

NEHEMIAH

Part 7: “Faithful Endurance”

Nehemiah 10:28–32, 39; 12:27; 43

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Scripture Reading

“The rest of the people, the priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers, the singers, the temple servants, and all who have separated themselves from the peoples of the lands to the Law of God, their wives, their sons, their daughters, all who have knowledge and understanding, join with their brothers, their nobles, and enter into a curse and an oath to walk in God’s Law that was given by Moses the servant of God, and to observe and do all the commandments of the LORD our Lord and his rules and his statutes. We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons. And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day. And we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt. We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God.... For the people of Israel and the sons of Levi shall bring the contribution of grain, wine, and oil to the chambers, where the vessels of the sanctuary are, as well as the priests who minister, and the gatekeepers and the singers. We will not neglect the house of our God” (Neh 10:28–32, 39).

“And at the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem they sought the Levites in all their places, to bring them to Jerusalem to celebrate the dedication with gladness, with thanksgivings and with singing, with cymbals, harps, and lyres.... And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away” (Neh 12:27; 43).

Introduction

Today, we are concluding our study of Nehemiah, which is one of the greatest stories of restoration and revival in all of Scripture.

At the beginning of the story, the people of Judah have returned to their ancestral Promise Land after suffering years of exile. Yet, even though they have returned to their land, Jerusalem, the Holy City, lies in shambles and ruin. The walls are broken down. The gates are burnt with fire. The people of God are in derision and shame, as they are exposed to abuse and attack from their enemies.

Enter Nehemiah. Nehemiah is a Jewish man who has ascended to the position of a high-ranking official in the Persian government. When he hears of the brokenness of the city of his forefathers, he is grieved. He fasts. He prays. And, at great risk to himself, he requests for that the Persian King would give him the permission and provision to go and restore Jerusalem.

Nehemiah receives the blessing and authority of the king. But even more, he possesses an authority granted by God, who is the King of all kings. So, he goes to Jerusalem. He carefully examines the brokenness of the city. He mobilizes the people of Jerusalem for action, and in fifty-two days—despite external threats and attacks—Nehemiah and the people of Judah restore a city that had been in ruins for decades.

But the rebuilding of the broken-down walls is not the end of the story. After all, the story of Nehemiah has always been about more than a mere physical restoration. Nehemiah is a story of *spiritual* restoration as well.

And as we have been looking into this story and laying it on top of our lives, we have been asking two primary questions: 1.) how does Nehemiah challenge us to love our city and seek restoration wherever there is brokenness in our city? and 2.) In a time when the Church at large has endured great brokenness, how does Nehemiah challenge us to restore the integrity of our witness before a watching world?

Today, we are going to see again how these two themes relate together as we summarize the last few chapters of Nehemiah. In fact, the two passages we just read show how physical and spiritual restoration are to be seen together in Nehemiah. The first passage spells out the specific terms of how the people of Judah are renewing their commitment to God. The second passage is about the dedication ceremony of the newly restored city walls.

The restoration and dedication of the wall is the outward symbol of the spiritual revival and renewal that has taken place inside the city. But now that the work is done, the people must commit themselves to endure for the long run.

Big spiritually-charged moments are important. But our spiritual health is measured not in sudden bursts of revival or emotional highs. Our spiritual health is measured by faithfully walking with God in our daily lives.

It is through the profoundly ordinary means of grace that the extraordinary power of God flows. It is through our the most simple and unimpressive rhythms of grace of that we, with unveiled eyes, evermore behold Jesus—as the Holy Spirit transforms us from one degree of glory to another; sanctifying us and molding us into Christ-likeness. This is how we remain faithful. This is how we endure.

Now that the restoration is accomplished, Nehemiah calls the people to **“Faithful Endurance.”** God’s people are to be a distinct and holy people. They are to be a people of integrity who are enduringly faithful to the mission of God.

How does this happen practically? From today's text we will see how this happens in four ordinary, but often overlooked ways: 1.) *Faithful Marriages and Families*, 2.) *Faithful Sabbath Rest*, 3.) *Faithful Generosity*, and 4.) *Faithful Leadership*.

Exposition

1.) Faithful Marriages and Families

Our text says, "*We will not give our daughters to the peoples of the land or take their daughters for our sons*" (Neh 10:30).

