

BE PREPRAYERED!

Sermon, February 10, 2019

Text: Nehemiah 2:1-10

An English soldier by the name of Robert Baden-Powell had a personal motto, "*Be prepared!*" The inevitable follow-up question would often be, "*Prepared for what?*" To which he would reply, "*Why, for any old thing!*" Baden-Powell published this motto in Scouting for Boys in 1908 (two years later, in 1910, the Boy Scouts of America was founded; some of you may know that today is *Scout Sunday*). In Scouting for Boys, Baden-Powell wrote that to Be Prepared means "*you are always in a state of readiness in mind and body to do your duty.*" Well, I think Nehemiah would resonate with this motto, but I think he might add something of a spiritual dimension to it ... for he was a man who believed in being pre-PRAYER-ed! But, I'm getting ahead of myself a bit. (*Editor's addendum, which didn't make the sermon -- notice the initials for Be Prepared and Baden-Powell are the same ... that's no coincidence; it's the way Baden-Powell prepared it!*)

I like the story of a Knoxville woman who lived next door to the city park. One day she called the animal control office when she discovered a skunk in the cellar of her home. The officer on duty advised, "*Open the cellar door and make a trail of bread crumbs from the cellar to the park, and wait for the skunk to follow it outside.*" Half an hour later the woman called a second time. "*I did what you said ... now I have two skunks in my cellar.*" I think the lesson to be learned here is that a half-hearted approach to necessary change, a timid, tentative approach to what stinks, **only** encourages more stench to come creeping in! As intimated last week, I'm sure Nehemiah would agree ... I think he would tell us to find out where that stinking influence is coming in to our homes, and with God's grace and help, go after it, get rid of it, and then close up the holes and build up the walls to keep it out!

These past weeks we began taking a look at the Old Testament book of Nehemiah, which is the story of the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls in the fifth century BC. To give a quick review (*past sermons are available online or in the narthex if you want to review more fully*): It had been nearly a century and a half since the Babylonians had torn down the walls of Jerusalem, burnt the gates, flattened the city and took the people into captivity some eight hundred miles away from home. After the Babylonians themselves were conquered by the Persians fifty-some years later, the Hebrews were permitted to return, but many did not. Those who did return, though, were in a precarious situation. With the walls in ruin, for the most part the Jews who returned (*or who had escaped the exile in the first place*) were scattered, demoralized, weakened, vulnerable and open to the influences of the mostly unfriendly forces around them. Nehemiah was a passionate man with a plan, and the tenacity, backbone and faith to see this plan through. As mentioned these past weeks, this book is much more than the story of a restoring of physical walls. It is also a story of the restoring people from despair to hope.

Jerusalem is not only an historic city. Throughout the Bible, Jerusalem is also a symbol, a symbol of the Heavenly city of God. Bear with me as I'll get a bit allegorical here; I know pastors are prone to do (*or, over-do*) that, but I really do think it's an important insight. The earthly Jerusalem had at her center the Temple, which is pictured as the place where God seeks to dwell. However, it was only a picture -- it was not the actual place where God dwells; God is omnipresent. In the New Testament, we learn that Jesus Christ is the New Temple. In Him dwells all the fullness of God; in Him we find the deity of God. And we also learn in the New Testament the glorious truth that Jesus Christ seeks to dwell in us ... thus making *us* Temples of the Spirit of God ... as Paul sums it in the letter to the Colossians: "*Christ in you, the hope of glory!*" (*Col 1:27*). Jerusalem in ruins, therefore, can also be seen as a picture of a life ... a life that was created to be the beautiful dwelling place of God, but now is in need of restoration, salvaging, salvation ... a life that has lost its defenses, a life overrun by the skunks of barbaric influences, a life that lies vulnerable to repeated hurt, misery and destructive influences. Jerusalem in ruins is a symbol of a potential divine dwelling place that lays vulnerable, broken, a life in danger of losing its identity, its hope, perhaps even its will to live.

We all know people who may fit this description. There are places in their lives where the walls have just broken down. They seem to no longer have any ability left to resist destructive influences. Their gates have been so badly burned that they've almost become inaccessible, unapproachable ... scarred and scared. Perhaps there may be someone here this morning who fits this description. Well, no matter what the ruin of any life may be, no matter how overwhelming and daunting it may seem, restoration can happen! Jesus Christ is that divine Nehemiah who wants to rebuild your good walls (*and please don't read a political agenda into this; I prepared the original notes of this sermon long before the present political brouhaha; in fact, long before the present Administration took office!*). Restoration, salvaging, salvation can happen, and there is always a place to begin that work. There is always a first step, a starting place. And that most effective first step is to **pray**. As Nehemiah prayed so admirably in Chapter One, admit your need before God, confess your complicity in the ruin, and pray that God will give you the wisdom and insight and strength and skill to determine what to do next and when to do it, and pray that God

will give you strength and the determination to take the necessary steps, whatever they may be. Be pre-prayered! And it almost goes without saying that if you are praying for help, as Nehemiah prayed for help in the opening chapter, then expect an answer: Expect God to do something, and be ready for it when He does! An opportunity to effect necessary change will surely appear; maybe it will take longer than you think it ought to take, but it will happen because God is a God who answers prayer.

