

Title: "Nehemiah: Living Faith Amidst of Opposition"

Text: Nehemiah 3-4

Turn with me again today to the Book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament.

-Nehemiah is the last person we are looking at as we bring this sermon series on "Living Faith in 3D" to a close.

And today we see in Nehemiah what "living faith" looks like in the midst of opposition.

-Nehemiah lived at the end of the period in Israel's history called the exile.

-The Babylonians had come in and destroyed the nation of Israel, and destroyed the Capital City of Jerusalem.

-And the Jews that they did not kill outright, they carted off to live in exile in other parts of the Babylonian Empire.

Later the Persians would come and defeat the Babylonians,

-and become the new dominant power of the ancient world.

-Under the Persian King Cyrus they would ultimately allow the Jews to return to Israel.

-Many did return over the course of many years, but some, like Nehemiah, stayed in Persia.

-They had homes and jobs there, and they stayed.

And the Jews that returned to Israel, found that their ancestral lands were now owned by other people groups,

-who during the 70-80 years of their exile had moved in in their absence.

They were not any more pleased to have the Jews return to Israel than the Palestinians have been over the past 70 years since 1948.

-And so there is great local opposition in Israel as the Jews come back and try to begin reclaiming their land, and rebuilding their cities,

-especially the City of Jerusalem.

Last week we saw that Nehemiah, who lived in the Persian Capital of Susa and worked as a cupbearer to the King of Persia,

-received a visit from one of his brothers, Hanani.

Hanani was among those Jews who had returned to Israel,
-and when he came back to Persia to visit his brother, he
told Nehemiah about the dreadful state of things in Israel.
-The Jews were being ill treated and living in squalor.
-The cities and towns were a mess.
-The walls of Jerusalem were still in ruins.
The news caused Nehemiah to weep, and mourn, and fast,
and pray.

And in the process of praying, we saw that God stirred
Nehemiah's heart to step out in faith and offer his own
services to God and his people to help them rebuild.
-So Nehemiah went to the King, and asked for time off from
his job as cupbearer,
-and for authority and resources from the King to go back
to Israel and lead a rebuilding project of Jerusalem.

Amazingly enough, the gracious hand of God was upon him,
-and the King granted his request.

As we come in now on chapter 3 and 4, Nehemiah has
returned to Israel,
-and has examined the situation at Jerusalem,
-and has assembled a whole team of Jews there to take on
this great project of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

For chapter 3, I am just going to read the first sentence of
each paragraph, to give you a sense of who Nehemiah has
assembled for this project, and then I will read you chapter 4.

Now don't you just love these sections of the Bible that are full
of names that none of us can pronounce?
-If you're like me, you often just skip over chapters like this,
or skim them quickly like we just did with chapter 3.

But what I don't want us to miss about this chapter, is seeing
the whole host of individuals, families, tribes, and people
-who are taking part together in this great project of
rebuilding Jerusalem's wall.
It's amazing the team of people Nehemiah assembles for the
work.

- There are priests and peasants, craftsmen and laborers, nobles and blue collar workers, men and women, and children! All working side by side.

And these are not just inhabitants of the area around Jerusalem.

- There is a team from Jericho working next to another team of folks from Gibeah and Mizpah and Beth Hakkerem.
- You see, Nehemiah has assembled a workforce from all over Israel.
 - He has told them his vision of restoring their capital city, and restoring the honor of God.
 - And people have responded to that vision and have come.

- Here in ch. 3, Nehemiah names these people by name and by family and by the places they have come from.
 - He knows them all now, and in this chapter he is honoring them, and appreciating their work,
 - and naming them before God as a testimony of praise.

It's a great image of the church!

- A diverse multitude of people gathered together in common cause to join with a great leader (in our case Jesus),
 - who has called us to join Him in a great project of building God's Kingdom together.

That's what Nehemiah is doing here with all these people in Jerusalem.

But as we come in on chapter 4 of Nehemiah, we see the kind of opposition and obstacles these people faced.

And verse 6 of chapter 4 tells us that the struggles really kicked in at the halfway point of the project.

- V 6 says they rebuilt the wall until all of it had reached half it's height, and the people had been working with all their heart.

And isn't that the way things often go?

- The first half of any big project can be carried off with hard work and the enthusiasm.
- But the second half of any project is always harder.
 - We lose steam. We lose the initial enthusiasm.
 - We get tired. We run into some obstacles.

-We get discouraged and we wonder whether the project is worth continuing.

Well, that's the way it is here for Nehemiah.

-And the problem is both external and internal.

-There is opposition from outside the working community,
-and there is growing discouragement from within.

1. First the opposition: Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite.

They are not Israelites, but local authorities who resent the return of the Israelites and who have been leading the opposition to the rebuilding of Jerusalem from the start.

But initially they just scorned the idea of rebuilding Jerusalem's wall as a stupid idea that would never get off the ground.

-But now this guy Nehemiah has mobilized a serious work force and the wall is actually half built!

-This is getting serious, and they decide to step in and make a ruckus.

So what do they do?

-They gather a little army of Arabs, Ammonites, and men of Ashdod to come and stir up trouble.

-And they don't so much attack with weapons, but with intimidation.

-They stand at a distance with weapons in hand, but they call out to the workers with insults and mockery.

"Who do you Jews think you are? And what a lousy job you're doing?"