There are reasons that this commitment needs to be made. We learn in the final chapter of Nehemiah that, since returning to the Promise Land, several Jewish people have allowed their sons and daughters to intermarry with the people of the land. Then, as they begin to have children, these children begin to speak a different language, they begin to serve other gods, and they begin to forget who they are called to be as part of God's holy people.¹

Now, sadly, passages like these in the past have been misused to argue against interracial marriage. I want to be clear: that position is not what the Bible is arguing for. In fact, there is a whole book of the Bible named Ruth that is all about a foreign woman who becomes a part of the people of God through marriage. Ruth is viewed as one of the greatest heroines of the Bible. She faithfully loves and serves the Lord, and she is even a direct ancestor of Jesus!

No, the point is this: the spiritual health of our marriages and our families is *vital* to the mission of God's people. The spiritual health of our marriages and families is *vital* to the enduring witness of God's people.

The Bible envisions marriage as a covenant union between one man and one woman that is both faithful and enduring.

One of the more contested aspects of Christian morality in today's culture is the Christian view of marriage and family. But we need to understand that the ethics surrounding these topics are not outdated, arbitrary restrictions on our freedom. The moral commands of God are the words of a wise heavenly father that are for the flourishing and joy of his people.

Even more, the ethical commands about marriage and family flow from the gospel. This is particularly evident in how Ephesians 5 connects its vision of marriage to the gospel: "*Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord...Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her...This mystery [of marriage] is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church*" (Eph 5:22, 25, 32).

¹ Nehemiah 13:23–27

I've told this story before, but I have a very dear friend who once worked with me in ministry in the early days of this church. He ended up leaving his role here to study law, and today he is a practicing attorney in Kansas City.

When he went to law school, he had just studied a lot about evangelism, neighborhood outreach, and missional living. He was excited at the opportunity to share his faith. I asked him after his first year in law school about what was the most effective way to share his faith.

He said, by far, the most effective witness he had to the gospel was his marriage. He said law school tended to not be good for most marriages. Many of the people he studied with were non-Christians who lightly ridiculed my friend for once being a minister. But over time, they noticed that he truly loved his wife and his kids. He wouldn't talk negatively about his wife, and he wouldn't talk about how attractive he found other women. The three other men of his study group began to notice. And it when some of those men experienced hardship in marriage and came to him for help, he was able to share the gospel with them.

His marriage was the strongest testimony to the gospel before those that were close to him. In this case, his gospel display gave credibility to his gospel declaration.

The people of God are to live in the world, but we are not to be of the world. We shouldn't expect the world to agree with our vision of marriage and family. But we should not criticize the corruption of culture if we are unwilling to fight for holiness in our homes and our hearts.

So, for those of us who are married, we need to ask ourselves: are our marriages and families testifying to that which is good, true, and beautiful? Are our homes environments where our neighbors can experience the holiness of God, the grace of Christ, and the fruit of the Holy Spirit?

2.) Faithful Sabbath Rest

Look back at our text: *“And if the peoples of the land bring in goods or any grain on the Sabbath day to sell, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on a holy day. And we will forego the crops of the seventh year and the exaction of every debt”* (Neh 10:31).

Now that Jerusalem is rebuilt, the peoples of the surrounding land want to do business in Jerusalem. However, they are not only coming to sell in the market on the weekdays. They are buying and selling on the day of the Sabbath—the holy day of the week that was to be set aside for rest and worship.

Yet, Nehemiah and the leaders call the people of Judah to renew their commitment to the Sabbath, which included everything from weekly worship, to holy days, to giving the land rest every seven years, and even extended to the forgiving of all debts every seven years.

In the ancient world, the Sabbath was one of the most distinctive and countercultural aspects of Jewish culture. God's people were to work hard for six days. But one day a week, they—as a people and an entire culture—were called and commanded to cease from their labors, to rest, to worship, and to remember that they were no longer an enslaved people.²

Since ancient times, the Jewish people observed the Sabbath on a Saturday, the final day of the week, because that was when God finished the work of creation. But ever since that first Easter Sunday, when Jesus rose from the dead, Christians have observed the Sabbath on Sunday, as the day God finished the work of our redemption.

To take a day of Sabbath, to choose worship and rest over frenetic activity and tasks lists is still a deeply countercultural act. Sabbath goes against the grain of our hectic schedules and our culture of busyness. And that is why keeping the Sabbath is a radical act of faith. *We rest in Sabbath not because our work is finished but because Jesus's work is forever finished!*

The Sabbath is more than just a rule—it is a gift of grace. Through corporate worship—through singing and Scripture reading and praying—we are told and retold the story of our redemption. We are invited to see ourselves and participate within the story that God is authoring onto creation. We are reminded that we are called to bear the image of Christ!

