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SERMON TITLE: The Most Important Community Foundation

Rebuilding a City: Trusting God & Each Other

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 8:1-12

DATE: June 28, 2020

View online service at www.fpcd.org/live-stream

Read also 2 Timothy 3:14-4:4.

All the conflict had been overcome for the time being.

The wall was complete. The workers had gone home.

The gates had been installed; gatekeepers were appointed; and guards were assigned to their watch posts.

Municipal leaders have been appointed and two trusted consuls with impeccable reputations were selected to oversee the city. They were charged with providing public peace and safety for the people. That's what a good government does.

The temple was open. Temple singers were selected. Levites were appointed to teach the Scriptures.

Nehemiah provided for both moral and physical protection. But they needed people in order to thrive. So Nehemiah made plans to repopulate this revived city.

The people were counted and totaled 42,360; slightly larger than Duncanville. It was time to live, build houses, establish their city. What would be their foundation?

This community had pulled together to accomplish this physical infrastructure. What would establish them now that that work was done? READ Nehemiah 8:1-12

So this is how it began:

"All the people assembled with a *unified purpose* at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had given for Israel to obey. . . . He . . . read aloud, from early morning until noon, to everyone who could understand. *All the people listened closely* to the Book of the Law." (v. 1, 3)

Imagine that happening today!

The Levites interpreted what was read, just like I interpret what the Bible says each week. Just like you learn in Sunday School or Conversations with God.

The people, led by Nehemiah, were laying a spiritual foundation for their community as it began to grow and become vibrant.

It takes both physical—economics, housing, order, protection, and safety, as well as spiritual—moral and ethical mores, faith and practice, for a community thrive.

C. S. Lewis says,

*"One of the most dangerous errors instilled into us by nineteenth-century progressive optimism is the idea that civilization is automatically bound to increase and spread. The lesson of history is the opposite; civilization is a rarity, attained with difficulty and easily lost. The normal state of humanity is barbarism."*¹

We have seen that now—tearing down, destroying. These things are a warning and it begs the question: What does it take to have a good, stable civilization? What did it take in Nehemiah's time and what might it take today?

It takes the Word(s) of God. It takes goodness; the willingness of a people to police themselves. Goodness comes from truth. Goodness is God's way.

God is your Creator; you are the subordinate. Yet God remains connected to you.

What did Nehemiah discover? God was here, working undercover.

God works but God also speaks and has for a long time. The Bible says, "All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for *showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, and training us to live God's way.*"² That way the reader of the Bible may be proficient, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:16-17).

God has a purpose: in communities God wants to equip people so that the community functions well. God gives us a solid foundation of *goodness*.

That began way back in the Old Testament.

That is what the people, who had not heard the Word for a very long time, heard that day.

Think about it. They had just accomplished something amazing because they committed themselves to it TOGETHER. They built, defended, continued in spite of famine, opposition, high

¹ C. S. Lewis, "Our English Syllabus" in *Rehabilitations and Other Essays*, p. 80.

² Italics show translation of Eugene Peterson in *The Message*.

interest rates and foreclosures, and the need to work from sun up to sundown and keep watch all night long—believing God had provided and would see them through.

They felt fabulous about this.

But what would sustain this community unity? The Psalmist says unity means not only not quarreling and devouring one another, but *delighting in each other with mutual endearments and promoting each other's welfare with mutual services.*³

"How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!"

The goodness and pleasantness are for citizens to dwell together as one—as one heart, soul, and interest in the common good of their community.

When the people stood to hear the words that some might not have heard before, they all wept. What might have touched them to make them weep? Let's think about what they heard. It began with Genesis:

Genesis 12:1-4 NIV

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing." . . .⁴ So Abram left, as the Lord had told him.

God repeated this promise to Abraham's son Isaac in Genesis 26:2-4.

Then in Genesis 35:11-12 God repeated this promise of a great nation of believers who would be a blessing to the world to Abraham's grandson Jacob.

But Jacob had twelve sons, all jealous of the young Joseph and they sold him. He was taken out of the land, to Egypt. It looked like God's plan went awry. But God's promise is true and so even though the brothers meant it for evil, God did not allow man's sin to prevail. God reversed Joseph's fate and he became the prime minister of Egypt. And through the hardship of a famine God worked it out that this family was reunited in Egypt and their lives were saved. Genesis 47:5-6 tells this part of the story the people heard that day—that GOD IS GOOD.

Next they would hear in Exodus 1-3 that a new king, who did not know about Joseph, came to power in Egypt. This king oppressed God's people to keep them in slavery. But God had not forgotten them. God witnessed their misery and rose up Moses to free them and take them back home.

God in the same way has compassion on us when we are in misery.

God wanted them to be able to live in their land successfully. So God gave them the Law at Mt. Sinai, telling them to follow it and to teach their children. He said:

What I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. . . . This day . . . I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. (Deuteronomy. 30:11, 19-20)

They promised to do it. And the Lord gave them the land with these words in Joshua 1:3-7:

"I will give you every place where you set your foot, as I promised Moses. . . . Be careful to obey all the law . . . Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go."

Are you holding fast to the Lord no matter what your struggles are? How is your foundation? How is the foundation of our nation? Getting wobbly?

When Solomon was king, 480 years after God's people came out of Egypt, Solomon built the temple; *a church* to which people could come to hear the words of God, teach their children, worship God, and pray. God opened the door because God speaks and wants us to speak to Him. This is the spiritual foundation of truth, forgiveness of Christ, and hope that does not fail, though people do fail at times.

So the people stood and heard these words of the Lord and Nehemiah said don't weep, "Go and celebrate with a feast . . . and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. This is a sacred day before our Lord. Don't be dejected and sad, **for the joy of the Lord is your strength!**"

These words were spoken to a nation. The joy of the Lord is the strength of any nation who will turn to the Lord, love God, and follow his Words. How are we doing? How is our community—who are the influencers? How about our nation? Are we turning to the Lord's foundation in these turbulent times?

AMEN

³ Matthew Henry Commentary, dated 1710.

NEHEMIAH 8:1-12 ^{NLT}

All the people assembled with a unified purpose at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had given for Israel to obey. ² So on October 8 Ezra the priest brought the Book of the Law before the assembly, which included the men and women and all the children old enough to understand. ³ He faced the square just inside the Water Gate from early morning until noon and read aloud to everyone who could understand. All the people listened closely to the Book of the Law. ⁴ Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform that had been made for the occasion. . . . ⁵ Ezra stood on the platform in full view of all the people. When they saw him open the book, they all rose to their feet. ⁶ Then Ezra praised the LORD, the great God, and all the people chanted, "Amen! Amen!" as they lifted their hands. Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground. ⁷ The Levites . . . then instructed the people in the Law while everyone remained in their places. ⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage. ⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were interpreting for the people said to them, "Don't mourn or weep on such a day as this! For today is a sacred day before the LORD your God." For the people had all been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. ¹⁰ And Nehemiah continued, "Go and celebrate with a feast of rich foods and sweet drinks, and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. This is a sacred day before our Lord. Don't be dejected and sad, for the joy of the LORD is your strength!" ¹¹ And the Levites, too, quieted the people, telling them, "Hush! Don't weep! For this is a sacred day." ¹² So the people went away to eat and drink at a festive meal, to share gifts of food, and to celebrate with great joy because they had heard God's words and understood them.

2 Timothy 3:14 - 4:4

¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ² proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. ³ For the time is coming when people will not put up with sound doctrine, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths.