

<b>Series:</b> Nehemiah, Healthy Walls	<b>Reference:</b> Nehemiah 1:1-11	<b>Title:</b> Palimpsests	<b>Date:</b> 4.30.17
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This is the start of our series exploring the work of Nehemiah, who was called back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. The city lay bare to attack, and from this we draw parallels to our lives. How we have broken down walls, and are now open to harmful attack. We need to develop steps to rebuild in order to set healthy boundaries in life. Walls to guard our hearts in good ways & allow the right people through their gates in healthy life-giving ways. Join us in the coming weeks as we explore this book thoroughly.			

### Color Changes in text indicate slide changes

The book we begin today is the story of Nehemiah who returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls, this is after Haggai's story we heard last week of their rebuilding the Temple itself. However, Nehemiah not only rebuilt the walls, he also brought the people from despair to a fresh new walk with God. But we need to know why they needed this in the first place.

From the time King David was shown that Jerusalem was the place for the Temple to be built, it had always been seen as the place where God would dwell with his people. A visual reminder of God's presence. However, this was foreshadowing. God would dwell in the hearts of people as seen in **Colossians 1:27, 'Christ in you, the hope of glory!' The Church; the living breathing Temple of God on earth.**

Going further back than Nehemiah, we have to remember Solomon & his effect on the nation of Israel. Due to Solomon's sin, the kingdom of Israel was split in two in 931bc. There were the northern & southern tribes; 10 tribes in the north, and two in the south [Judah & Benjamin]. These kingdoms continued in their sin & in 722bc the northern tribes fell to the Assyrians. Then in 586bc the tribes in the south fell to the Babylonians. In effect, Satan had divided & conquered through the willing sin of the Israelites.

All this is fulfillment of the words found in Deuteronomy chapters 28-30 which speak of the blessings Israel would receive *if* she followed God & the curses she'd encounter *if* she turned from Him. In chapter 28 God lists these blessings & curses.

And then Deuteronomy 30:1-3 says this, *1When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come upon you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, 2 and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, 3 then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you.*

So, due to Israel's stubborn sinful heart she'd been scattered among the nations given that it's her reluctance to be a witness to these very nations which brought about the situation in the first place. Israel had been self focused rather than Kingdom focused. The northern tribes were eventually assimilated into other cultures, while the Southern

tribes remained in tact. In 539bc when the Medes & Persians conquered Babylon many Jews returned to their homeland, some did not. Then after many years of hardship they succeeded in rebuilding the Temple in 515bc under Zerubbabel. Then in 458bc another group returns to Jerusalem under the lead of Ezra who re-instituted Temple worship reestablishing spiritual life. Then it was in 444bc when Nehemiah came to Jerusalem to continue this work of rebuilding, particularly the walls & other aspects of the nation of Israel. So, that's where we are in the story.....but what does all that tell us?

Firstly, it reveals the devastating effect sin has on a community of faith. Add up those years & the work of rebuilding the Temple, the walls, the hearts of people; you realize how the sin of one man [Solomon] had affected so many throughout history.

This scattering of Israel is a visual reminder of a life broken apart by sin - the body separated, can't support itself, unable to heal, or minister to its other members. However, God not only draws people back to himself, but to each other as well - the body of Israel coming together is a larger picture of a person becoming whole again in Christ. A picture of the faith community coming together again, becoming healthy, whole, and useful once more to the Kingdom purposes of God.

Before this, in the years 605-562bc, Babylon was at its height of power, and as a result Jerusalem & its Temple were destroyed & the people deported from Judea. The rise of Babylon & the decline of Jerusalem give us a picture of sin poisoning God's kingdom peace. And under leaders like Nehemiah, the people were called back to God, but we must acknowledge *back* doesn't mean *backward*.

Remember we quoted Eccl 7:10 last week which says: "*Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?'*" We tend to look back on history through rose colored glasses at times, disregarding the sins of our past. We have to be careful when we say, "We have to get back to God." Since we can't mean returning to some *better time* in history past. Since what people usually mean by that is they want to get back to a time they enjoyed, or made them feel comfortable & safe during a particular period of history. Or a time when they *mistakenly assumed* they'd been following God. If we're honest we emerge from checkered pasts, individually & collectively. Some of the things we might be advocating getting back to, aren't things to which we should return. So back to God can't mean backwards. It means going forward in Him, returning to His original call in our current context, repenting of past sin & allowing Him to purify us for future ministry.

