

EPIPHANY 6 2010: REBUILDING GOD'S TEMPLE ~ REBUILDING YOUR LIFE WITH GOD #4
Nehemiah 6-7 (*various verses*)

REBUILDING THE WALLS

INTRODUCTION:

We have arrived at the end of our worship series -

"REBUILDING GOD'S TEMPLE: Rebuilding Your Life with God."

Last Sunday - because of the ice and snow - only a few of us could gather for worship, and reflect upon "Rejoicing in the Word." So, let's do a quick review to bring us up to today's message, and help us tie everything together.

We've looked at Ezra and Nehemiah to help us reflect upon how to rebuild our lives with God. In one way or another -- we all have some rebuilding to do.

- A few are just beginning the process of rebuild their lives **with God.**
- Others, while they are Christians - have had experiences that have torn their lives apart:
 - illness - *either personal or someone close*
 - financial hardship
 - the dissolution *and disillusion* of a relationship
 - death of loved ones...

- And there are those of us who are aware that there are some gaps in our life -- cracks in the walls of our faith -- that have threatened our relationship with God, and the people of God.

So, in some way or another -

each of us can learn from the story of the Jews returning from Exile to rebuild their lives with God in the Promised Land.

THE ALTAR, THE WORD & THE WALLS:

In our study of Ezra-Nehemiah, we learned that within the process of rebuilding their lives with God, the people accomplished **three main priorities:**

1. Reset the Altar: the worship of God was the first priority. Resetting the Altar in our lives means acknowledging that God is God: God is the one and only who deserves the very first place in our lives. The worship of God -- and how we approach worship -- is shaped and shapes our relationship with God, and our neighbors.

2. Rejoice in the Word: this was the focus of last Sunday's message. And the main idea was that it is when we fully engage the Word of God (the scriptures) it intimately informs us of our true identity as beloved children of God. The scriptures convict us of our brokenness (our sin) -- and yet as we confess our sinfulness, and return to God -- there is reason for rejoicing. And as the Scriptures continue to inform our lives -- what we do day in, and day out -- to bring joy to God -- it is the joy of the Lord that is our strength in and for all circumstances of life.

3. Rebuilding the Walls: When we have placed God upon the center, high altar of our heart, and we've engaged the living Word of God as the compass and guide for our lives, there is the need to build walls of protection.

- That's what we're going to briefly reflect upon this morning.

READ: Nehemiah 6:1- 7:3

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THIS PASSAGE?:

There's a lot going on in this passage. There are persons named that we've not heard about. But the gist of the story is that Nehemiah runs into opposition and attempts to distract him as he leads the people in rebuilding the city walls of Jerusalem.

In fact, throughout the process of rebuilding their lives in Jerusalem -- the returning Jews had to deal with such tactics. Not everyone who had been living in the region was happy the Jews had returned. They saw it as a threat; to their personal way of life, and their quiet life together as a back water place within the Persian Empire.

So, "the people of the land" harassed and attacked the Jews as they rebuilt the altar and the Temple. They were suspicious of the Jews as they congregated to renew their covenant with the living God. And now, they were attempting to stop the building of the city walls.

We will recall that city walls in ancient times were important. They delineated order and justice, from the precarious nature of life in the wilderness. And yes -- they also signified strength and power for those who dwelled within the walls.

The return of the Jews from Exile had disrupted the lives of the people of the land. It disrupted family life. It disrupted what had become the accepted practice of worshiping multiple gods. The rebuilding of the city walls threatened the way commerce and trade would be conducted, and it might even provoke the attention of the Persians as a threat to their authority in the region. So, the people of the land, had (in their eyes) good reason to try to halt or distract the rebuilding process.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR US?:

The people of God always encounter opposition and distractions in their pursuit to live faithfully in their relationship with God.

-- If you've been a follower of Jesus Christ for any length of time, you know what I am talking about:

You realize your need for God's mercy and love. You accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. The Holy Spirit begins to bring healing and deliverance to your life. And real change begins to take place.

But the thing about change is - it's scary and it is often hard to maintain.

And while they may not admit to it -- the change God is working in your life -- it threatens those closest to you. They've gotten used to their role in your life -- and the benefits that come from that role.