-You think that flimsy wall will keep anybody safe?

-A little fox could climb up on it and knock the whole thing down.

You see, they are making fun of the workers,

-and since they also have a whole little army of men with weapons, they are rather intimidating.

And how does Nehemiah respond?

-He prays a simple prayer to God in verse 4, and asks God to take care of their opponents.

-He says, "Lord, turn their insults back on their own heads."

And here again, we see the character, and the living faith of Nehemiah.

-He firmly believes that this project is a work of God.

-He believes it was God who called him to it.

-And God is the One who has shown his gracious hand all along the way for confirmation.

-And God is the one who has granted them success so far.

So when it comes to opposition, Nehemiah simply asks God to take care of that, too.

"This is your battle, Lord. Let their taunts rebound back onto themselves."

But look what else Nehemiah does in verses 8-9.

-He not only prays himself, but leads the people in praying about the situation.

-The workers along the wall have also been hearing these taunts and insults of the enemies.

-So Nehemiah does two things, he gathers them all to pray, and then he posts a guard day and night.

I love that about Nehemiah. He is faithful and practical.

-There is nothing wrong with using our brains even as we are trusting God to fight the battles of life for us.

-He prays, and he posts a guard.

2. But now we come to the second problem at this midway point of the project: the discouragement of the workforce.

V. 10 says, "Meanwhile the people of Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we can't rebuild the wall."

You see, the workers are tired, and the enthusiasm has worn off.

-And think about it: they are halfway through the project, and is there more rubble now that there was at the beginning of the project?

-No! There is far less rubble than there was because they have been using most of those old stones from the rubble in order to rebuild the new wall.

But back at the beginning of the work Nehemiah had given them a vision of that great wall rebuilt, -and they had seen the rubble as a resource.

But now in their weariness it all just looks like rubble again. -And it doesn't seem like they have even made a dent in it. -And sure the wall is half-built, but they have lost the vision for the great project they are about. -Discouragement has changed their perspective.

So what does Nehemiah do?

-First in verse 13 he takes the people's fear of the enemy seriously and posts more guards along the wall. -And then in v. 14 it says Nehemiah takes a little time to "look things over." -He took a little time to reflect on what the real issue was before he did anything else. -And he came to the conclusion that the real problem was not the enemy nor the rubble. -The problem was the discouragement and loss of vision.

And so in v. 14 he turns the people's focus back to God, and a vision for what God has called them to do. "Don't be afraid of the enemy," he says, "Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers and sisters, your sons and daughter, your wives and your homes."

Remember who has called us to this great project, he is saying, and remember we are restoring our homeland for the protection and prosperity of God's people.

And the most amazing thing happens when they catch the vision again: they are not tired anymore.

-v. 16 says that from that day on, half the men worked while the other half stood guard. -And they work from first light of dawn until the stars come out.

And when the opposition sees that their taunts and threats
were of no avail,
-they back off, frustrated in their attempt to stall the work.

My friends, this again is a great picture of the people of God in
action, living out faith in an often hostile world.
-It's an image of the church! It's an image of us.

And the living faith of Nehemiah has been a great
encouragement to me this past week.
-Because I have been feeling tired and a bit discouraged
about the state of the world, and about the state of the
church at large in the world,
-and about the state of our church right here in Malden.

It often feels like the enemy is winning.
-Like the church is in decline.
-Like the gates of hell are indeed prevailing against us.
-And like the workers' strength is giving out.

I needed Nehemiah to speak God's word to me this week
and remind me that it's a great and awesome God that we
serve.
-And that it's a great and awesome calling He has given us
to be His people, living out a multi-dimensional faith in
this day and in this generation.

Sure there is a pile of rubble still around us, and certainly the
enemy will continue to oppose God's people
-and tell us that this faith we hold onto is now culturally
irrelevant,
-and this Kingdom of God we proclaim is out of touch with
reality,
-and this gospel of redemption is old and outdated.

But like the people in Nehemiah's day, we have actually been
drawn together by a great God
-into a community of diverse people who amazingly enough
have been experiencing
just how wide and long and high and deep the love of
God is.

- And we have been responding to that love by loving him back,
 - and by learning to love each other as he has loved us.
- And that is not culturally irrelevant.

And over the course of years people here have been discovering their own gifts, and passions and calling,

- and have been using those giftings to serve God and others, and to serve this community
- in ways that are not out of touch with reality at all.

And though it may seem at times that we are not even making a dent in the rubble of the world around us,

- and sometimes like we haven't made much of a dent even with the rubble in our own lives,
- we have experienced enough of God's amazing grace and power that we know that this great project of building and extending His kingdom
- is not foolish or outdated or irrelevant.

It's a great calling, and a great project to be joining hands and doing together.

- It involves self-sacrifice, and taking risks.
- It involves leaning less on our own logic and understanding and leaning more on the grace and power of God.
- It involves making decisions on a daily basis that reflect the values and priorities of Jesus.

I needed Nehemiah to call me this week to take my eyes off the rubble,

- and lift them again to our great and awesome God.

I needed him to call me to faithfulness, and to trust, and to perseverance with a fresh vision of the goodness of God in the face of opposition and discouragement.

That's what Nehemiah did for all those people he names in chapter 3, who were living this faith out in their day.

- Let's listen to him ourselves, and then continue to do the kingdom work God's called us to do together in our day as well.

Let's pray.