So, do not neglect the Sabbath. Do not neglect the gathering of believers, as is the habit of some. Sabbath worship renews us and testifies to a day when all things will be made new.

That's why for the Prophet Isaiah, Sabbath meant so much more than just a day of rest. Rather, the heart of Sabbath was about restoration. The restoration of our hearts and our worship; the restoration of peace between nations of the world; restoration of justice within human society; and, ultimately, the restoration of the cosmos itself!³

We live in a weary, anxious age. Our restless world and our restless hearts are groaning for a peace that lies in Christ alone. What better gift do we have to offer the watching world than the embodied gift of Sabbath rest?

So, let us hear and respond the voice of our Savior. Christ himself says to us: *“Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls”* (Matt 11:28–39).

² Exod 20:8–11; Deut 5:12–15

³ For an extended discussion, see David A. Ritchie, “Isaiah’s Theology of Sabbath” (2019). Available upon request.

3.) Faithful Generosity

The ancient temple of Jerusalem was a holy place. It was the place where heaven and earth met together. The temple was where God came to rule, reign, and rest among his people. And part of the Old Testament law was that the people of Israel were to give tithes and offerings to support the priesthood and the ministry of the temple.

But after the people of Judah returned from exile, life was very difficult. The threat of war was always near, resources were low, and the economy was in shambles. In this environment, it was very easy to forgo supporting the ministry that flowed from the house of God. Some only gave meager leftovers. Many people neglected to give at all. The ministers of the temple had to start working as part-time farmers, just to feed their families. As a result, the ministry of the temple suffered.⁴

However, Nehemiah confronts the people of Judah neglecting to support the temple. This is from Nehemiah 13: *“So I confronted the officials and said, ‘Why is the house of God forsaken?’ And I gathered them together and set them in their stations. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses”* (Neh 13:11–12).

Today, we no longer require a physical temple. When Christ came into the world, the fullness of God dwelt among his people not through a building but through a person. Then, when Jesus died, rose again, and ascended to heaven, he sent his Spirit to dwell within his people. Now we—the Church—are the new temple!

So, what then does it mean to financially support the new temple that is the Church? Well, in the New Testament, it meant that the earliest Christians of Jerusalem shared almost everything in common, so much so that not a need was found among them (Acts 2:44–45). Later, when Paul planted new churches throughout the Mediterranean world, he encouraged wealthier churches to financially support poorer churches (2 Cor 8–9). Simply said, Scripture encourages all Christians to generously give to their local church as a way of worship.

Generosity is Christian spiritual discipline. We are to be a people who are called to generously give because God gave us Jesus. We are to give not, begrudgingly or haphazardly. Rather, we are to give joyfully, sacrificially, and as a regular rhythm of our worship.

When we give, we have an opportunity to say to our hearts, *“Jesus has met my greatest need. I’m going to give, so that others might experience the goodness of Jesus through the church. I don’t have to be afraid of not having enough because Christ is my protection and provision—not my money.”*

Through our combined resources as a church, we have been resourced to minister in and through our community. We have been able to drill water wells for the thirsty in

⁴ See Neh 13:11–14

Africa as well as feed hungry children in our own community. We have help rescue women from trafficking, as well as show material support single mothers. We've planted churches and supported missions that bring healing to bodies and souls. We've been able to declare and display the gospel of Jesus Christ in ways that we could have never done as mere individuals.

So, if you have given to support this church, I sincerely thank you. And if you have been blessed by this church, but you have yet to give to support our mission, I want to humbly invite you to be a part of the mission of God going forth.

As Christ himself once said, it is truly more blessed to give than it is to receive (Acts 20:35).

4.) Faithful Leadership

One final commitment that the people of God made was to ensure that the priests of the temple were qualified to serve in within the holy temple of God. At the time of the Old Testament, these qualifications meant that one was a physical descendent of the ancient high priest Aaron.

However, do you remember Sanballat and Tobiah, the villains of the story? These were the men who did everything they could to stop Nehemiah from rebuilding the wall. They even threatened to attack the city as the walls were being built, and they even conspired to murder Nehemiah. Throughout the story, these characters represent the spiritual powers of darkness that oppose the work of God and the people of God.

Thus far, they have failed in their attempts to destroy God's people. But at the end of the story, their final tactic is to *join* God's people. In the final chapter of Nehemiah, Nehemiah discovers that Tobiah started renting a room inside of the temple and using it as an apartment (Neh 13: 4–9) ! Even more, he found out that one of the sons of the high priest has married into the family of Sanballat (Neh 13:28)!

