



October 26-27, 2019
Pastor Mark Toone

For the City: More to Come

Nehemiah 7:1-4

I want to start my message a weird way! If you are on the left side of the pew, you will find a roll of stickers. I want you tear one off and pass it to the person on your right who will do the same thing. And then...hold on to them for later. OK

For the past eight weeks we have been learning what it means to really be a champion for our city by learning from a guy named Nehemiah. God called him to rebuild the broken-down wall of Jerusalem...and in the process, the broken down people, too! In chapter 5, we were inspired by Nehemiah's integrity. In chapter 6, as progress on the wall continues, Nehemiah's enemies pour on the coal! I call them the "Guardians of the Rubble." They continue to do all they can to intimidate Nehemiah and bring the project to a halt. They are so sneaky...and so dirty. And so desperate because they realize Nehemiah will not be stopped. And in 6:15...right in the middle of the chapter...this news sneaks up on us!

So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem, for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.

52 days! Imagine that! This giant wall was rebuilt in less than two months. Despite all the opposition, threats, intimidation, fatigue...despite the lack of expertise, the naysayers and the doomsayers...despite the best efforts of the Guardians of the Rubble...the wall was rebuilt. Jerusalem was a city once more. And even their enemies recognized this as a miraculous work of God. What joy that was!

We got a sense of that joy today when we burned our second mortgage. And that's just a taste of what we will feel in June when we stand up here to burn our third mortgage and eliminate the last bit of debt burden upon this church! The culmination of dreams and work that go back to the construction of our gym in 1992. For Nehemiah, the wall was done; the job was over. Right? Well...not quite. Listen to Nehemiah 7: 1 ff.

Now when the wall had been built and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers, the singers, and the Levites had been appointed, I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many. And I said to them, "Let not the gates of Jerusalem be opened until the sun is hot. And while they are still standing guard, let them shut and bar the doors. Appoint guards from among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, some at their guard posts and some in front of their own

homes.” The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt.

Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I [read] it:

The wall is built; the gates are in place. The honor of the city has been restored. But notice that Nehemiah remains vigilant. He orders guards to keep watch in case their enemies try to sabotage their work. He appoints godly leaders to watch over the city. And then...Nehemiah does two more things that every great leader does: He looks ahead...and he looks back.

The first thing Nehemiah does, even in this moment of triumph, is look ahead. Because he realizes there is more to be done. Did you notice it in verse 4? “The city was wide and large, but the people within it were few, and no houses had been rebuilt. They’ve got their wall! The boundaries have been reestablished. The temple, which had been rebuilt 100 years earlier, is protected. Finally! Jerusalem is a proper city once again. But they aren’t done, are they? The population has dwindled. Why? Because the homes are derelict. The next step, obviously, is to rebuild the homes so that the people will return. The life of the city is not its architecture; it is its people! There was more to do!

There’s always more to do! Children to be cared for, widows to be encouraged, marriages to be restored, hungry to be fed, prisoners to be visited. Always more souls to be saved! We can never rest on our laurels. The church that stops dreaming...stops straining toward its future... is the church that starts dying. Slowly, maybe. But that’s the truth of it: grow or die. I think that’s why Beyond These Walls captured our hearts. This is not just about paying off debt...although that will be great. It’s because, when THAT part of our vision is completed...when the buildings God led us to build are paid off...then we turn our attention to the next thing. Planting new churches. Helping FISH food bank build a new building. Serving and loving our communities in ways never before possible.

Even as they put the finishing touches on the walls, Nehemiah hints at what must come next for the sake of the city. They have to rebuild the homes. He’s looking ahead. But before he can lurch forward to the next project, God slows him down. Verse 5: “Then God put it on my heart...” Nehemiah was thinking about walls and gates and guards and singers and governors and new houses...he was planning his next big thing... and God said, “Wait a second.” And what did God put upon Nehemiah’s heart? Verse 5:

“Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. And I found the book of the genealogy of those who came up at the first, and I [read it].”

