitting beside him. But for whatever reason, he gave permission, and he set a time. We know later in the book that the time he set was twelve years - a long time to be gone. But the damage to walls and city must have been extensive. And Nehemiah boldly asks for materials for this project in the next verses, and the king grants them. In light of the events of Esther seven years before, this makes total sense. He arrives in Jerusalem.

Verse 10 of chapter 2 says,

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of it, they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel.

Why would Sanballat and Tobiah dare to have opposition and hostility to Nehemiah when he came at the decree of the king? Because they knew this king was legalistically bound by the laws of the Medes and the Persians, which cannot be annulled (Esth. 1:19; Dan. 6:8,12,15). His hands were tied by his first decree under Haman. Yes, under Mordecai Jews were allowed to defend themselves, but the law also still allowed the Jews to be opposed. What Sanballat and Tobiah were doing was perfectly legal (not lawful, but legal). So the Jews and their enemies were at a stalemate at this point. They are testing each other out and evaluating each other's strength.

So in verses 11-20 Nehemiah surreptitiously and very cautiously investigated what needed to be done in the dead of night with only a few trusted men with him. He didn't want anyone knowing that he was doing this investigation. He was on a dangerous mission. He could easily be assassinated. Verse 16 says,

And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the others who did the work.

Legally he could have been killed at any time based on that previous decree. Anyway, he gives a speech when it is day and convinced the leaders that the emperor had authorized him to rebuild the walls, and they are quite willing to join with him.

The boldness of Sanballat and Tobiah's opposition in verse 19 is astonishing, given the king's decree. But later in the book we can understand it when we realize that key leaders were in covenant with these two leaders. These two had an enormous amount of influence within Israel. It made them brash.

Verse 19:

Neh. 2:19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed at us and despised us, and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?"

Neh. 2:20 So I answered them, and said to them, "The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem."

Just like Ezra before him, he draws the lines of antithesis clearly. And he has enough of an army and cavalry that he brought with him from Babylon (according to verse 9) that they don't dare directly attack. So Nehemiah begins work on the wall.

In chapter 3 we have a marvelous administration of that work, where each family takes ownership for part of the project. They get the credit for what is accomplished and they are accountable if nothing gets accomplished. That chapter is the antithesis of communism. Each person had ownership of their particular project. There are a lot of cool principles in that chapter that Gary

covered in his class.

Throughout this book, Nehemiah's responses beautifully illustrate the relation between divine sovereignty and human responsibility. It is God's sovereignty that enables us to be truly responsible. When confronted with a problem he didn't just say, "Let's pray about it," and then leave the results up to God. No, he used every resource and means that God enabled them to use. For example, in chapter 4, prayer for help in verses 4-5 immediately leads to work on the wall in verse 6. Prayer for protection in verse 9 immediately leads to setting an armed guard. They knew that as they used every means at their disposal they could rest with confidence in God's perfect plan, but they were not to be presumptuous. Whenever I read this book I think of Oliver Cromwell's famous statement "Trust in God, and keep your powder dry." There was no passivity in Nehemiah and there should not be such a temptation for us either.

Some will point to Scriptures that say we are to wait on the Lord. That is true, but the passages that say that imply great effort and activity on our part. Scripture does not separate faith and effort as if they were unrelated. Hebrews 11 is the great chapter on faith, and every example of faith has action. Certainly Isaiah 40:29-31 says that we should wait upon the Lord, but that means we are to look to him as the source and pattern for all that we do. It is not a passive waiting. It doesn't say, "They that wait upon the Lord shall roost like lazy chickens." Rather it says "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint. If we aren't active we aren't waiting like God wants us to wait. Let's look at the practical activities that Nehemiah used to handle opposition.

The first form of opposition is given in chapter 4:1-6. It is scorn. The enemies mock and deride this project and try to make it look impossible. We could summarize the criticism of the enemies in the scornful phrase "What are these feeble Jews doing?" (v. 2) Verses 1-3 indicate how pitiful Sanballat and Tobiah thought the work to be. The numbers of the Jews were so small, and the work that they had undertaken was so great that it appeared laughable to the critics of the Jews. At first they thought that there was no way they could accomplish this. This scorn was intended to demoralize the workers and keep them from working. It is peer pressure and shame of what others would think about us that tends to make us give up. Scorn can be very demoralizing.