As a result, Nehemiah expels Tobiah from the temple, and he kicks Sanballat's son-in-law out of the priesthood. In clear terms, Nehemiah refuses to make compromises when it comes to the integrity of the spiritual leaders of God's people.

Today, the leaders of the church are not qualified through ethnicity or bloodlines. Rather, they are qualified by character (1 Tim 3).

The church can withstand persecution. The church can withstand poverty. The church can withstand challenging situations like living in a polarized culture in the midst of plague and pandemic. But a local church can be mortally wounded by corrupt and compromised leadership.

I have now served at Redeemer Christian Church for ten years, and I sincerely want you to know this: our leadership has consistently chosen to value humility and character over impressiveness and power.

Our elders are prayerful and humble. Our deacons are selfless and servant-hearted. Our staff is sincere, hardworking, and compassionate for the least of these.

We have sought to hold one another accountable. We are constantly seeking to represent the kingdom of God with integrity against the pressures placed upon us by the kingdoms of men. We are willing to call out false teaching and idolatry in the church, even when it has cost us. And we are committed to calling leaders based on character qualifications displayed through humble service.

For those of you who were with us ten years ago, you know that the first ever volunteer opportunity we had was the “*cleaning crew*.” It was a team of people who cleaned out church before we could afford janitorial services.

Week after week, people would come to the church taking turns to clean bathrooms, our children’s area, and the pews of the sanctuary. And what I treasure so much about those memories is that many of the people who humbly served then have become the very same people who lead our church now.

The world is impressed by bravado and power. The world is impressed by self-promoters and influencers. It’s always been this way.

In fact, when Jesus came into the world, most of the Jewish people wanted a political messiah. They wanted a military leader and a conquering king. They wanted the glory of a Caesar. They wanted a worldly definition of greatness.

But in this environment, Jesus showed the definition of greatness. The one who is radiance of God’s glory and the exact imprint of his nature, humbly got down on his hands and knees and washed the feet of his own disciples with a servant’s towel. *That* is greatness.

And he expects that the greatness of integrity, humility, and holiness to define the leaders of his church.

Conclusion

The people of Jerusalem rebuilt the broken wall brick by brick, not in a single, extraordinary moment.

So too, the witness of the church is garnered and restored not in big epic moments. A faithful church is built up by a thousand small decisions we make. Choosing health in our marriages over compromise and pride. Choosing Sabbath rest instead of succumbing to our culture of busyness. Choosing generosity over selfishness. Choosing leaders by their character, not by their charisma. But it is through these ordinary means that the extraordinary power of God is revealed to a watching world.

In Nehemiah, the city is restored and dedicated to the Lord. And the people rejoice: *“And they offered great sacrifices that day and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and children also rejoiced. And the joy of Jerusalem was heard far away”* (Neh 12:43).

Today, we too will rejoice. We celebrate that, ten years ago, a dead church was able to live again. This morning, however, we celebrate the baptisms of eleven people who are publicly confessing their faith in Jesus.

God is still redeeming brokenness. He is still breathing life into death.

But all of this, from the restoration of Jerusalem, to the anniversary of ten years of Redeemer, to the baptisms of this morning all point toward a greater celebration that is to come.

There is a day when we will all witness not just a restored Jerusalem but a New Jerusalem. There is a day coming when we will not only feast as a church family, but all the people of God throughout the ages will join in the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. There is a day coming when people of all nations will bring their glory into the city of God and the elders of heaven will cast their crowns before the Lamb who was slain for our sin and raised again for our redemption.

And for that day, we say, “Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus!” But until that day come, may we be a people who faithfully endure.

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1.) Read Nehemiah 10:28–32, 39; 12:27; 43. What are the big ideas in these two passages? How do these passages relate to the overall message of Nehemiah?
- 2.) One major focus of the final chapters of Nehemiah is the restoration of the practice of the Sabbath. What is the Sabbath? How should Christians observe the Sabbath today? Why is it so tempting to neglect the Sabbath?
- 3.) What are the biggest takeaways you have gleaned from studying Nehemiah this fall? How has this book shaped your idea of what the church is called to be?
- 4.) The dedication of the wall was a time of great rejoicing for the people of Jerusalem. So too, this week, we are celebrating the tenth anniversary of Redeemer Christian Church. What are some specific ways you are thankful for Redeemer? How has our church been a blessing to you?