Before Nehemiah moves ahead, God says, “I want you to look back!” To remember the FIRST pioneers to leave Babylon and return to Jerusalem. You see, there was ANOTHER, earlier group of pioneers. 100 years before Nehemiah, a group led by Zerubbabel returned from exile to rebuild the temple. And in this moment of triumph, God puts it on Nehemiah’s heart to stop...and read out the

names of that first group. You can see them behind me. Name after name of those who preceded Nehemiah. If THEY hadn't come back and rebuilt the temple, there would have been no reason to rebuild the wall. God prompted Nehemiah to pause before he plunged ahead...and remember...and offer thanks...for those who had come before him; who paved the way; upon whose shoulders they stood.

That's what St. Andrews weekend is about. It is a moment for us to pause...to look back... and remember the pioneers who preceded us. Our forefathers and foremothers whose vision and sacrifice laid the groundwork for all we have today. People who not only built and grew this congregation...but who built and grew this city! Pay attention! You will recognize the street names of our city! Our mothers and fathers who loved this church...ALSO loved this city...and lived out their faith in the service of their city.

That's what we are trying to do, too. That's what "For the City" is all about. Putting hands and feet to our faith; not hunkering down behind these walls, but taking our faith in Jesus out into our neighborhood and our community.

One of our elders described "For the City" this. He said, "Everyone LOVED the idea of "Beyond These Walls;" of eliminating debt so that we could do more in our community. But I came to realize that "For the City" takes it from being about the church as a group...to being about ME as a person. The question is not 'What will the church do beyond these walls?' but 'What will I do beyond these walls!' I'll confess, that makes me a little uncomfortable. But it is good discomfort. 'For the City' is making 'Beyond These Walls' personal." Exactly!

In a moment, you are going to see our roll call of faith; the list of every Chapel Hill member who has passed. Within that list you will see names of those who left a forever-imprint upon this church. If you knew them, you'll never forget them. If you didn't, how I wish you had. Uddenburg, Lodjic, Johnson, Smith, Pandiani, Conan, Nichols ...you have no idea what you owe to these people... and scores of others on that list.

Like the Thorntons. Bill Thornton was "Head usher for the ages." Every service, every Sunday, without fail, he cared for us. We even named the usher's closet after Bill. And his wife, Margaret. She was a force. When we worshipped in the gym, she showed up early every Sunday after the crew had set up the chairs. She would straighten every single row...and put out flowers...because in that moment, it wasn't a gym. It was a sanctuary. And God...and God's people...deserved the best that she could offer.

That's what you will be reminded of on that list. Of course, not everyone was so faithful. Every group has some who are just along for the ride. No different for us. No different right here, is it? Some of you would have to admit that you're really not "all in." That you are more of a spectator than a player. A consumer than a contributor...right now. But it doesn't have to stay that way! You could decide...you could choose this day...to become one of those whom God uses to make a mark on his city. It's not too late!

In "For the City" we are asking... we are urging...every person in this church to discover what that elder did: God is calling me beyond my church walls to bless my city. God is calling ME to speak up for Jesus when I get a chance. God is calling ME to be more generous; to be more loving; to be more caring. God is calling ME to bless my neighbors. God is calling YOU to all of that! Can you hear him? Don't you want to be part of that? To put it differently, if a future Nehemiah discovered the list of those who were "all in" for Christ's mission to their city in 2019, would your name be on it?

Well...in case you aren't sure, today could be a starting point. A chance for you to say, "Lord, I want to be on that list! I want to be counted among the faithful; those are all in!" So I want to give you a chance. We're going to do something different. In a moment, I am going to START by reading the names of those Chapel Hill members who died in the last year. We will take extra time to honor these departed brothers and sisters. When you hear the name of your loved one, please stand in tribute.

Then...when I have finished reading those names from the last year, you will see a scroll of the rest of the Chapel Hill saints. And here's what I invite you to do. As those names scroll by, the names of those upon whose shoulders we stand...if you are all in...if you want to be named among those who loves their city and wants to be used by God to love your neighbors... I invite you to get up, come forward to one of these two maps... and put your sticker where you live. Kind of like staking your claim. This will be your way of saying, "I'm in! I want to do my part. I'm for the city. I'm willing to do whatever God calls me to do to bless my city for the sake of Jesus." Do this when you are ready.

When you are done, return to your seat...and we will close by singing *Amazing Grace*.