A Heart Set on Worship and Obedience Memory Verse: Nehemiah 8:10

February 4th, 2024 Scripture Reading: Genesis 17:1-8

 Last week we joined up with Nehemiah in his efforts to rebuild Jerusalem’s walls. We saw all the opposition he received and how he overcame that opposition. His simple but effective method: Pray and keep building! We also talked about the fact that the task set before Nehemiah was an incarnational one. Meaning, the effort to complete the wall rested fully on the shoulders of the people, and fully in the hands of God. God chooses to work in this way…he demands our full participation. Yet Nehemiah, his people and their enemies are all well aware that the project could not have been completed without the help of God.

 Now that the wall has been restored, there are still some matters that need to be addressed. Walls were an important part of any city at the time, yet the entire point of the project was not to stack stones for protection, the point was that the people might understand that God himself is their protection. Their safety is not afforded by a wall, but by God. And so, in the process of rebuilding a wall, God is really restoring his people into proper relationship with him.

 And this relationship is based on a covenant. It’s a lot like a marriage.

SLIDE 2: Wedding

Marriage is a covenant that two people make and in making that covenant, they bind themselves together in a life-long fidelity. The Bile describes it beautifully as two becoming one flesh. That means that each spouse in the relationship will have a lot of decisions to make regarding their marriage. Because I am married, there are certain things I must do, and certain things I must not do. I live my life and make my decisions based on the covenant that I have made with my wife. If I don’t live in that way, my marriage suffers and eventually falls apart. This is why adultery is so devastating…because fundamentally, it violates an established covenant. In fact, when the Old Testament prophets speak on behalf of God, they accuse the people of being unfaithful, of committing adultery with other gods, false gods. Read the book of Hosea to learn more about that. So we have God, who is bound to the marriage covenant, who wants to be in relationship with his people, but they are continually unfaithful. They have made their vows, they have entered into this relationship, yet they violate those vows again and again. But from God’s perspective, divorce is not an option. That is what unconditional love is all about. He still loves us despite our unfaithfulness. But we need to be clear here, God’s love for us is unconditional, but the covenant he has made with us is very conditional. In order to have any meaning at all, the relationship must have conditions! So because of Israel’s persistence in adultery, God insists on a time of separation. So this plays out in history as Jerusalem is eventually overtaken, the temple is destroyed and God’s people are deported every which way, separated from each other, their home land and their God. We know that if a marriage ever comes to separation it’s never a good thing, but in taking such a drastic step, there is hope. The hope is that the offending spouse will come to their senses, will feel the consequence of their actions, will repent and recommit to the already established covenant. Here now, we are going to see that moment of reconciliation play out.

 Enter Ezra. We have not yet talked about Ezra who is a scribe and priest, well versed in God’s word. Technically, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are just one book that eventually split apart, so Ezra has already been a part of the story, but this is the first time we see him in Nehemiah. Ezra has actually been in Jerusalem for about thirteen years at this point. So let’s read Nehemiah chapter 8:1 READ

SLIDE 3: Nehemiah chapter 8:1

 So we are not told exactly what Ezra’s scroll contained, but we know it had to do with Moses. Traditionally, we consider the first five books of the Bible to be written by Moses. As a scribe, Ezra would have had access to these types of texts and so READ 2. Everyone is at this assembly. The Hebrew phrase gives the idea of the people gathering “as one”. Young and old, rich or poor, everyone showed up. We saw this same dynamic at play when everyone worked together to restore the wall, it will again take everyone together to restore God’s people. READ 3. Everyone listened attentively for hours! From early morning to midday! That seems hard to imagine. For most of us, a twenty minute sermon is long enough. But remember, this is a moment of turning. These people are so far removed from their marriage to God that they are actually largely unfamiliar with the covenant to which they are supposed to commit. So they listen intently and with humility, trying to soak in every word, wanting to know what is expected of them, wanting to know the conditions of the covenant.

SLIDE 4: Nehemiah 8:4-8

 READ 4-8 So we see Ezra is not working alone here. He has a lot of leaders around him, almost like small group leaders who work with the people and answer their questions. Comprehension is key here! Understanding God’s word is so important at this juncture. Again, just like in a marriage, if I have wronged my wife or hurt her and I come to her sorry for what had happened and she starts talking to me about her expectations and feelings, am I going to put my hand up while she is talking and say, “Okay, I’ve heard enough! I just came to apologize not to get a lecture.” Well, that’s not true repentance right? If I am truly sorry, I approach my wife with humility and I want to hear her perspective. I want to know how I can be a better husband to her. So the people come to God with humble hearts and open ears. In fact, the text says they worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground. They are humble. They are ready to receive the lecture so to speak. They are ready to hear how they can do better moving forward.

SLIDE 5: Nehemiah 8:9-10

 And their response is in verse 9 READ. Why do the people break down here? Because they are truly sorry. Because after hearing God’s perspective, they understand the damage done. READ 10. This is what reconciliation looks like. If I come to my wife humbly and sorry for the way something turned out, I am sorry for the damage caused. I can’t take it back, I can’t fix it, so there is sadness. But when my wife offers me forgiveness, that brings joy. So the people are experiencing this mix of sadness and joy. And notice where strength comes from…not the newly built walls, but joy from the Lord! Time magazine reported on something called the Grant Study. They followed a group of men throughout their lives and tried to gauge their experience of happiness. Here is one of their conclusions: **“the capacity to love and be loved was the single strength most clearly associated with subjective well-being at age eighty.”** The study highlights the importance of relationships. And it follows as one of biggest regrets people have at the end of life is wishing they had spent more time with loved ones. So if we derive happiness from our relationships with other people, how much more happiness, how much joy could result in our relationship with God? And what’s more, I believe that if you find you do not have joy in your relationship with God, then it is time to consider, am I living into the covenant? What in my life is separating me from God? Am I listening attentively to his word? Am I comprehending what he says?