How did Nehemiah respond? He ignored them, prayed, and got back to

work. And by the way, his prayer was not for guppies. It was calling down God's judgments. We need to have a few more prayers like Nehemiah's prayers in the church. But he did not allow scorn to make him give up on his work.

The next form of opposition was the use of force in verses 7-23. When scorn failed it gave place to force. We should not think that the Church will not meet the opposition of force. Those who compromise and fail to build all the wall as God wants it built may not face force, but if we are faithful to God we probably will stir up opposition that is stronger.

Look at the formidable alliance - Sanballat, Tobiah, Arabians, Ammonites and Ashdodites. Isn't it amazing how mutual enemies can be mutual friends when opposing God's people? Pilate and Herod patched up their quarrel and Luke 23:12 says that they became friends on the day that Herod mocked Jesus.

The third thing to discourage them was the enormous amount of rubbish. You can see this in chapter 4 verses 2, 10, and 19. It was overwhelming. In verse 10 the leaders of Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall."

There was far more rubbish than they could handle, or so it appeared. It was back breaking work and it was heart breaking as well since there never seemed to be an end to the work. We live in a day and age when there is much rubbish that is hindering the progress of the kingdom. Furthermore, the manpower for removing the rubbish and building the wall is very limited. The words of Nehemiah could have come right out of our own mouths. The work is great and extensive and we are separated far from one another on the wall.

What kind of work do we have to reverse Satan's damage? Oh, it's huge. The leadership of both major political parties seems to be controlled by the shadow government. Neither one follows constitutional restraints. Socialism of every brand seems to be deeply entrenched. State schools seem to be supported by even Christians. Evolutionism infects the thinking of everyone. Feminism, LGBTQ+ agendas, abortion, attempts at gun control, and agencies controlling every segment of society seems like an impossible problem to overturn. Yet the book of Nehemiah shows us how to accomplish the impossible.

First, rather than having their vision clouded by the circumstances Nehemiah exhorted them to have a vision that was driven by the greatness of God. (v.

14) “Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome...” If we could be gripped with the same awesome realization of God’s majesty it would help us to overcome our fears. Too often we look at life through the sun glasses of our difficult circumstances and we begin to think that all of life is dark and gloomy. Surprise, surprise. That’s what sunglasses do. God wants us to as it were take off those sun glasses and to look through the clear spectacles of His word and see things from His perspective. I love the story of Elisha and his servant in Dothan. The servant thought the end had come when he saw the multitudes of enemy forces surrounding the city. He looked at life through the perspective of his circumstances and was in dread and fear. When God opened his eyes he saw all the fiery chariots and horses of God around about on the hills. He realized then that greater is he who is with us than he who is with the world. We need to immerse ourselves in the realization that God is mightier than the enemies and He is on our side. We have an even greater hope since we are living during the period of Christ’s mediatorial reign.

Secondly they were to realize the issues that were at stake if they did not act. “.and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.” (v. 14) They could expect no mercy from their enemies and everything that they owned was at stake. If only churches today could realize the issues that are stake in their compromises! Unfortunately evangelicals support pluralism little realizing that the humanists are using the doctrine of pluralism to stamp out the exclusive claims of Christ. His claims are exclusive: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through Me.” But Satan also has universal aspirations. Satan is not content to keep some territory and to let us have the rest. He wants universal dominion. If we do not conquer, Satan will. There is no neutral ground. As many Christians will testify in Communist, Hindu, and Islamic countries, when satanic ideologies control the land there is only tyranny. The stakes are high in the conflict between the universal claims of Christ and the universal claims of Satan. It is conceivable that in the future our sons, our daughters, our wives and our houses will be in jeopardy as they were in Nehemiah’s day. The greatness of the stakes should stir us up to embrace our task with vigor as well.

Thirdly, Nehemiah instructed them to both build and to be ready to fight at a moment’s notice. They were to hold a tool in one hand and a weapon in the other. And I’ve already dealt with that paragraph earlier.

But in this book Nehemiah doesn’t just deal with external enemies. He deals with internal problems as well. In chapter 5 he deals with oppression,

economic antinomianism, and even slavery. In chapter 6 he deals with Jews who were siding with the enemy and had compromised. They posed a huge problem to him. Yet in verse 16 of that chapter he finished the wall, and in chapter 7 he repopulates the city with people, many of whom had come in that first migration 35 years before. He just kept working and trusting God with the results.

