

# NO MORE NEGLIGENCE

## Sermon, January 24, 2016

### Text: Nehemiah 9:38, 10:28-39

Many of you are familiar with the story of Nehemiah; I did two sermon series on this Old Testament book in the past nineteen years (*one five week series in 1998, a three month series in 2004, and one sermon from this book six years ago today, when we dedicated our refurbished steeple*), and I'm sure you who were here remember every word. For the rest of you, I'll provide a little background and review: Nehemiah is basically the story of the restoration and rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls in the fifth century BC after they returned from the Babylonian captivity, but it is so much more than the story of a restoration and reconstruction of walls and buildings. It is the story of the restoring of a displaced people from despair to hope. It's a story of restoring people from shame and ruin to pride and confidence. It's a story of restoring people from lethargy to spiritual fervor. The main character of the story, Nehemiah, had a place of privilege at the right hand of the mightiest king of that time; he was cupbearer to the Persian monarch Artaxerxes. With the approval and the royal mandate of that great king, Nehemiah entered into the ruin of Jerusalem to both identify with the people he loved and to lead them in this major work of restoration and salvation. By the way, that might have a familiar ring. This story should remind us of Someone Else who graciously left His place of power and privilege at the right hand of the mightiest King ever, to enter into the ruin of His people's lives in order to both identify with the people He loved and to save them, to restore them. Perhaps we should refer to this Old Testament book as the Gospel according to Nehemiah,

With the walls in ruin, the Jewish people who had returned from exile lived scattered among the area villages and towns intermingling and intermarrying with the many non-Jews who resided there. Jewish children were growing up not knowing the language of the synagogue; they were increasingly unfamiliar with matters of Jewish faith, culture and identity. For the most part the Jewish people were scattered, demoralized, weakened, timid, and they were no longer practicing ... or even familiar with ... the religion of their heritage and the laws of God. For too, too long, those adversely affected by the wall's ruin did nothing at all about it, even though the situation was robbing them of safety and security and confidence and identity, and eventually causing ruin to their families. Maybe too many simply hoped "someone else" would take care of it. Maybe too many felt that this is just the way it was supposed to be; after all, it had been like this for so long ... and it is amazing what God's people will accept as normal when they are scattered, insecure, uncertain of their convictions and lacking confidence in their unique identity. Perhaps many even complained about it, but a litany of complaints is not the same as a plan. Nehemiah was a man with a plan, and the passion, tenacity, backbone, faith and royal mandate to see this plan through.

I'll state the obvious and point out that the purpose of restoring and building the wall of Jerusalem was not just so the Jewish people could have a nice wall. The wall was a means to an end. The "end" was to gather, contain, protect, identify and give a place of security to the people of God in order that they may be rooted, restored, retrained and raised in the ways of God ... that they might maintain their unique religious and cultural identity, in order that they and their families would not only survive, but thrive ... both now, and for generations to come. *It is the same with the church.* The superstructure and organization and the money and the "walls" of this church are all a means to an end. This beautiful center of worship wasn't built, maintained and upheld these past seventy-one years just so we could have the nicest church building in town. The purpose of these "walls" is to gather, contain, protect, identify and give a place of security to the people of God that we might be rooted and trained and raised and encouraged in the ways of God. And we didn't spend @ \$75,000 to thoroughly restore the steeple and the supporting superstructure six years ago just so we could have an eye-catching tower that would be the highest structure in town, or in order to hopefully attract a cellular phone company to install antennae so we might collect some rent! The primary purpose of the steeple is to lift high the cross, and proclaim to all who see that elevated cross this building is set apart for a purpose of the highest value! Everything that goes on under that steeple's lofty perch and everything in this building's very architecture is meant to communicate God's grace in Jesus Christ and to create an environment where the people of God can find sanctuary, community, nurture, encouragement and be equipped for godly living. The "end" of this building, the purpose, is the spiritual restoration and training of those of us who gather here, which will benefit not only us, but our children, and our children's children and all who gather inside these walls under that lofty cross for years and years to come ... and the eternal benefits will last forever!

