

Nehemiah 2:17-20

We his servants will arise and build... v. 20

There was little to encourage Nehemiah upon his arrival to Jerusalem. The city was in ruins. The rubbish heap which remained of the city served as a charred monument to the disobedience of the Jews as well as the faithfulness of God to the warnings He had given to His people through His prophets.

It is true that the people of God were allowed to return to Jerusalem following 70 years of captivity and a remnant had returned, the temple had been built which was no easy accomplishment. But the city of Jerusalem was still in ruins. This is how the book of Nehemiah begins {**cf. Neh. 1:1-3**}.

If you know the story of Nehemiah then you know that Nehemiah was given permission by the King of Persia to return to Jerusalem in order to head up the project of rebuilding the city. It was a daunting task both in terms of all that needed to be done and in terms of the opposition they faced. But in the end the task was accomplished. I think there's a phrase in this chapter that occurs twice that could explain how the task was accomplished.

In 2:8 we read *And the king granted me, according to the good hand of my God upon me.* And in v. 18 we read *then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me, and also the king's words that he had spoken unto me.* It's interesting, isn't it, that Nehemiah could see the King of Persia's permission is the broader picture of the good of hand of God being upon him. We are taught by Nehemiah's example to view the actions of rulers in the broader setting of Christ's rule over all. This is a lesson we do well to keep in mind especially when so much is made of our presidential wannabes in an election year.

When you see, then, in the book of Nehemiah, the story of rebuilding the walls of a ruined city you should be reminded that in the spiritual realm you and I are engaged in a building project that in many ways corresponds to the events recorded in the book of Nehemiah. There are a number of verses in the NT that make this clear:

- Mt 16:18 *I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*
- 1Co 3:10 *According to the grace of God which is given unto me, as a wise masterbuilder, I have laid the foundation, and another buildeth thereon. But let every man take heed how he buildeth thereupon.*
- Eph 2:21,22 *In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord: In whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit.*
- Jude 1:20 *But ye, beloved, building up yourselves on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Ghost,*

The book of Nehemiah also conveys clear spiritual lessons in terms of the awful spiritual climate in which we find ourselves today. Spiritually speaking, one could argue that our nation lies in ruins today. There are great heaps of rubbish that need to be removed and the

foundation of Christ needs to be set down again. And then we need to build again on this right foundation. And just as the builders in Nehemiah's day faced challenges and opposition and found the project hard and slow so do we face the same things.

The thing I want to call your attention to this morning with regard to the builders in Nehemiah's day is their resolution to take on the task of building. Notice how that resolution is expressed in v. 18 *Then I told them of the hand of my God which was good upon me, and also the king's words that he had spoken unto me. And they said, Let us rise up and build. So they strengthened their hands for this good work.*

And in v. 20 Nehemiah is answering those that opposed the work of rebuilding. *Then I answered them, and said unto them, The God of heaven will prosper us; therefore we, his servants, will arise and build.*

You are all aware that when a new year begins – resolutions are commonly made. Some are soon broken – others are adhered to with greater success. Here is a resolution that the people of God should take to heart. I'm calling it our motto text for the year 2008. In the words of Neh. 2:20:

We His Servants will Arise and Build.

In order to arise and build there are a number of things that we must do or take into account. Consider with me first of all:

I. We Must Know what it Means to Build

The Old Testament economy was focused on the city of Jerusalem. This was the place that God chose to dwell. This was the city where the temple was built, where the children of Israel were summoned for the Old Testament feasts. There was so much emphasis placed on the importance of this city that when Daniel, in the land of exile prayed, he would pray with the window opened which faced Jerusalem.

For this reason the Psalmist exhorts his readers in Ps 122:6 *Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: they shall prosper that love thee.* Ps 137:5,6 *If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.*

The spiritual well-being of the nation was tied to the prosperity of Jerusalem. When you realize this, then you can appreciate what it meant for the city of Jerusalem to lie in ruins. It was as if the religion of Judaism itself had been destroyed. It was as if the Jews had altogether lost out with God.