We find Nehemiah at that point of opportunity as the second chapter opens: "*In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; so the king asked me, 'Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.' I was very much afraid, but I said to the king, 'May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?' The king said to me, 'What is it you want?' Then I prayed to the God of heaven ..."* (Neh 2:1-4) It has been four months since Chapter One (Nisan is not a Japanese automobile, here; it is the Hebrew month that comes four months after the Hebrew month of Kislev in Chapter One). Four months Nehemiah had prayed that God (1:11) "... would give your servant success today." But many "todays" had come and gone, and nothing happened. Still he prayed, and as he prayed, he planned. I think it is safe to assume he was waiting for the Lord to indicate the right time to take the first step, and when it would come, he would be ready. We want our prayers answered tomorrow, or now, or even yesterday! I think Nehemiah would say, "*Keep praying until an answer comes, because God's timing isn't always our timing ... and in the meantime, get ready to act on the answer!*"

As we read here in Chapter Two, it looks like he let his guard down a bit. His concern for his people shows on his face while he is at the office, he visibly (*and some would say unwisely*) brings his concerns to work with him, and while he is in the king's presence, his face displays something is amiss, showing sadness and inner turmoil. This is a risky thing to display! The king notices immediately and asks him why he is so sad. Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer, remember. In those days of totalitarian monarchs, death by natural causes or by assassination was the only way one could be removed from office, so the cupbearer's main responsibility was to keep the king from being poisoned! This was a good job Nehemiah had, but a dangerous one. It is obvious he had to be a man of unquestionable integrity and trustworthiness. The king relied upon him to keep him safe. He must be always above suspicion, keeping the king's trust at all times. If the king grew suspicious, Nehemiah's very life could be in danger. He would not only lose his job, but he could also lose his head!

Nehemiah realized that this was the God moment. Though a moment of danger, it is also one of great opportunity. Nehemiah immediately senses that. This was the moment he'd been praying for. He can either seize it and move forward, or he can back down and avoid the hassle ... which would result in the precarious situation of his people remaining unchanged. Four months he had been praying, "*Give success to your servant today;*" well, today that day has come. Nehemiah tells us he was very much afraid. That fear has a sound basis! But this is God's open door. Nehemiah's response is to shoot up one more prayer for help, and then he stepped through that door of opportunity. In Verses 5-8, we learn just how ready he was for this occasion: Nehemiah was a good Boy Scout ... he was prepared and he was pre-prayered. He had thought out all that he would need. He knew it would require a lengthy period of time, so he asked for the time he needed. The king had asked him how long it would take, and Nehemiah records, "*It pleased the king to send me, so I set a time.*" We learn later that he was actually gone for twelve years (!). He knew he'd need secure travel, so he asked for letters to the governors of the provinces that he would have to pass through. He knew he would need some supplies, and so on. Nehemiah had done his homework thoroughly. And because the hand of God's grace was upon him through his preparation and his pre-prayer-ation (*if that can be a word*), Nehemiah got all he requested.

More on this next time, but one of the chief obstacles faced by Nehemiah was the powerful people who were determined to maintain the status quo. There's a principle here: Any attempts to rebuild broken walls, any attempts to correct wrongs, any attempts to improve, any attempts to fix what is broken, any persistent attempts at goodness and godliness are going to be met with opposition. As Ronald Reagan famously put it, **Status Quo** is Latin for "*The mess we are in.*" These status quo political officials did not want a strong Jerusalem. They benefited from the mess the Hebrews were in. Under normal, healthy conditions these corrupt officials would most likely not have been in power ... but whenever people are scattered, demoralized, easily intimidated, fearful, uncertain of their faith, their identity, their convictions, that creates an environment which enables corrupt, conniving people to rise to influence and control. Well, Nehemiah is about to rock their boat and they don't like it. Again, the principle: Any attempts to change, any persistent attempts at goodness and godliness are going to be met with opposition. Opposition must be *anticipated and prepared for* in any great work. And as we will see in coming weeks, Nehemiah's response to the intimidation is consistent with his character displayed thus far ... he prays, he prepares, and he goes to work.

He stayed on task, because he was *pre-prayered*.