



RETURN, REPAIR, REBUILD: PARTICIPATING IN GOD'S WORK

SERIES: RETURN, REBUILD, REJOICE

Nehemiah 3, Ephesians 4
1st Message
Jerry Tu
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The last 15 months of the pandemic have been life-changing. We've experienced months of isolation and had to adapt to a new way of work, school, family, and relationships. We had to rethink "church" —how we preach through streaming, how we minister via flat rectangles on a screen. And now, we've crossed a significant threshold as we worship in the auditorium with reduced restrictions, all while we continue to stream online. We're glad to be here, and glad to be with you wherever you are and whenever you're watching. We embrace this new hybrid ministry; it is both familiar and unknown. And we're learning to do it all together.

Did you know that there was a period of time in biblical history, when there was also an isolation followed by a returning and regathering of God's people? It occurred after Israel's Exile to Babylon 2,500 years ago. As we read this story recorded in Nehemiah, we will find elements that are familiar to our own experience, and there are lessons we can apply in our regathering and rebuilding process.

Today and next Sunday, we'll embark on a 2-sermon series called Return, Rebuild, Rejoice. My good friend and fellow elder Tim Paaske will join me, and together we will examine two stories in the book of Nehemiah. I will preach on "Rebuild" and Tim on "Rejoice"; we'll tie these passages to the "Return" of PBCC today. The arc of both sermons begins in the biblical history of Nehemiah in the Old Testament. To help us get oriented, let me give you a brief chronology of the Old Testament. So buckle your seat belts and put up your tray tables, because we're about to fly through 2,000 years of history!

We start about 4,000 years ago, around 2,000 BC. This was the time of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his 12 sons. Brian's recent series on Joseph was at the end of this 200 year Patriarch period. The twelve tribes of Israel remained in slavery in Egypt for 400 years until Moses led them out of Egypt in the Exodus story, about 1,400 BC. After wandering in the desert for 40 years, Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised Land, where they conquered the Canaanites, Jebusites, Hitites and several other -ites. 300 years elapsed in the Promised Land during the time of Judges. The judges were not judicial officials but rather warlords that God put in place as leaders over various tribes of Israelites.

About 1,000 BC, God gave Israel three kings: Saul, David, and Solomon. This century of kings represented a glorious time of Israel's history. All tribes of Israel were united under one king, so it was called the "United Kingdom." This golden age saw the building of the City of Jerusalem, its walls enlarged, its economy flourished. King Solomon built the Temple, where God's presence dwelt among His people.

Around 900 BC, the kingdom became divided: the northern kingdom of Israel, which had a succession of bad kings, and the Southern kingdom of Judah, which had some good kings and some bad ones. During the Divided Kingdom, the people sinned, forsook God, and sought after deities of Canaanites. This was when

Habakkuk prophesied, which Sharon taught last week. God allowed enemies to conquer the land to punish Israel for her idolatry. So around 722 BC, the Assyrians conquered the Northern Kingdom, and in 586 BC, the Babylonians conquered the Southern Kingdom, destroyed the magnificent temple, and broke down the city walls. All the inhabitants were exiled to Babylon and beyond. This was the time of Exile. Daniel, whose story Bernard will preach on next, occurred during this time of exile of 70 years.

From 516 to 440 BC, the kings of Persia allowed the Israelites to return to Jerusalem, to repair the city walls and rebuild the temple. This time of return, repairing, and rebuilding is the narrative we're embarking on today. Ezra and Nehemiah were respectively the priest and the administrator that led the return and rebuilding effort around 500 BC.

The return from Exile marks the end of the Old Testament. The prophetic book of Malachi, a contemporary prophet of Ezra & Nehemiah is the last Word from God in the Old Testament. God was silent for 400 years; this "silent" 4 centuries saw the rise of the Roman Empire at 27 BC. Then the true Word of God came in human flesh and lived among His people —Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The books of Ezra & Nehemiah were one combined book in the Hebrew manuscript. That's why I refer to the books under one title. They are historical narratives, not prophecy or poetry. The events of these books trace the return of Israel back to Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the altar, the temple, and the walls of the city. We will look at the rebuilding of the wall under Nehemiah in chapter 3.

As a backdrop to the rebuilding, I'll read an excerpt from Nehemiah chapter 2:

"Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, (so) that we may no longer suffer derision." And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good ... And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work. (Neh 2:17b-18 ESV)

This is God's work for the people; His hand is upon them for good and will give them success. Along with His sovereignty, He wanted human participation, to work alongside Him and each other. Everyone responded by strengthening their hands for this good work.

Now let's read Nehemiah chapter 3.

Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set its doors. They consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Tower of Hananel. And next to him the men of Jericho built. And next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built. The sons of Hassenaah built the Fish Gate. They laid its beams and set its doors, its bolts, and its bars.