For Israel going back to life before would be going back to the sin which caused the dispersion in the first place - what they needed to get back to was God's kingdom call to reach the nations, not what they were used to before. We must move forward realizing we're always progressing in our understanding of what it means to follow God. A difficult thing, since in our faltering walk with God, we battle old thoughts & patterns.

In other words, we are *Palimpsests*. What is a Palimpsest you ask? Glad you did!

Palimpsest comes from two words, *scratched-out & again*. They were ancient documents which were scratched out & used again. Romans used waxed tablets which they would scratch writing into, then it would be smoothed out & reused. But often times there was still the remnant of the previous writing on the tablet.

We're like that, we never really come with a blank sheet, there's always something about our past life; the sin, the hurts, the pains, etc. bleeding through. God wants to write new truth on our hearts, but there's something underneath, something written on us from before which needs to be thrown out & recreated. They're the old tapes which play in our heads about ourselves & others. "You're stupid, look what you did, you're worthless, they don't like you, you'll never measure up!" These tapes play in our heads unheard by others around us, but they desperately hold us back & undermine relationships & our usefulness in God's hands.

Like Israel, we can only see backward; it's difficult to look forward in childlike faith trusting in the truth of who we are in Christ. We have the remnant effects of our past sin lives still scribbled on our lives under the surface. We've been fully redeemed & God doesn't see the scribble underneath any longer. He sees Christ's Righteousness on us - but we have a hard time seeing ourselves as a fully clean slate. We have a hard time acting in faith & giving up our fears. We hold onto that which comforts us, maybe we don't really believe we've been restored & redeemed - but the truth is, in Christ the old has gone, the new has come.

Have you noticed, Jesus got frustrated with the disciples, not because of their incapability. If that were so, he'd just recruit capable followers. Rather it's because they were capable. He knows what they could've been, but they fell short because they didn't. It wasn't their failure per se, it's that they didn't realize their potential & live up to it... Jesus is assured of your capability even when you're not. He believes in you more than you believe in yourself - not because we're all especially gifted, but because of his work in us! We must learn to see ourselves through the eyes of God's grace. It seems too good to be true & we seek identity everywhere but in Him. We achieve, push, perform, shop, work out & try to accomplish great things, longing to repair our perceived broken image. To create identity when it's already been created for us. We must trust that in dying to the old self, the new self is reborn in Christ...I don't have to do, prove, achieve, or accomplish anything. I'm totally accepted & forgiven; there's nothing which can separate me from the love of God in Christ! When God the Father looks on me, He sees the perfect record of God the Son.

Jerusalem with the gates & walls in disrepair, lay bare to her enemies, vulnerable & unprotected. She'd lost all her defenses; open to continued hurt & misery. Look around you this morning, we live in a world where people live with their walls broken down, exposed to continued hurt. But God's repairing & renewing us, just as he did with his people then. He wants to write over all that past scribble, to restore order, peace, unity, and usefulness to our lives. But the lesson of Nehemiah is this, we need God to do for us what we could not do for ourselves. To repair, to bring recovery & healing - to believe him when he says we're a new creation. But it takes recognition & sometimes some good

old confession & repentance to experience this. This is when walls are a good thing. Let's read.

*1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. 3 They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."*

The people distraught & in disgrace. They've lost their sense of purpose & usefulness. Laid bare to attack with walls broken down. They have no way of fending off further destruction. Fallen prey to those things that would seek to break them down further. If we can take this image as one for our own lives, we could say the same. We've been damaged, maybe by others, maybe we've not been following after God. Destructive patterns have set into our lives. Satan seems to have a foothold we can't fend off. Maybe some struggle with addictions. Maybe some with an attitude of bitterness & complaining. Stuck in patterns we can't erase. No matter how we try the writing underneath appears through the scribbles God has written on our hearts; and as a result his truth is blurry to us.