To rebuild Jerusalem would also mean a rebuilding of the Jews relationship with God. It continues to be a wonder throughout the history of civilization that the Jews were preserved during the time of their exile and that they were enabled eventually to return and build the city again. God was not and I believe is not done with the Jews.

We know today, however, through the very words of Christ that the literal city of Jerusalem is not the focal point of our religion. Christ said to the woman at the well that *the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father* (Jn. 4:21). *The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth; for the Father seeketh such to worship him* (Jn. 4:24).

So when we think of the rebuilding of Jerusalem today we must think in terms of the spiritual meaning of that concept. To build Jerusalem today, then, means a couple of things. It means that we must remove the rubbish heaps from our own lives. It's interesting to note that when the enemies of the Jews sought to console themselves by expressing their skepticism about the Jews to each other Sanballet says in Ne 4:2 *What do these feeble Jews? will they fortify themselves? will they sacrifice? will they make an end in a day? will they revive the stones out of the heaps of the rubbish which are burned?*

And later in that same chapter we see how great those rubbish heaps were - Ne 4:10 *And Judah said, The strength of the bearers of burdens is decayed, and [there is] much rubbish; so that we are not able to build the wall.* The rubbish was in the way and the task of removing the rubbish was so immense that it hindered the building of the walls.

The first task that had to be accomplished, then, was for the rubbish to be removed. It's the same today for the people of God spiritually speaking. If we would build up ourselves – if we would have a part in the spiritual building of church of Christ then the rubbish heaps need to be removed.

When we think of the church of Christ at large it's not hard to discern those rubbish heaps. The rubbish heap of false doctrine needs to be cleaned up. The rubbish of humanistic evangelism needs to be taken away. The rubbish heap of sanctification based on our own merit needs to be removed and replaced with a right understanding of our justification and our union to Christ.

Perhaps the largest rubbish heap that hinders the building of Jerusalem today is the rubbish of our own worldliness. It's our love for the world that causes us to lose our first love. It's our worldly wanderings that lead us to become lukewarm. It's a lack of sensitivity to the heinous nature of sin that leaves us hardened in our hearts and takes from us that resoluteness of will to arise and build.

It's interesting to see that even during the time when the temple of Jerusalem was being rebuilt, that same spirit of worldliness had to be overcome. The priorities of the Jews shifted when the work became difficult. So we read in Hag 1:9 *Ye looked for much, and, lo, [it came] to little; and when ye brought [it] home, I did blow upon it. Why? saith the LORD of hosts. Because of mine house that [is] waste, and ye run every man unto his own house.*

They had misplaced their priorities and consequently, even though they labored hard in many respects it all came to naught. Even though they worked so hard for their own families, it was as if they were spinning their wheels, so to speak. The first part of rising to build, therefore, means that we must remove the rubbish heaps. Rubbish heaps are not hard

to discern. It's not as if we have to be engaged in intense heart searching in order to find the rubbish heaps of our lives. They're really quite easy to discern. They're the things that are obvious. I wonder today what rubbish heaps need to be removed from your own lives in order to arise and build?

But not only must the rubbish heaps be removed by our own repentance and faith in the blood of Christ, but then the means of grace must be utilized in order to build ourselves up in the faith. When Paul summoned the elders from Ephesus together and addressed them for the last time, knowing that he would not see them again – he said to them in Ac 20:32 *And now, brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.*

What does it take to build you up, then? It takes the word of His grace – it takes time spent in the word of God learning and reviewing and appropriating the word of grace to your own soul. I hope that, having entered in to a new year, that you have devoted yourselves anew to spending time in the word of His grace.

In Rom. 15:20 we see another tool, so to speak, that contributes to the building up of the people of God. Rom. 15:20 *Yea, so have I strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation:* Do you see how Paul, as a wise master-builder, went about building up the people of God. He did it through the preaching of the gospel, or through the preaching of Christ. Attending to the preaching of Christ becomes, then, an essential tool for the building up of ourselves as a holy temple for God to inhabit.

