

Nehemiah: Rebuilding the City

Nehemiah 2: 11-18 & 8: 1-10

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The book of Nehemiah is one of those Old Testament books that we don't read or preach from very often because, at first glance, it looks fairly boring, with nothing much to offer.

Nehemiah led the third wave of returnees from Babylon and Persia back to Judah and much of what he did when he arrived was count heads and try to organize things. So about half of the book of Nehemiah contains long lists of names: people who arrived with the first two waves of returnees, people who came with him, who worked on rebuilding the city and what part of the city they worked on, what was contributed by whom, that kind of thing.

Pretty boring stuff.

But, if we read what lies between the lists, we discover Nehemiah's memoir about how he led the people in rebuilding the city and the obstacles that he had to overcome in undertaking this enormous task. And what we discover is that the problems Nehemiah encountered as a leader were not all that different from the ones leaders encounter, today.

NEHEMIAH IN PERSIA

Nehemiah was the Cup Bearer or, what we would call, the Wine Steward to Atraxerxes, king of Persia. He was one of those Jews who had made it, who had thrived and worked his way up to a position of power and influence in Persian society.

This is about 450 BCE, some 70 years after the first group of Jews returned to Judah with Zerubbabel and about 15 years after the second group arrived with Ezra.

One day, Nehemiah is talking with some other Jews who had made the trip down to Judah for a visit and come back and he asked them how things were going down there. Their reply surprised him.

"Terrible! It's going awful down there. The temple has been rebuilt but that's all. The rest of the city is still in ruins. Nothing has been done to rebuild the walls or the gates and there's weeds growing in what used to be the streets."

Nehemiah finds this news vexing and he spends a couple of days weeping and praying and moping around until the king notices that his wine steward has suddenly lost his interest in wine and he asked him about it. "Nehemiah, I've never seen you so sad. What's wrong?"

Nehemiah explains why he's so depressed. His home town – well, not his home town, exactly, he was probably born in Babylon or Sousa, the capital of Persia, but the home town of his people, the Jews – Jerusalem, is still sitting in ruins seventy years after the first returnees went down there to fix it up and sixteen years after Ezra went down there for the same reason. What, he wants to know, could be the problem?

He then asks the king, Atraxerxes, for permission to go down there and take over the job of rebuilding the city. Atraxerxes asks him how long he thinks it will take and Nehemiah gives him a wild guess and, surprise, Atraxerxes agrees. And not only that, he outfits him for the work. Here are some letters of safe passage, and some soldiers, some of which are, themselves, Jews, to protect you on the road, and some lumber for the gates, and some stone masons and other things and people to help with the project. Oh, and, as of today, you are the chief contractor and new governor of Judah.

So Nehemiah takes all the gifts from the king and off he goes to Judah with a bunch of other Jews and Persian craftsmen with the task of rebuilding the walls of the city and then returning home to Sousa and resuming his job as the king's wine steward.

NEHEMIAH IN JUDAH

He arrived in Jerusalem a couple of months later and, the first thing he did on the first night he was there, was to survey the damage. Without telling anyone why he was there or what he had come to do he took a couple of men with him and they road their donkeys around the city to see just how bad things were.

And things were pretty bad, let me tell you. (This is the account you heard in our reading, this morning.)

The stones that made up the city walls had been pulled down, one by one, and scattered about. The gates, which had been made of wood, had been burned to ashes. And at one point, you recall, the rubble and ruin was so thick that the streets were impassable and they had to go out and around the outside of the city.

Nehemiah was undaunted, however. The next morning he gathered the elders together and announced why he was there, that God and Atraxerxes had appointed him governor and chief contractor to rebuild the walls of the city and he unveiled all the equipment he had brought with him.

The people were ecstatic. They cheered and sang and said, "Well, let's get started then. Let's rebuild the walls of the city." And they did. They started that afternoon and things went pretty well, for a while.

The first obstacle Nehemiah ran into was his neighbors. A Persian official named Sanbalat, the governor of Samaria, and his son-in-law, Tobiah, a descendant of the Jews who had been left in Judah during the Babylonian

captivity, ridiculed and mocked Nehemiah's workers as they went about their labor. When they saw the work going forward anyway, they threatened the workers.

Nehemiah met that challenge by dividing the work force in half and arming half to stand guard while the other half worked. Also, each worker was armed with a short sword and was told to always leave one hand free in case he needed to drop the work they were doing and fight.

He also set up a series of sentries with trumpets to create an alarm system that would call all the workers and guards to whatever part of the city was being attacked.

Frustrated in their efforts to stop construction on the city of Jerusalem, and fearing that Jerusalem would grow to overshadow Samaria in importance, Sanbalat and Tobiah tried sending a letter to the king, Atraxerxes, to discredit Nehemiah and his workers. Little did they know that Nehemiah was there with the blessing of the king. When discrediting him didn't work they plotted to kill him, but the plot was found out and Nehemiah avoided it.