The book of Nehemiah is divided roughly into two sections: in the first six chapters, there is the *physical* reconstruction and restoration of the wall; in the last seven, there is a *spiritual* reconstruction and restoration of the

people now protected by that wall. In Chapter 8 you can read about the Watergate revival. This was a six hour Bible reading held not in Washington, DC, but at the city gate of Jerusalem known as the Water Gate (*imagine being the lector THAT day!*). This was followed by a time of weeping and sorrow, as this fresh reading of the Scriptures reminded the fifty thousand people present that pain and ruin and despair had come not only to their city, but to their lives and their families' lives, as a direct result of neglecting God and His good words. They wept because they realized what they and their parents and their grandparents had missed ... the really, really good life God always desires for His people. Following chapter 8, we have the **Guinness Book of World Records** Prayer of Confession. Nehemiah 9 has the longest prayer in the entire Bible; in this prayer the people acknowledge God has been just and fair and gracious and loving and good all along; this ruin had come upon them because they and their parents and grandparents and great grandparents had repeatedly neglected God.

So now, under Nehemiah's leadership the people have re-paired and re-built the walls and gates, they have re-read and re-hearsed the good law of God, and they have re-pented, and they have re-joyced, and now they **re-solve** not to let the ruin happen again! 9:38 -- "*In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.*" Then follows a list of the signers of this new covenant Israel is making (*which I spared you from having to read this morning*). This is their founding document (or, re-founding), this is Declaration of not INdependence, but their Declaration of DEpendence on God and His law, their pact, that said in effect, "*We've an opportunity for a fresh start; let's do it right! This is our promise to you, O God. We will live as your people. We don't care if anyone else in the world lives by this; we will live by it. Our lives and our homes will be distinct.*" In verse 10:29 there is a general promise to obey all of God's law, and the rest of the chapter spells out four specific areas they will be extra careful to observe. They are collectively making a four-fold pledge:

**First**, they pledged they will no longer neglect paying attention to the social lives of their children. They will take a keen interest in those with whom their children interact and form relationships with ... and by the way, it's OK (*and even imperative!*) for parents to do that. This is not a bigoted thing to do; it is good to marry one who will encourage, not discourage, you to put into practice and not neglect the weighty and crucial and life-enhancing matters of faith. This pledge means, among other things, they will make every effort involve children in the life of the worshipping community, for what better way is there to meet lifelong compatible mates? They commit themselves to avoiding what Paul calls the unequal yoke in their marriages. They simply will no longer intermarry with those who do not share their faith and belief and convictions and dearest values. They've learned that to neglect their children, especially in areas of social and religious identity, nurture and practice, is to neglect God.

**Second**, they pledged they will no longer neglect the Sabbath. Verse 31, slightly paraphrased: "*When the neighboring peoples bring merchandise or grain to sell on the Sabbath, we will not buy from them on the Sabbath or on any holy day. We will say, 'Come back tomorrow. We're closed.'*" The Sabbath is to be a special day! They will no longer treat the Sabbath as just another day to catch up on work, go shopping and/or cram full with meaningless activity. The Sabbath is ordained by God to be set apart for worship and rest. They've learned from bitter experience that to neglect the Sabbath is to eventually and practically to neglect God.

**Third**, they pledged they will no longer neglect providing for the center of worship. Verse 32, they pledged they will all chip in their "fair shekel share" for the things needed to keep the worship services going and the offering fires burning (*literally!*). Verse 35, they pledged to bring the best of what they had, the first fruits to God, not the leftovers and/or the dregs. Verse 37 -- I like the King James Version translation, which tells us they pledged to bring the first of their *dough* (*NIV says "ground meal"*) ... a tithe of their crops, a tithe of their produce, a tithe of their income, to the temple. They were grateful for their restoration, they were grateful for their salvation, they were grateful for the grace they received, so they determined to give what is the biblically recommended "divine gratuity", which is 10% of what they were given by God's gracious hand. It is precisely because they were so grateful that they were *fit to be tithed!* We give as a response of gratitude for the grace and blessings God has given us, and God has ordained this as the way by which the ministry would be supported. And again ... they've learned from bitter experience that to neglect giving, to neglect tithing, is to neglect God.

**Fourth**, they promised they will never, never, never again neglect the house of God. They know that those who forsake the worship of God inevitably go on to forsake God. And when you forsake God, ruin, despair and pain inevitably follows. But because they are so grateful for the work of restoration and salvation in their lives, they determine they will not neglect the house of God ... and this pact ends with these words: "We will not neglect the house of our God."

And neither will we. Amen?