

THE ORIGINAL TALE of TWO CITIES

Sermon, February 3, 2019

Text: Nehemiah 1

August 24 was the anniversary of a momentous event in world history. No, I'm not referring to the suspension of Pete Rose from baseball on August 24, 1989. Nor am I referring to August 24, 1979, when a vote took place during halftime at Foxborough's Gillette Stadium to decide whether the team should keep Pat Patriot as the official team logo of the New England Patriots, or go with another tri-corner hat logo that was easier to reproduce on souvenir items ... well, the vote was overwhelmingly in favor of keeping Pat Patriot! It wasn't until fourteen years later, 1993, that the current logo, affectionately called the Flying Elvis and basically an updated refined version of the one originally proposed in 1979, replaced Pat Patriot, who still remains in mascot form. Hey, it's Super Bowl Sunday, so I had to slip in some kind of connection!



It was **August 24, 410 AD** ... 1,608 years ago last August ... that the Visigoths, led by Alaric, sacked Rome. Rome, the Eternal City, the capital of the greatest empire the world had ever known, was plundered, overrun by the barbarian Visigoths. This shook the civilized world to its core. St. Jerome, living in Bethlehem at the time, wrote, "*The city which had taken the whole world was itself taken.*" Especially in the Mediterranean world, Rome was the symbol of civilization, order, stability, permanence. In North Africa, this event prompted a Christian bishop by the name of Augustine to start writing about the lessons Christians should learn from Rome's destruction. The result was a book that has stood as a classic of Christian philosophy over the centuries: The City of God. Written as a Christian interpretation of human history, some say (*with apologies to Charles Dickens*) that Augustine's City of God was the original Tale of Two Cities -- the "City of God", which is the *real* Eternal City, and the "City of this World," which is temporary, no matter how permanent it may seem. Augustine reiterated Jesus' teaching that while Christians live in the temporary City of this World, we are in reality citizens of the eternal City of God. Our presence in the earthly city is like that of strangers sojourning in a foreign country. While here, we are to enjoy the truly good blessings this world has to offer under the ethical guidelines God has given. We are to enjoy and work toward establishing and upholding this world's rights, its protection, and its preservation of order, but this world is not our true home. It is to the heavenly eternal city that we owe our ultimate loyalty.¹

Augustine would be quick to say that this is not an excuse for Christian withdrawal into our sanctuaries away from the City of this World, it's anything but. Just as we are to enjoy the blessings of the City of this World, we must assume the obligations of dual citizenship: We are to obey laws, pay taxes, get involved, work to preserve order and safety and community, and in all cases render unto Caesar as far as we are able, because out of obedience to God we are to love our neighbor. Being a good citizen of the City of God means, among other things, doing our civic duty where we live right now. While "in" the City of this World, our Lord calls us to do all we can to make it like the city of God ... it may not fully happen this side of heaven, but we are to nevertheless work and strive for rightness (righteousness), justice, liberty, and the common good ... even if this City is overrun (*or, run*) by barbarians. We are to do all we can to help set the moral tone of our culture, to get involved in this world that God loved so much that He sent His only-begotten Son into it in order to redeem it. Abandoning our neighbor, withdrawing from our neighbor, is inconsistent with the command to love our neighbor, and so political and cultural and community engagement are incumbent upon faithful believers. This is almost another sermon, but I believe the best citizens of the City of this World are those who know their true citizenship is in the City of God, and they **live accordingly**.

Let's go back another millenium or so (*to be exact, 996 years*) prior to the sack of Rome. It is 586 BC; this time the city known as the Eternal City was Jerusalem, not Rome. This time it was the Babylonians, not the Visigoths, who had conquered the city. This shook the *religious* world to its core. Jerusalem, the earthly city of God, was overrun. The Babylonians tore down the walls and they burnt the gates, and they took all the people into captivity some eight hundred miles away from their home. And as mentioned last week, it was fifty-two years after that the Babylonians were themselves overpowered and conquered by the Persians. In 538 BC, the Persian potentate Cyrus allowed Israelites to return to their devastated homeland and their beloved ... but now virtually leveled ... Jerusalem. Some returned, but many did not. It had been over five decades (*think 1967 in our time frame*), and not to oversimplify, but lots of the exiles had landed good jobs in the empire, and had built homes in the suburbs, and maybe even drove SUV

¹ For two fairly brief summaries of the City of God, see <https://www.supersummary.com/the-city-of-god/summary> and <https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/augustine/section2>

chariots. Though they had been in captivity, it wasn't an unduly harsh captivity; they were permitted considerable freedoms. They had been in this foreign land for so long that many knew no other home, and a relatively comfortable, familiar life in the Persian empire was preferred to an arduous life rebuilding their devastated homeland. Some attempts had been made to rebuild, but it was slow going.

