Greetings, DGCC Family.

Today we continue our year-long walk through the books of the Bible in order as we look at the book of Nehemiah, which is the last of the so-called “historical books.”

Nehemiah records the events of the third return of the Jewish people in exile to Jerusalem (recall that last week, in the book of Ezra, we looked at the first two “returns:” first under the leadership of Zerubbabel, and then under Ezra, as the people rebuilt the temple). This third return, under Nehemiah, takes place in 445 BC, which is when the book was written.

To begin with, it is important to understand who Nehemiah was. He was a Jew in exile in Persia (who had conquered the Babylonians), but was no common, ordinary person. Nehemiah describes himself this way: “I was cupbearer to the king” (1:11).

This was no ordinary position within the king’s court. He was in the presence of the king (who in this case was King Artaxerxes) at all times. He was trusted by the king and his court to bring wine to the king that was not poisoned or tainted in any way. He heard the deliberations and edicts of the king. No doubt the king took him into his confidence. To be the cupbearer was to have a position of honor and privilege within the king’s inner circle.

It was from this position that God calls Nehemiah. Some people return from Jerusalem and report that the city walls have been broken and burned down, leaving the people, and the city, defenseless. Nehemiah knows he must go, but one simply does not quit his job in the king’s court. It may have been a position of honor and privilege, but in many ways, it was a position of bondage. You served at the pleasure of the king.

And so, Nehemiah prays to God that the king will release him to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city walls. This is how he records it: “Then I prayed to the God of heaven...And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my request” (2:4; 8).

Nehemiah leaves his comfortable, honored position behind but comes away with something far more valuable: God’s grace. He knew that God’s gracious hand was all he needed. Hundreds of years later, the Lord would have the same message for the apostle Paul: “My grace is sufficient for you; for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12:9).

God’s grace is more comforting that material comfort. God’s grace is more powerful than positions of privilege. And is with Nehemiah 2,500 years ago, and with Paul 2,000 years ago, so it is with us today. God’s grace is all we need.
Grace and peace to you this day.

Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem and, as had been described to him, the city walls of Jerusalem are in a shambles. The people don’t know what to do, and so Nehemiah goes about the business of organizing people, assigning tasks, motivating them, and, in modern day terms, he gets after it.

Of course, nothing is that easy. Sanballat, the governor of neighboring Samaria, which was an avowed enemy of the Jewish people, gets wind of what’s going on and heaps scorn and insult upon the people and their efforts. And he brings his army with him as a show of strength, and as a threat.

Many of us would have responded with insults of our own. Many of us would have responded with threats of our own. Many of us would have stopped the work at hand in order to deal with our mean and nasty neighbors. Not so Nehemiah. His response, as we will see time and again, was to turn to the Lord:

“Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders” (4:4-5).

Rather than be distracted from their appointed task and get into a nasty confrontation with the Samaritans, Nehemiah turns to prayer. This was the result: “So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart” (4:6).

God had called and appointed Nehemiah and those around him to a task. That task was not to get into a war of words and insults. Nehemiah could not have known it, but his task was to rebuild the walls and the gates of the city that one day the Messiah would walk through to shouts of “Hosanna.”

And so, my prayer for all of us today is this: let’s remember our task. When the world scoffs and ridicules us for that task, remember the words of Nehemiah that day: “Don’t be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome” (4:14).

IHS,
Pastor Lou
Greetings to you in the name of Jesus the Risen Messiah.

While God had called for the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, nonetheless, it was a human endeavor. It took human labor. It took human time. And it took human money. Lots of it. Tradesmen had to be fed and paid. People had to take time from work. To put it in contemporary terms, it was a very large public works project.

In order to pay for this project, many people had mortgaged their property or had borrowed money at very high interest rates. When they were unable to pay the loans back, their lenders, who were their own “flesh and blood, their own countrymen…subjected their sons and daughters to slavery” (5:4-5).

When Nehemiah heard about this, this is what happened next:

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, ‘You are charging your own people interest!’ So I called together a large meeting to deal with them and said: ‘As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!’ They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

So, I continued, ‘What you are doing is not right. Shouldn’t you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies? ‘I and my brothers and my men are also lending the people money and grain. But let us stop charging interest! Give back to them immediately their fields, vineyards, olive groves and houses, and also the interest you are charging them—one percent of the money, grain, new wine and olive oil.’ ‘We will give it back,’ they said. ‘And we will not demand anything more from them. We will do as you say’” (5:6-12).

While God desired that the walls to the city be built, He did not desire that they be built in a way that was unethical or contrary to His call of justice. Here we see that certain people took advantage of the situation for personal gain, and Nehemiah had the courage to stand up to them.

As I read this passage, here’s what I think: in the same way that God calls us to whatever the task of the day is, so does He equally call us to stand up to injustice. In Nehemiah’s day, as in ours, the wall to the city needed to be built, but the wall of injustice needed to be torn down.

IHS, Pastor Lou
April 28

Grace and peace to you this day.

“So, the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God” (Nehemiah 6:15-16).

Fifty-two days. About 2.5 miles of stone, timber, and brick. Forty feet high and about eight feet thick. Thousands of tradesmen and laborers, all of whom had to be fed and housed. All of that in less than two months. And so our story ends. Down comes the curtain, strike up the band.

Well, not really. The purpose of rebuilding the wall was not just to rebuild the wall. The real purpose was to rebuild the peoples’ relationship with God. To restore them as a covenant people in obedience and submission to the Lord. Therefore, after the wall is rebuilt, Nehemiah doesn’t just send people home, he gathers them together and summons Ezra the priest (remember him from last week?) to read from the book of the Law of Moses (which is probably the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy). This is how Nehemiah describes it:

“So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law” (8:3).

“From daybreak until noon,” meaning about six hours. Standing shoulder to shoulder under the Jerusalem sun. Listening “attentively.”

The wall is rebuilt, the Book of the Law is read, and Nehemiah returns to the king. God’s plan of redemption moves forward.

Next week, a queen named Esther.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
April 30

Happy Friday, everyone!

Here’s your musical devotion for the week. Turn up the volume and enjoy.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8wN-fspKq1Q

IHS,

Pastor Lou