Family and friends of recovering addicts know this to be true:

As much as we prayed for our loved ones to get sober, their sobriety means changes in our lives, our roles, our identities: as Enabler, Rescuer, Peace-maker.

Others often discover that as they make faith-based life-style changes, they're friends are threatened. Friends often times will believe that your decision not to engage in certain activities is a judgment (on your part) against them.

And depending on the extent and depth of a life change is made -- such as how you conduct your business -- how you work as an employee -- how you make financial decisions for your personal lifestyle ---- others will experience negative effects.

But often, our newly found faith is weak in its resolve. And so we begin to comprise. After all, we don't want to alienate our family and friends. And we don't want to be accused of being the cause for anyone's economic downturn.

But the most severe and damaging attacks don't come from others = outside...

...they come from within = **from ourselves.**

Others might become leery of the changes in our lives....but we can be downright afraid. Or...we become too self-confident. And so, like the people of the ancient plain -- we begin building our own Towers of Babel: to make a name for ourselves to show how holy and righteousness we are, and how we understand the ways of God, oh-so-much better than anyone else.

REBUILDING THE WALLS = PRACTICING THE HOLY DISCIPLINES:

Nehemiah understood the importance of rebuilding the city walls.

They were for protection -- and yes, to strengthen the city.

And yet -- the walls also had gates that allowed trade and commerce to flow in and out -- for people to engage in community building activities with those beyond the gates. **However, the gates allowed for a monitored flow** -- things would pass in and out in an orderly way -- a way that benefitted both those within and those outside the walls.

The strength and power the walls afforded the city would also become the source of strength and power to the surrounding area -- as those people would be invited in during times of distress, and benefit from the show of power in their midst.

What are the Walls that We Need to Rebuild in Our Lives?

The walls we need to build (or rebuild) are those things -- those practices and life-style choices -- that work to guard and strengthen our faith and our relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

John Wesley referred to such walling building as the "holy disciplines". Some people called them the "spiritual disciplines". Back in the day, folk used to refer to it as "living the sanctified life" or a life of "holiness."

Look at them as the building blocks to strength your life with Christ. Each practice becomes another layer of protection. And yet -- the amazing thing is that as practice becomes lifestyle -- we discover that there is great freedom and joy within the holy city of our lives.

John Wesley -- referring back to both the Bible and the practices of the ancient church -- put before the people called Methodists, what he called ***The Means of Grace***. In other words, these can be used for building the wall of mercy and love around our lives that strengthen our personal relationship with God in Christ, and allows us to live in this world with others in ways that reflect God's purposes for everyone, and all creation.

We don't have time this morning to discuss each one in detail.

But, Wesley divided these holy disciplines into two major categories:

Works of Piety and Works of Mercy.

Basically -- **works of piety are those practices that strengthen our personal relationship God** through Jesus Christ. And these are divided into those that help us individually, and as a community of faith.

Works of Mercy are acts of service focused on the needs of others -- both individual and societal.

And while John Wesley encouraged the Methodists to practice all of the disciplines -
- he understood that some were easier for some folks, and more challenging for others.

Using a instrument similar to the Myers/Briggs Personality Inventory -- we can now discover that individuals respond to and benefit from different disciplines based on their Spirituality Profile.

And yet -- there is a means of grace that Wesley -- and so many others recognize as both a universal and repeatable means for people of faith to strengthen their relationship with God and neighbor --- in effect = the means to rebuild the walls: **HOLY COMMUNION.**

RESETTING ALTAR, REJOICING IN THE WORD, REBUILDING WALLS:

ALTAR: It is within the sacrament that our hearts and minds are centered upon the object of our praise and worship: Jesus Christ the Son of God.

WORD: We hear in the words of consecration the scriptural witness to the one true God, and of his Word-made-flesh, to redeem his people.

WALLS: And as the Holy Spirit descends upon both the elements of the Bread and Cup -- and upon our hearts and minds -- we receive sustenance = strength and confidence that we, indeed, are offered a loving, personal

relationship with God
disciples and witnesses to

through Christ...And that we can go forth to live as
what God has done through Christ.

And the joy of the Lord becomes our strength.

And our lives are **REBUILT WITH GOD.**