

Nehemiah: Building a City Within the City, week 1

Nehemiah 1:1–11a

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“You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”

— Jesus (Matthew 5:14)

The storyline of the Bible opens with a beautiful garden paradise. It closes, however, with the vision of heaven as a dense urban city filled with people. The ultimate goal of creation is an urban paradise called the New Jerusalem. Throughout the Bible, the city of Jerusalem (also called Zion) is set forth as the prototypical city that is supposed to belong to God and shine forth as a holy city in example to other cities of the earth. Jerusalem is so important that it is mentioned nearly one thousand times in Scripture.

Practically speaking, a city is marked by greater density and diversity than suburban and rural areas. For the first time in the world’s history, roughly half of the world’s population today is urban. That number is expected to swell to 60 percent by the year 2030.

Christianity is historically an urban religion. A reading of the history book of early Christianity, Acts, reveals that Christianity began as an urban movement led by Paul, whose itinerant church planting ministry was almost exclusively urban. He moved from city to city and bypassed the rural areas.

Historians like Rodney Stark and Wayne Meeks say that by AD 300, upwards of half of the people living in major Roman cities were Christian, while more than ninety percent of those living in the countryside were still pagan. Our word *pagan* likely came from the Greek word *paganus*, which meant “someone who lives on the farm,” since most of the Christians lived in cities and most pagans lived on farms.

Indeed, God’s people should bring the gospel to any place where there are people because God loves all people. But since there are more people in the city, it also makes sense that bringing the gospel to cities would be a priority.

One of the reasons Christians in our day are to love the city as they await the unveiling of Jesus’ city is because the city is the most strategic place for Christians and the gospel. If culture is like a river, then cities are upstream. They create culture that flows downstream to the masses. Because government, law, education, healthcare, information, media, arts, sports, entertainment, trade, travel, population, and industry are concentrated most in a city, cities are the fountains from which culture flows. Therefore, the flight of Christians from cities, and their subsequent complaints about the kind of culture that is flowing into the culture from the cities, is both foolish and hypocritical. The answer is for Christians to love the city, move to the city, pray for the city, and serve the city until Jesus returns with His city from which all culture will emanate throughout the new earth.

The book of Nehemiah is the account of one of the finest leadership initiatives in all of history: the restoration of the city of Jerusalem. The mission of Nehemiah in Jerusalem is a timely and important lesson for Mars Hill, which is seeking to build our church as a countercultural city within the cities of Seattle as we expand our campuses and church plants. As Jesus said to us in Matthew 5:14, “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”

¹*The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.*

The book opens by introducing its central human character, Nehemiah. He loves God and is a seemingly average man working a job (not a religious professional). Much of the book is simply his journal entries (chapters 1–7, 13). Although he is recognized by many Bible students to be one of the greatest leaders in all of Scripture for rebuilding an entire city in just 52 days (after 141 years of prior failed efforts), he is never mentioned in the New Testament.

Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital, ²that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. ³And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”

In the year 445, nearing the end of the writing of Old Testament Scripture, in the winter season of November–December, news was brought to Nehemiah by either his actual brother or a close male relative regarding how God’s people were faring in the Judean city of Jerusalem. Under the leadership of King Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians had attacked the city 141 years prior, destroying the city and carrying many of God’s people into exile. Since that siege, the city had been left defenseless without a wall, which was at least as important as having an army (e.g., Proverbs 25:28). There had been many failed reform efforts and God’s people were both discouraged and unable to live as His people, worshipping freely and living according to His biblical commands. The rebuilding of the wall was necessary for God’s people to live as a city within the city, a city where the God of the Bible was worshipped and served as an example for others to see the goodness of God through His countercultural and kingdom people.

⁴*As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.*

Nehemiah’s response is striking. Although the city had been destroyed and its walls broken for 141 years, he has a deep emotional breaking at hearing the news. He weeps, mourns, fasts, and prays for three to four months (Nehemiah 2:1 is in March–April). Some have speculated that Nehemiah was responding to some devastating new news, but it seems more likely that he was simply seeing and feeling old news in a new way. Likewise, every day God’s people drive by dead and dying churches all over our region without really feeling God’s heart of grief over the lack of love for Jesus among most people. For example, the following old news should break our hearts like Nehemiah’s and God’s:

- The Pacific Northwest is the most unchurched part of the U.S. (officially called the “None Zone” because in religious surveys “none” is the #1 religion chosen).
- The Seattle area is only 8 percent evangelical Christian.

- There are more dogs in Seattle than evangelicals (150,000 vs. 136,000).
- Washington and Oregon are the two least churchied states in America.
- Only one church in Washington/Oregon is among the 100 fastest-growing churches (Mars Hill).
- Not one church in the entire Pacific Northwest is among America's 100 largest churches.
- Through the greater Seattle area, the population grew by roughly 230,000 people between 1990 and 2000. In the same period, 134 churches were planted, but to keep pace with the population growth, 456 new churches were needed.
- Nationally there are 106 churches for every 100,000 people. In Seattle there are 66 churches for every 100,000 people, and those churches tend to be more liberal and smaller than the national average.

⁵And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. ⁸Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your dispersed be under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.' ¹⁰They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. ¹¹O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."

Because we are in a city no less spiritually broken than Jerusalem in Nehemiah's day, it is God's intent that we not only feel like he felt, but also pray like he prayed. Before devising a plan or beginning a project, Nehemiah spent some months praying and fasting for God to go before him and also prepare him for the task of rebuilding the city of God within the city of man, to use Augustine's words. Nehemiah prays repeatedly throughout the book (1:4–11; 2:4; 4:4–5, 9, 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29–31). In this we see the importance of prayer and what a blessing it is to have access to God at any time.

Without making Nehemiah's prayer a rigid prototype, it is helpful to learn from his example:

1. Adoration of God (1:5)
2. Confession (1:6–7)
3. Remembrance (1:8–9 echoes Deuteronomy 28:64, 30:1–4, 12:5, and 9:29)
4. Thanksgiving (1:10)
5. Supplication (1:11)

The roots of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam can be traced back to the city of Jerusalem. The city was great because it was the place from which God's name went out to the world (Deuteronomy 12:5, 11; 1 Kings 11:36; 14:21; 2 Kings 21:4), it was the throne of God on the earth (Psalm 48), and it was home of the Temple where sin was atoned for and God was worshipped. Much of Jesus' ministry occurred in Jerusalem, and He wept over the city much like Nehemiah had (Luke 19:28, 41–44). After His resurrection from death, Jesus walked back toward Jerusalem (Luke 24). Before ascending back into heaven, Jesus commanded His followers to wait in Jerusalem for the Holy Spirit (Acts 1–2).

One day, Jesus will return to Jerusalem (Zechariah 14:1–5). At that time He will establish the New Jerusalem (Revelation 3:12; 21:2). That city, unlike the former, will not have a Temple because Jesus fulfills the functions previously met in Jerusalem (Revelation 21:22). Subsequently, today we gather not to worship in Jerusalem, but rather to worship in Jesus by God the Holy Spirit (John 4:1–45). In Jesus we now have the fulfillment of the intent of Jerusalem as Jesus is the name of God, Jesus is the Word of God, Jesus is the King of Kings, Jesus is the Temple of God, Jesus is the sacrifice for sin, and Jesus is our place of worship. We gather as the church to be a city within our city, living countercultural kingdom lives of worship and inviting others in our city to Jesus.

Verses for next week: Nehemiah 1:11b–2:8