SLIDE 6: What in my life is separating me from God?

 Well, fueled by the joy of the Lord, the people go into the next day ready for round two, and as they listen to God’s word, they come to find that they are supposed to celebrate a special festival called the festival of Booths. During this time, people would go out and gather branches and build little lean-to booths in which they would live for the duration of the festival. It sounds strange to us, but the people were supposed to do this as a way of remembering their own story. Leviticus 23:32 gives the rationale: “For seven days you must live in huts. Every citizen of Israeal must live in huts so that your future generation will know that I made the Israelites live in huts when I brought them out of the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.”

SLIDE 7: Leviticus 23:32

 So they gave up their relatively comfortable homes and moved out into booths for a week. And when the kids ask “Why are we doing this?” The story of God’s redemption can be told once again and the people can be strengthened by the joy of the Lord. In verse 17, we are told that the people had not celebrated this festival since the time of Joshua…that’s about 850 years of not living into the covenant God had established. And yet, there is forgiveness and restoration. The people continue to read from God’s law and they continue to celebrate accordingly.

 Chapter 9 recounts a prayer offered up by the Levites, who were the guys that served in the temple. We are not going to comb through this prayer, but I do want to give an overview because, as we have mentioned in past weeks, having examples of prayers like this is so important for us. These examples help us to be better prayers. Basically, the prayer begins with a word of praise:

SLIDE 8: Nehemiah 9

“From everlasting to everlasting bless your glorious name, which is high above all blessing and praise.” So they establish, in case there is any confusion, that God is eminently worthy to be praised. They then launch into a rather lengthy account of history beginning with creation. God is the Creator, God calls Abram and makes promised to him. God saves his people from slavery in Egypt, God gives the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai, yet the people rebelled and forged a golden calf idol. Despite this verse 17 says, “You are a God ready to forgive, merciful and compassionate, very patient and truly faithful. You didn’t forsake them.” Wow, what a hope filled verse. It’s no wonder why we can find such joy in the Lord. He is ready to forgive, and he will not forsake us! But he does punish, and the Lord sustains his people as they wander in the wilderness for forty years. Finally, the people enter the promised land, but once again they rebel, they do not listen to the prophets and God ends up handing his people over to their enemies. So like many relationships, it’s a bit of a rollercoaster. Good times and bad, but the common denominator through it all is God’s faithfulness.

 So why pray all this long history lesson? It is not as though God is unaware of the story. He knows what happened. But I think it is important to pray this way for two reasons: One, it helps you; the one praying! To recount the way God has worked in the past serves as a reminder of who God is, it builds faith as we look to the future. So it is good for us to know who we are addressing in our prayers and we can know who God is based on what he has done. Also, the second reason for such a long account is simply that it continues the idea of praise and worship. In prayer we show God adoration…we tell him what is great about him because we appreciate him. That is part and parcel of any relationship. We communicate what we admire in the other person, what we are thankful for…we praise God by naming the things he has done. We retell that story.

SLIDE 9: “In your great mercy however, you didn’t make an end of them. Neither did you forsake them, because you are a merciful and compassionate God. Now our God,”

The saga is summarized in verse 31 “In your great mercy however, you didn’t make an end of them. Neither did you forsake them, because you are a merciful and compassionate God. Now our God,” so here we see the word “now.” So the story is over and we have come all the way up to the present, “Now our God, great and mighty and awesome God, you are the one who faithfully keeps the covenant, who actually holds up this marriage: Help us!” It’s a plea, a straight up cry for help. The prayer actually ends on a bit of a downer: “We are in great distress.” Sure, we have a rebuilt temple, sure we have rebuilt walls, we have even restored our relationship with you God, we have recommitted ourselves to your covenant…Now, now we need help.

The people then make it official. Like signing a marriage lisence, they gather and make a firm agreement in writing that they will live according to God’s instructions. They will uphold their end of the covenant. And so, with that move, the marriage has been restored.

SLIDE 10: This is the heart of God.

As we have read, God is merciful and compassionate. He wants to restore our relationship with him. So maybe you are here today and you know exactly why you’re relationship with God has gone sour…I just encourage you to repent, start living into the covenant and humbly accept God’s grace. Maybe your are here and you are not really sure how distance has crept into your relationship with God. Maybe it is time to take some time. Shut off the phone the TV, get your bible, read a favorite passage and spend some time with God in the quiet. If you seek him, you will find him. Maybe you’re here and you do not have a relationship with God to speak of. If that is the case, please know that God loves you, he sent his Son to die for you and he rose back to life after three days so that your relationship with God could be possible! God has initiated the relationship, he has popped the question, he is committed, all we have to do is accept. You can do that today, and we would love to pray with you after the service, or talk with you about what a relationship with the Lord looks like…We sing these words, “You bring restoration, You bring restoration, You bring restoration to my soul…You give me joy.” That is joy for each and every one of us, joy as we enter into a covenantal relationship with the almighty God who is merciful and compassionate. Amen.