
Day 285 - October 12

Period of Restoration (535-425 BCE)

Nehemiah's Religious Reforms

Dedication of the Wall

Readings: *Nehemiah 12:27-47; 13:1-31*

Reflections:

- After the great confession and recommitment of Israel, the people then dedicate these walls they have built in Nehemiah 12. They can't secure the borders of Israel, but they have secured the perimeter of Jerusalem. All this hard work to restore the temple and this remnant community is finally humanly secured by the walls they have built.
- The celebration is wonderful, the joy is real, and although we know what is coming, this small group truly believes that they are now going to serve God for the rest of their lives.
- There are two interesting points at the end of this Act, as the curtain falls. One is personal and the other corporate.
 - Personally we see Nehemiah write in his own prayer at the end of all of this: "Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services." First we see Nehemiah's desire to make a lasting spiritual difference in his work before God. All people want that to be true of their lives. They want to make a lasting difference. Here is the sad reality: It is all for not. By the next chapter in the book, the people are completely a mess again and the house of God is completely abandoned. Here is a warning for all leaders who would spend all of their time focused on the externals: it won't last. The only thing that lasts is partnering with God to see people changed from the inside out. Everything else means nothing if this internal transformation is not taking place. To use an old phrase, "All you are doing is rearranging the chairs on the Titanic."
 - Corporately, we see people completely focused on excluding the nations of the world from God's community as they hide behind their walls. "...there it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God... When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign descent." Interesting the selective hearing of the people.

They didn't remember the story of Ruth, the Moabite. They didn't remember about Rahab the prostitute. They didn't notice the laws about caring for the aliens and foreigners. All they heard was the one law from the story of Balaam's donkey. Fascinating how when we are in self-saving mode, hiding behind our walls of exclusive religion, how we tend to hear what we want to hear. Israel completely missed their calling to be priests to the nations, to be a light to the Gentiles. This final remnant is here in the Promised Land, hiding in their one last city, wall built high and kicking out every single person who isn't one of them. How powerfully must have Jesus' words sounded when he declared that the Gentile Centurion in the Roman army had more faith in God than anyone in Israel? (Matthew 8:5-13, Luke 7:1-10).

- Nehemiah 13 now puts the final "fizzle" into Israel's crash and burn story. Eleven years passes and 432 BCE Nehemiah returns to Susa to Artaxerxes. Here he learns again on how the people have completely abandoned all their commitments. The temple was basically not in service. A Priest named Eliashib who was suppose to ensure the storerooms were filled with offerings to God has them empty and has converted them into a place for him and his family to live. Rather than the temple being God's home it is Eliashib's home. The Levites are not being taken care of and so they have to all go back to farming because they don't receive the support of people's tithes and offerings to live on. People are working on the Sabbath. The men are again marrying foreign women as they follow the pattern of Solomon: "Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon king of Israel sinned? Among the many nations there was not a king like him (he was the best of the best). He was loved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel (this was the highest point in Israel's history), but even he was led into sin by foreign women." Nehemiah reminds the people that even at the best of times and with the best leader they ever had, they as a nation have failed to live as God wanted them to live. Now again, they are categorically breaking every commitment they have just made before God and in writing! Everything is a royal mess.
- Nehemiah does one more house cleaning item, he sets up the Priests one more time, and prays for God to remember his best attempts to put things in their right place. And with this pathetic account, so ends Act Three, the case study of Israel and the sad story of "what doesn't work to change the human heart." As we enter into the silence of 400 years, how deafening the divine silence must have been? How they must have longed for the days of Messiah to come? And yet we see how the fourth Act begins, the shocking revelation of God's rescuer and the revelation of "what does work to change the human heart!"