Problems didn't arrive only from outsiders, however. The Jews themselves had been eager to get the wall built, but they were less enthusiastic about doing the actual work to rebuild it. They complained about the weather and about how they didn't have time enough to get their own crops harvested. And they complained about how much rubble there was in the city, so much that they could hardly move through it. And one by one, Nehemiah found solutions to each problem they brought to him.

Eventually, he had to stop the construction, call all the people together and have Ezra read the Torah aloud to them, reminding them of who and whose they were and why they were there in the first place. (Sometimes it's good to have someone to remind you of your purpose and your goals.)

Finally, having rebuilt the walls of the city, Nehemiah left the rebuilding of the interior to other leaders. He spent the rest of his time in Jerusalem, with Ezra, establishing the new Israel as a constitutional theocracy. Their religion would be their government and their government would be limited and directed by their constitution, the Torah.

All that done, Nehemiah returned to Sousa, took up his job as Wine Steward to the King, and wrote this book which is his memoir.

NEHEMIAH IN AMERICA

The story of Nehemiah is an historic story, to be sure. But it is a contemporary story as well. Ask any person in a leadership position and they will tell you that things haven't changed much.

Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem with a dream and the first thing he does is survey the damage and come up with a plan. The people say they want to help but, when they find out that helping means working hard for a long time, they begin to complain.

There are always those, like Sanbalat and Tobiah, who stand outside the process and sling criticism and ridicule and do their best to sabotage it.

But the leader, Nehemiah, refuses to be intimidated or distracted. When the people complain he reminds them of their calling as the People of God and, eventually, the work is finished and the city begins to thrive again as it once did.

End of story. Fun, wasn't it? I'll be here all week. Tip your waitresses. Drive carefully. I'm kidding of course.

Before we finish, this morning, I would like to introduce you to a modern day Nehemiah.

He, too, has been called by God to rebuild that which is falling and, in some cases, has fallen, down. And he has been given the equipment he needs for this task, not by the king but by one of God's anointed princes.

That prince is named George Barna. He is a sociologist. In fact, he's the leading sociologist of church and religion in America, today, the founder and C.E.O. of The Barna Group. And he is, himself, a committed Christian. His Nehemiah is a young researcher named David Kinnaman.

A couple of years ago George Barna gave David Kinnaman enough money and assistants to do 5,000 in-depth interviews. And he gave him 27 years' worth of collected data from other studies and he told him to go and find out why young adults between 17 and 29 years of age are rejecting organized religion – which they happen to be doing in record numbers.

The result of Kinnaman's quest is the book, ***You Lost Me: Why Young Christians are Leaving Church and Rethinking Faith***. (Baker Books, 2011). And I would like to share with you some of what Kinnaman discovered and reveals in his book.

SURVEYING THE DAMAGE

Like Nehemiah, the first thing David Kinnaman did was survey the damage (5,000 interviews with young people who had been raised in the Christian church but who had, for one reason or another, rejected it) and folks, the damage is both dismal and devastating. Teenagers, it turns out, are among the most active church people in the United States...until they reach the age of 17. Then they drop out and they don't come back.

People from 17 to 30 years of age are the least active church people of all American Christians.

By the time they reach the age of 30, forty-three percent of all American Christians have completely broken off from the church – the largest number of any age group.

Some of them (nomads) have just drifted away and are wandering around sort of aimlessly. They didn't get angry or hurt and storm off, they just drifted away through disinterest or lack of any real attraction.

Some are prodigals who are experimenting with different lifestyles and faith systems – anything from atheism and agnosticism to eastern religions and cults. This is the group who tend to use the phrase, "spiritual but not religious."

A third group are what Kinnaman calls Exiles. They consider themselves Christians and they really do want to be Christians but they are not getting what they want or need by way of answers or experiences through the established church. They are looking for a church where the people act like Jesus and can help them do the same. And they want to worship where they can have an experience of God that is passionate and where they can experience the presence of God in awe and wonder.

Asked why they rejected the traditional, established church, they gave six reasons.

Let us be clear, before I go on, that some of these reasons/accusations are unfair. We can all think of exceptions to the perceptions these young people offer. Also, some of their dissatisfactions grow out of different and distinct values that separate the generations.

But fair or not, accurate or not, these are the perceptions that young people tend to bring to their rejection of organized religion and, if we are to win them back, we must prepare ourselves to address these issues.

THE TOP SIX LIST: WHY I REJECT THE ORGANIZED CHRISTIAN CHURCH **By the Millennial Generation (Ages 17-29)**

1. The church is defensive and over-protective.

Church people kill creativity and self-expression and they are hyper-critical and afraid of popular culture – music, movies, television and technology. They demonize the secular, deny the complexity of the real world, and create a false separation of the sacred and the secular.

Young people find expression of the sacred in all types of art, music and entertainment and do not want to be limited to "Christian" art and music. They want to be allowed to express religious faith in their own language without being judged.