Nehemiah was one such Jew who probably knew no other home. He served in the court of King Artaxerxes; Artaxerxes was two kings after Cyrus. Artaxerxes, interestingly enough, is believed by some historians to be the stepson of Esther ... another heroic woman of faith, a faithful citizen of the city of God, who greatly influenced the course of events in the earthly city about her and wound up saving her people from massacre (*her story comes chronologically and historically before the events in Nehemiah, although it is in the Bible after Nehemiah*). It is highly likely Artaxerxes was favorably disposed to the Jewish community because of his stepmom. In today's text, it is now in December of 445 BC ... 93 years after Cyrus' original decree of release ... and the city of Jerusalem was still barely occupied. The walls of the city had never been rebuilt. Jerusalem lay vulnerable to those who would do it harm, and it looked forlorn like any abandoned construction project. Now, many of these exiles in Persia still loved their homeland. They dreamed of the old Jerusalem with its Temple, knowing that some of those who had returned were rebuilding that Temple (*see the book of Ezra*), prophets like Haggai and Zechariah stoked those dreams, and they all dreamed of restoring Jerusalem to its former glory, to the way things should be. But nearly a century after they were permitted to return, the city still sat in ruins. Then one day, Nehemiah inquired about his homeland. He had most likely grown up in exile, but he had heard so much about its glory from his parents and perhaps his grandparents. After hearing the stories of Jerusalem's grandeur, he was inspired by a vision of what that city was supposed to look like.

It's not too much of a stretch to say that Nehemiah's not all that different from many of us, who have grown up in the Christian church, who have heard sermon after sermon, story after story, about the City, or Kingdom, of God. We, too, have been given a vision of what it is like. We, too, have a God-given, faith-preserved vision of the City that is supposed to be. I'm sure Nehemiah would say to all of us: Determine to rebuild that city! Through prayer and faithful effort work to restore things to the way they should be ... again, that full restoration probably will not happen this side of heaven, but that is nevertheless our calling. Our calling is to "see" the city of God, to hold that vision before us, and to work with all our heart and soul and strength to make our earthly city like the heavenly city, working hand in glove with Jesus Christ Who came to redeem this world. We come in faith to Him, we work with Him in this world, and as we do, we pray as He taught us, *"Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN."*



Twenty-seven years ago I came across a poster that really captured my attention as a then-new father and as a relatively new pastor. I've had that poster hanging in or near my office at the two churches I've served ever since; I bought it at the Country Cupboard in Lewisburg, PA the summer of 1992 (*I've brought this out a few times before over the past 22 years, and also showed it during the Time With the Children*). It is a picture of a diaper-clad baby, his face scrunched up, with this caption across the top: **"BABY PHILOSOPHY: If something stinks, change it!"** Profound, isn't it? If something stinks, and it is within your power to change it ... well, change it! Don't just complain about it; don't just whine *"Why doesn't someone DO something about this?"* It has come to your attention, so YOU change it. Do your part to restore things to the way they should be!

But it isn't always that easy, is it? As Mark Twain put it, the only one who likes change is a wet baby. We resist change and we resist making changes, no matter how badly it "stinks." Change involves **effort**, and we love to take the path of least resistance. Or, we want to avoid risk. Or, we hope someone else will take care of it for us; someone else will make it right, because after all, we don't have the talent or tools or training to deal with the situation; we feel unqualified. Or, we just pray to God to "fix it" for us ... *"You change it, God! I just can't, because I'm too old or too young or too inexperienced or too (fill in the blank.)"* We may think we don't have the talent or the training to deal with the situation; we feel unqualified, so why bother? Or ... and this happens with depressing frequency ... we have just resigned ourselves to living with the "stink." *"It's never going to change, it stinks, so I better get used to it."* Eventually we get so used to things being so bad that we even begin to think that's the way it's supposed to be! What "stinks" becomes normal! As Nehemiah says to the people in chapter 2, *"Can you see the trouble we are in?!"*

Nehemiah knew full well that restoring the city would take effort, **monumental** effort. He knew that to restore things to the way they should be would also be incredibly difficult and risky. He also knew he just couldn't wait until someone else came around; it's already been nearly a century ... and besides, he also knew he was in a unique, divinely appointed position to do something effective about it! Nehemiah was driven to restore the city of God in this world, and he resolved to do all in his power to correct what was wrong, to work hand in glove with the Divine Architect of that city to bring about necessary change. We will look more into these things in the weeks to come.