Then in chapters 8 to the end of the book we have a restoration of the covenant. The covenant is based upon the law of God and the grace of God, so Ezra reads God's law to everyone and interprets it over a period of days. He reinstates a truly liberating and joyful Sabbath in verses 9 and following. They celebrated the Festival of Tabernacles. In chapter 9 there is a corporate confession of sins, which was the prelude for the re-covenanting with God.

In chapter 10 there is a signing of covenant documents by both church officials and state officials as well as every member of the church. The issue that sparked this was people marrying unbelievers. This is either a new falling away or the same event that was dealt with in Ezra 9-10. Commentators are divided on that. I don't have the time to get into it. But it was critical that the homes be strong if church and state is to be strong. So chapter 10 makes a covenant with families, churches, and state. In many ways this was identical to the Scottish covenanting that went on during both reformations in Scotland.

Chapter 11 lists the people who moved into the city of Jerusalem. Even that chapter has cool lessons that we can't get into this morning. But it certainly speaks to administration, migration, a willingness to move for the sake of the kingdom, resetting family traditions, etc.

Chapter 12 highlights dedication of both wall and temple again.

And then chapter 13 deals with a summary of reforms that Nehemiah was instrumental in. Verses 1-3 deal with very important principles of separation that run completely counter to the modern ecumenical movement. The Bible could care less about organizational unity if there is no unity in the truth and unity in holiness.

I already mentioned Nehemiah throwing all the furniture of Tobiah out of the temple.

Verses 10-14 deal with his reformations of the temple and making sure that the poor priests were adequately compensated for their labors. They had to get outside jobs to be able to survive, and Nehemiah wants to make sure that

they can concentrate upon service. There is precedent in the law for ministers to be full-time well-paid servants rather than tent-makers.

In verses 15-22 he threatens to lay hands on merchants from Tyre who were selling wares on the Sabbath, and in doing so he establishes the principle that the Sabbath is for Jew and Gentile, believer and unbeliever, past, present, and future. Yes, there are civil penalties for Sabbath breaking in the law. And it is one of many verses I appeal to in order to show that lesser penalties than the maximum penalty were allowed by God. But in any case, we have already seen that it is an abiding and enduring law as long as the earth lasts.

In verses 23-27 he deals with those who had married unbelievers. People are troubled by verse 25, where he contended with some, pronounced curses on others, struck others, and pulled the hair out of others. Is a civil magistrate allowed to do that? Well, it depends on the nature of the crime. But for the few people that he gave physical punishment to, if it was less than the penalty that the law gave as a maximum (and believe me, the law gave a much more severe penalty for such apostasy), I have no problem with his lesser penalties. And verse 26 makes it clear that Solomon was in sin when he married multiple wives and when he married pagans.

In verses 28-29 he drove out one of the grandsons of the high priest because he was married to the daughter of Sanballat, the Horonite. When you are covenanted with Israel's sworn enemy, you are guilty of treason. Nehemiah was actually going easy on this grandson, given that he was engaged in treason.

For those of you who are discouraged over the problems in the church of our day, take heart from Nehemiah. What may look impossible to you, is possible for God. Compromise happens and we must constantly work for reformation. We can never let our guard down. As early Americans used to paraphrase John Philpot Curran, "Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty."

When even the priesthood was in a mess, you can imagine the work that Nehemiah had cut out for him. Yet he was successful. The last verse of the book says,

Neh. 13:30 Thus I cleansed them of everything pagan. I also assigned duties to the priests and the Levites, each to his service, 31 and to bringing the wood offering and the firstfruits at appointed times.

Remember me, O my God, for good!

In short, Nehemiah is a call to not ignore the problems that we face in our society, no matter where those problems may appear. Jesus Christ claims

every square inch of planet earth, and we are His ambassadors reconciling the world to Him. We must be good ambassadors and not deny His claims over culture simply because we are afraid of what others might think. If He is not Lord of all, He is not Lord at all. That means He must be Lord of American politics. May we be involved to the degree that our callings allow. And may God give us success in the face of overwhelming obstacles. Amen.