In another NT reference the picture is different but the concept is the same when we read in Eph 4:16 *From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.*

I said the picture is slightly different – it's the imagery of a body in this case but by the same token the word *edify* is a word that means *to build up*. And so we see in this verse that in order to rise and build we must rise and minister to each other in love. We must encourage one another. We must pray for one another. We must take each other to heart in order to strengthen ourselves in the Lord.

We, his servants, will arise and build – our text says. And what this means is that we will remove the rubbish heaps in our own lives and we'll utilize the means of grace in order to build up each other. May the Lord strengthen our resolve to make this text our motto. If we would do so, then not only must we know what it means to arise and build but:

II. We Must Utilize the Right Motivation

When we read in the text *we will arise and build* – the implication is that building had not been taking place. There was a period of inactivity. Their resolve was weak – I think you could say that the Jews were discouraged. The task undoubtedly seemed beyond them. The book of Nehemiah begins with a discouraging report being conveyed to Nehemiah

himself {cf. 1:1-3}. This discouragement was so great that Nehemiah couldn't keep his composure before the king. *Why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchers, lieth waste, and its gates are consumed with fire?* (2:3).

And so there wasn't anything to motivate the Jews to carry out this work. There was too much rubbish. There were not enough people interested. The Jews that returned to Jerusalem are referred to as a remnant – a very small number in comparison to the number of Jews that were content to abide in the land of their captivity. There was no support from the king, but there were many enemies that were quite happy to see the reproach of the Jews extended indefinitely. It's true that the temple had been built but it wasn't anything like the temple that had been destroyed. And so motivation had evaporated.

How easy it becomes to relate to them when you consider the spiritual barrenness of our own land. There are so many churches but so much sin. There are no many numbers set forth as those that allegedly are won to Christ – but so little progress in holiness. There seem to be so few who show an interest in Christ. Even among them that show some interest – how few are the ones that take up the burden for the advancement of the kingdom of Christ – how few are the ones that are given to prayer. How few are the ones that endeavor to lead others to Christ because they don't believe that anything will come from their efforts.

The task seems beyond us. Some make it a part of their creed that we shouldn't expect the Lord to do anything. This is in accordance with prophecy. Things are supposed to get worse – apostasy is supposed to prevail. The very notion of arising to build makes some Christians weary to even think about such a thing. It's better just to fend for ourselves and try to survive as best we can in the shambled state of Christianity today.

Thankfully the Jews in Nehemiah's day were able to overcome their discouragement. Their resolve was quickened by God so that they would say among themselves *let us rise up and build*. And then v. 18 goes on to say that *they strengthened their hands for this good work*.

What made the difference? What was it that lifted them from the doldrums and strengthened their resolve? What was it that would so move them to attempt to do something for God? I believe the answer is found in the word that Nehemiah conveyed to Sanballat and the rest of the enemies of God. *Then I answered them, and said unto them. The God of heaven will prosper us; therefore we, his servants, will arise and build.*

Here is the dividing line between discouragement which leads to inactivity and encouragement which leads to rising to the occasion. *The God of heaven will prosper us*. I wonder what made the Jews believe that? Why would they believe that God would prosper them when the challenges were so great? Why would they believe that God would prosper them when it was the sin of the Jews that had led to the destruction of Jerusalem in the first place?

Could it be that they saw the cause they were serving as being something greater than them? Perhaps they came to realize that God Himself had as much a stake in what they

were doing as they themselves did. This had always been the plea of Moses. When the Lord had told Moses to step aside that He might destroy the Israelites and start over with Moses, Moses had always answered – *Lord, what will the nations think? What reproach will be brought to your name when the Egyptians say that God was unable to do what He had said?* And that kind of plea always prevailed with God.