Maybe your gates have been burned. Gates being the ways in & out of your life; ways that people get to know the real you. They're burned & unusable, you may be open to destruction, but you can't allow others access to your heart in healthy ways. No one really knows you, you may look good, but inside you know you're not. Burnt & scarred emotionally, you're inaccessible. Maybe you've been a victim of something horrific since you didn't have the healthy walls up to fend off someone hurtful. Now you're bitter & closed off to healthy relationships & God's healing words. Our defenses are down & we do our best to build our own walls & repair our own gates with defensive tactics which make sense to us; but what we find is that we're fighting in our own strength. By His grace God has already rewritten who we are, now it's time to believe him. We are wholly accepted & loved by God, and need to allow him to build healthy walls, to rebuild the gates that will let him & others into our hearts in a healthy & right way - since as of now, those who'd seek to destroy us have access in any way possible. Instead of us being the gatekeeper allowing only those who are life-giving to come through a prescribed gate. To make us whole & useful in his hands once more, free from fear & worry, full of faith & love, and self sacrifice for his Kingdom. Mature Christians that can live in the dichotomy of dying to self, but not allowing themselves to be destroyed in the process.

So when we examine ourselves & find these things true, be encouraged, we have been given this Word of God to lead us back to Him. Nehemiah takes the first & very necessary step.

**The 1st Step: take stock & pray**

*4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.*

He mourned over this for four months. This is not emotionalism, this is deep recognition; facing his personal writing on the tablet of his life. He goes straight to God, he doesn't attempt to look away from the devastation he feels, or the ruins of life, but looks straight into them & brings them before God directly. When you find yourself in that wonderful distressing place of seeing your own devastation, don't run. Face it, weep over it, become distraught over it & bring it to the throne.

Typically this is not our first step. We talk, complain, figure it out on our own, read a book about it, listen to sermons about it, get depressed, avoid & fill the void with unhealthy behaviors, but never simply take stock & pray. But it's our first, best & only step, and as so, we should then do as Nehemiah did & recall the character of God.

### The 2nd Step: Recognize the Character of God

*5 Then I said: "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.*

He acknowledges who God is, and what he's committed to, which is that God keeps his promises. One that's attentive & listens. One who has the power to help his people. Then he repents of all corporate & personal sin.

### The 3rd Step: Personal & Corporate Confession

*I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.*

Notice, he doesn't pass blame on someone else. He acknowledges, he & his own are a part of the problem. He doesn't mince words, but goes directly to their sin & confesses it outright. Any good counselor will tell you that if you excuse yourself & pass blame on others you stand in the way of your own recovery. Then Nehemiah reminds God of his gracious promises.

### The 4th Step: Remind Yourself of God's Promises

*8 "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' 10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.*



In doing this, he's not necessarily reminding God, but himself of God's promises. He's thinking of promises like in Deuteronomy which predicted Israel would turn from God, be scattered, but if they returned to him he would answer by drawing them back in, bringing restoration to their lives. God's a god of restoration, of forgiveness, power, and of healing. Nehemiah claims these truths & it's as if you can see God erasing the old writing & rewriting the story on the hearts of his people. And, lastly, Nehemiah asks for specific help to the situation.

### The 5th Step: Ask for Specific Help

*11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king.*

Who was the king? Well you may or may not know, Nehemiah had been placed in the capacity of being the cupbearer to the king of Persia. This is definitely a place of power. He had the ear of the king, and do we think that's by chance, or by God's design? Definitely by design - God raised up Nehemiah for this task; his specific calling. But even with his position, to get the king to do what he wanted wasn't an easy thing, since this king had put a stop to this building before. Nehemiah needed God to move in this relationship. That was his first step.

In every situation, God will give steps. He will give the place to start rebuilding. His was to pray & then approach the king. Nehemiah takes his situation one step at a time as God reveals them not getting overwhelmed with the whole scope of the project. Isn't that how all great things happen - if we all knew everything we were committing ourselves to in any worthwhile endeavor we may not do it. We build kingdoms one rock at a time & eat elephants one bite at a time. No matter what you're facing in life there's always a place to start the rebuilding, and God goes before you, leading through the steps. But we must take the first step. Perhaps we need to turn away from a sin & turn to God. Perhaps we need to finally face some horrific past hurt. Perhaps we need to walk away from a relationship which is destructive.

Sometimes we feel like Israel, divided & scattered. God is calling us back together, to a place with healthy walls & boundaries, and gates through which we can usher in life-giving people & things but hold out destructive people & things. Whatever has broken down your healthy boundaries take the steps towards restoration today...

Firstly, pray, weep, mourn - take stock of your life & bring it to God. Examine your walls & gates - turn back to God in the process. Secondly, recognize the character of God. Thirdly, confess personal & corporate sin. Fourthly, remember God's promises as reality to you. And Fifthly, ask for specific help in your situation. We don't have to be a palimpsest; we can be a blank slate in the hands of God, useful once more in our kingdom calling!