2. The church is shallow.

Church people are more interested in the form of Christianity than the substance of it. Christianity in the church is all about clichés, Bible quotes, and easy answers. There is little, actual Christ-like living going on in the church. It is boring, irrelevant, and passionless. The Bible is not taught clearly or often enough and there is no sense of awe, mystery, wonder or power in the worship services.

Young people are surrounded by the awesome and the miraculous every day. Technology provides this for them on a regular basis. But technology does not provide them with depth or meaning and they are looking to the church to do this.

3. The church is anti-science.

It is anti-intellectual, requiring us to choose between faith and science. It is too confident that it has all the answers and tries to make complex things too simple. The church is out of step with the modern world.

Young people experience the benefits of science hundreds of times each day through technology, medicine and communications. They aren't about to give it up for the promised and intangible benefits of religion. They believe that Christians tend to all sit on one side of the evolution/creationism debate and it is a huge waste of time.

4. The church is repressive.

This, they say, is especially true in the area of human sexuality. The church's desire is to control them when, what they seek is broader freedom. The church's teachings about sexuality are out of step with the times. And they feel that, if they have made some mistakes in their sexual choices and behavior, they will be harshly judged in and by the church.

5. The church is exclusive. (This is the area of highest agreement among young people interviewed.)

It is unable to embrace the open-mindedness, tolerance and acceptance that young people esteem as an ultimate value. This is especially true when it comes to accepting gay people, ethnic minority people, people of other religious faiths, and poor people. The church is intolerant; if you want to be accepted by church people you have to look and act like them. Young people feel that they will have to choose between their faith and their friends.

6. The church is doubtless.

It is not a place where doubts can be freely expressed and, when doubts are expressed, they are met with arguments and fact obsessed attempts to convince or persuade them that they are wrong. Church people tend to be more interested in winning arguments than winning people.

Young people feel that they cannot express their doubts or ask questions that are really important to them. Many have had life experiences that have caused them to have doubts and there's no one in the church they can talk to about it. Their significant intellectual doubts are dismissed or not taken seriously by Christians.

They are told that they have to believe things that they can't make themselves believe and, they are told that because of this they are doomed to hell after they die.

REBUILDING THE CITY: THE CHURCH RESPONDS

David Kinnaman's book concludes with fifty suggestions for overcoming these points of separation for young people. They are divided into sections for church leaders, teachers, parents, and young people themselves, who are still involved in the church. I'm not going to share all fifty of them with you. I hope you'll read the book, which we have ordered for the church library and read it yourself.

I do want to conclude by sharing with you three broad principles which Kinnaman offers if we are serious about keeping young people in the church and attracting those who have fled.

1. We must rediscover the concept of vocation.

Young people want a religion that is about more than the stories they hear on Sunday morning. They want a religious faith that informs every moment of every day of their lives and they want role models who live that way. They want to be like Jesus and they want to be with other Christians who have that same goal.

In short, they want a sense of what we used to call "Christian Vocation." (We will be talking about this more in weeks to come.)

2. We must reprioritize wisdom over knowledge.

Young people, today, know more about more than any generation has ever known. They are being flooded with information every day, at school, through mass media, through the internet. And while knowledge and information are important parts of what we do in the church, what is more important is that we have that extra thing that gives meaning to all of that information.

Young people are desperate for something that gives meaning to the stuff that makes up their lives and I suspect, that we are all searching for that same sense of meaning. Instead of pretending that we already have it, that we know all the answers and that they will, too, when they are more like us, why not just admit that we're all searching desperately for meaning and inviting them to join the search with us.

And that leads us to the third principle. Because they will not join us on the journey until they trust us.

3. We must rethink how we do relationships with the young people of the church.

They are not here just to be tolerated and taught until they are old enough to fill out a pledge card. They are here to be loved. If we would take seriously the task of keeping young people inside the embrace of the church then that embrace must be our embrace. The church's arms must be our arms.

Ezra and Nehemiah teach us the important lesson that providing a room for young people in the church is not the end of our responsibilities toward them. Even if it's a really nice room!

Both of my children are young adults who are active in their churches and they have been so through their twenties and, now, into their early thirties. The church they grew up in had no youth lounge or youth room. They met in the church's parlor. Ask them, as I have, and they can hardly remember the content of any one of the hundreds of Sunday School lessons or VBS programs or Youth Group meetings they went to or sermons they heard.

But this they can remember, my friends: ***That they were loved***, that the people of the church always said hello to them and asked them how they were doing and cared about the answers. They shook their hands and hugged them and asked their opinions and cared what they said. The people of the church invited them to their homes to swim in their swimming pool or babysit their children or feed their dogs.

The people of the church showed up and watched the plays they were in and the concerts they performed and they cheered at their football and basketball games – not because they cared about football or basketball or concerts or plays, necessarily, but because they cared about the kids who were in them.

If we would keep young people in the church we must glue them there not with superior arguments but with love, the love of God in Jesus Christ, yes, but the love of each and every one of us, too. That is our best witness and our best argument for the church.

That is how we well rebuild this City of God.

AMEN