What, then, does it take for you and me in our day to boldly assert that God will prosper us? What does it take for us to believe such an assertion to the point that we find ourselves willing and anxious to arise to build? We know how easy it is to build a case against ourselves? We know how unworthy we are to see the Lord move in power and might.

The thing that should stir our hearts to arise and build is that the word of our King has come to us – and this is His word – *I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* The good hand of God is upon our King. And while we can lay no claim to our worthiness we can lay strong claim to the worthiness of Christ.

In other words – we can be assured that God will prosper us because God has and God will prosper His Son. And we so make the plea of the Psalmist our own plea when we pray in the words of Ps 80:17 *Let thy hand be upon the man of thy right hand, upon the son of man [whom] thou madest strong for thyself.*

There's our hope. There's our plea. There's our assurance of victory. There's the grounds for our claim – *The God of heaven will prosper us.* There's our motivation to arise and build. We can tie this motivation into the studies we've already conducted from the sermon on the mount. I've made this a repeated point of emphasis. The sermon on the mount begins with the pronouncements of blessing upon the people of God. *Blessed are the poor in spirit – blessed are those that mourn – blessed are the meek – blessed are they which do hunger and thirst for righteousness.*

To the degree that we believe that we're blessed – to that same degree we'll believe that God will prosper us. To the degree that we believe that we're blessed – to the same degree will we be motivated to arise and build. And so I wonder today – are you convinced that you're blessed of God? Do you believe that He's with you and for you? Do you believe that He'll honor His word and build His church. If you are convinced of these things then there should spring from within your breast a compelling force that moves you to say *We will arise and build – we will plead the blood over the rubbish heaps in our lives – we will utilize the means of grace to build up ourselves in the Lord – we will endeavor to encourage one another in the things of Christ and to extend the Kingdom of Christ by our lives and by our words.*

May the Lord so stir us with the worthiness of Christ and the truth of His word – may He call to our remembrance the blessings we've already received and the grounds upon which we received those blessings. If the Lord so stirs our hearts then our declaration will be *Let us rise up and build.*

It remains for us to consider finally and briefly:

III. We Must Meet the Qualification of the Text

Would you note again from the text the statement – *We, his servants, will arise and build.*

In the earlier days of this time period when the temple was being built – the initial desire of the Jews adversaries was to help them in the building project. So we read in Ezz 4:1,2 *Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity builded the temple unto the LORD God of Israel; Then they came to Zerubbabel, and to the chief of the fathers, and said unto them, Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye [do]; and we do sacrifice unto him since the days of Esarhaddon king of Assur, which brought us up hither.*

The thing that they didn't say was that they offered sacrifices to their own false gods as well. They took an eclectic approach to religion which said there's a little bit of good in each of them and we should fashion our religion by making a composite religion made up of all the religions of the world.

In our day it appears to be the world itself that offers itself to the church. If you'll use my methods, if you'll employ my technology, if you'll embrace the toleration of humanism – then the world will be happy to help you build. Unfortunately much of the church has taken the world up on its offer.

I can't tell you how many booklets and brochures I receive that offer to help us build. The qualification for receiving the Lord's help is that we maintain our separation from the world and endeavor to utilize the means that God has ordained for the building of His church. Could I point out that if it is the servants of Christ who alone qualify to carry out this work then we should consider that it is a part of our service to arise and build. May we not be found as that slothful servant who tucked away his gift in a napkin and buried it. May we be seen, rather, as those that take what gifts the Lord has given us and invest our time and energy and talents in the building of Christ's church.

You see, then, what is involved in the motto – *We, his servants will arise and build.* We will clean out the rubbish from our lives and endeavor to grow in grace and in the knowledge of Jesus Christ. We will endeavor to encourage one another to that end. We every reason to do so. God will bless us – God will prosper us. He has blessed us already and to the degree that we realize we are blessed to that same degree we'll have confidence that we will be blessed.

May God help us, then, to maintain our separation from sin, from compromise and from the world. And may we rise to the occasion in anticipation that the God who calls on us to arise and build will so prosper us in our every endeavor to do so.