## Questions for Community Group Leaders

1. Do you feel divided & scattered?
2. Are you a Palimpsest? Do you have old behaviors, or tapes playing in your life which are destructive to you?
3. How does 2 Corinthians 5:17, *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!*, speak to this?
4. Do you feel that you do not have healthy boundaries [walls] in life? Walls are typically spoken of in the negative, but in this case they're necessary & good. Walls to keep out unhealthy practices, or people who simply will rob us of life, and bring destruction to us. As much as you are willing share how the lack of proper boundaries in life have brought destruction to you.
5. What is your usual way of dealing with *attack*, be it spiritual, emotional, or relational? How would life be different if those attacks could not even penetrate healthy boundaries you've erected in Christ in the first place?
6. How does the way in which you view yourself through the eyes of the Gospel [grace] become healthy walls? For instance, if someone verbally attacks you, how do you go back to Jesus and speak truth to yourself? How does the truth of who you are in Christ erase the old tapes [the writing underneath your life] enabling you to think well of yourself bringing wholeness and confidence?
7. Describe a person who's been a model to you in this kind of life...one who is able to let others in, in good ways, but seems to hold up respectful boundaries which enable them & their ministry to thrive - Do you see this in Jesus? And if we are to be *like Him*, how can we continue to pursue his life within us?
8. See the *Who Am I In Christ* verses on the next page. Read & pray through them together. Discuss what they mean to us, how do assimilating & truly believing these things about ourselves practically change how we operate in life & relationships?
9. Revisit the 5 steps listed in the sermon, and challenge each other to approach issues in order to go forward & not backward in life.

## Who I Am In Christ

*"How can two walk together unless they agree?" Amos 3:3*

You need to know who you are in Christ so that you can live an abundant life with Jesus. The more you *agree* with God about your identity in Christ, the more your behavior will reflect your God given identity. Learn to see yourself as God sees you. Accept what God says about you and become the whole person you are meant to be. Understanding who you are in Christ will give you a strong foundation to build your life on. Your identity doesn't depend on something you do or have done. Your true identity is who you are in Christ. When you are in Christ you are a new creation, the old has passed away. It's time to stop living out of who people say you are and take hold of the truth of God's word.

- I am loved - 1John 3:3
- I am accepted - Ephesians 1:6
- I am a child of God - John 1:12
- I am Jesus' friend - John 15:14
- I am a joint heir with Jesus, sharing His inheritance with Him - Romans 8:17
- I am united with God and one spirit with Him - 1 Corinthians 6:17
- I am a temple of God. His spirit and life are in me - 1 Corinthians 6:19
- I am a member of Christ's body - 1 Corinthians 12:27
- I am a Saint - Ephesians 1:1
- I am redeemed and forgiven - Colossians 1:14
- I am complete in Jesus Christ - Colossians 2:10
- I am free from condemnation - Romans 8:1
- I am a new creation because I am in Christ - 2 Corinthians 5:17
- I am chosen of God, holy and dearly loved - Colossians 3:12
- I am established, anointed, and sealed by God - 2 Corinthians 1:21
- I do not have a spirit of fear, but of love, power, and a sound mind - 2 Timothy 1:7
- I am God's co-worker - 2 Corinthians 6:1
- I am seated in heavenly places with Christ - Ephesians 2:6
- I have direct access to God - Ephesians 2:18
- I am chosen to bear fruit - John 15:16
- I am one of God's living stones, being built up in Christ as a spiritual house - 1 Peter 2:5
- I have been given exceedingly great and precious promises by God by which I share His nature - 2 Peter 1:4
- I can always know the presence of God, He never leaves me - Hebrews 13:5
- God works in me to help me do the things He wants me to do - Philippians 2:13
- I can ask God for wisdom and He will give me what I need - James 1:5
- I have been justified - Romans 5:1
- I am assured that God works all things out for good - Romans 8:28

This list is not exhaustive, there is so much more! Simply choose to believe what God says about you. Try reading the above list every day for a month, preferably out loud. The more you know who you are in Christ, the more your behavior will reflect your true identity; "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" Romans 12:2. To walk with Jesus you need to know and believe who you are in Him. Understanding your identity in Christ is crucial to your walk with Him. The best way to renew your mind and experience transformation is by knowing, thinking, and speaking who you are in Christ. Train yourself to say the same things that God says in His word about you.