And next to them Meremoth the son of Uriah, son of Hakkoz repaired. And next to them Meshullam the son of Berechiah, son of Meshezabel repaired. And next to them Zadok the son of Baana repaired. And next to them the Tekoites repaired ...”
(Neh 3:1–5)

The entire 32 verses of chapter 3 goes on this way —lots of difficult names to pronounce, so I won’t read all of it. Instead, I’ll summarize by looking at some distinctive descriptions of the workers, their collaboration, and their attitudes. As I present these observations, we will draw some implications for us as we return from our isolation.

The most repeated verbs in this chapter are “build” —*bana* and “repair” —*hazaq*. These words appear in nearly every sentence in this chapter. “*Bana*” appears first; it means to build a house or structure, and it was also used when God “made” or built a woman from the rib of the man in Gen 2:22. We’ll see this significance later in the sermon.

The next word is “*hazaq*” —translated as “repaired” is used thirty six times in thirty two verses. The meaning of “*hazaq*” is to make strong, restore to strength in addition to repairing something that is broken.

While Nehemiah’s narrative deals with physical things: lumber and mortar, gates and roofs, the implication to us may be relational rather than physical. Is there an aspect of our relationships that can use some strengthening or rebuilding after the pandemic? In my life, I’ve let my interactions with many of you lapse, so I need to intentionally reach out to restore our connection. While we recognize our personal relational areas may need strengthening, I’d like to pivot to consider how our community life at PBCC may need strengthening.

As we return, we wish everything would resume normally as if nothing has changed. But things are different now, changes have happened, transitions are unavoidable. How do we navigate these coming weeks and months as a church community? Let’s examine a few “nuggets of wisdom” in the narrative of Nehemiah 3.

1) The list of workers

Note that the workers are listed by family names, by social status, by cities. We note that everyone is mentioned: clergy and lay people, rulers and common inhabitants. There were people from Jerusalem and Jericho and all of the surrounding towns of Judah. And what links these disparate people together is “next to him” —side by side, united alongside each other, arms locked, hands joined. Their work and purpose united them, transcended class, gender, locality, social ladder. It wasn’t just the clergy or the professionals. Everyone participated in God’s work of rebuilding.

2) Unique skills and abilities

Each person contributed unique skills that were necessary for the job at hand. The priests consecrated the work, carpenters laid the beams and doors, iron workers set bolts and bars, roof makers repaired the roofs. There were men and women, fathers and daughters, brothers and sons. There was participation from goldsmiths and merchants and perfumers. Each person had unique abilities; each was necessary for the whole project of God’s work.

3) Personal work arena and motivation

Each family had a vested interest to repair the wall closest to their own settlement. They did what was natural, to rebuild the portion closest to their own home out of familiarity as well as personal protection. A result of each family doing the work in its

own area, the wall surrounding the entire city was rebuilt, providing protection and strength for the whole community. While each group worked within its own area of influence, the whole structure was strengthened. The whole became greater than the sum of its parts.

There is no better illustration of this concept than the choir whom you heard earlier today. There are different vocal ranges: sopranos and altos, tenors and bases. Each voice is unique and necessary. Each worked within his or her arena of vocal range, while beautifully blending side by side with other groups. The result is a beautiful choral piece which is greater than the sum of individual parts.

4) Working in the presence of opposition

When God’s work is being done, there will be opposition and challenges. Chapters 4 and 5 detail several schemes from Israel’s enemies to attack and disrupt the unity and their work. We find that the builders were steadfast; they prayed, they guarded and protected each other while continuing to do God’s Work.

Finally we read in Neh 6:15 “So the wall was finished ... in fifty-two days.” The rebuilding of the wall was completed in record time, and Israel’s enemies were amazed, for they perceived that “this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.” (Neh 6:16).

This was ultimately God’s work, and it was done by the faithful participation of all his people. Each person was necessary, each worked in his own area while protecting and caring for one another. This is a beautiful illustration of the principle of “Participation in God’s Work” or “Ministry of the saints,” which is one of the four values we hold dearly at PBCC.

As we return and rethink our church, it is important for us to revisit this foundational PBCC distinctive. The Ministry of the Saints is described in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians. This wonderful New Testament letter is worthy of a year’s worth of study and sermons. I can only pick a couple of verses in the remaining time we have together. Let’s look at Eph 4:11–13 and see how it applies to Participation in God’s Work.

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ ... (Eph 4:11–13 ESV)

This passage complements our Nehemiah story, as it explains the theological significance of doing God’s work. Let’s make some observations from these three verses.

1) Role of leaders

God gave us leaders: the apostles, prophets, evangelists and shepherd-teachers. But the passage doesn’t say they do all the work of the ministry, but rather they equip the saints for the work of the ministry. God’s work is not left to the professionals; God’s church is not a spectator sport like football, with 22 men on the field, desperately in need of rest and 50,000 people in the stands desperately in need of exercise. Rather, the role of leaders is to equip the saints (katartismos) —“make complete or perfect”. Our leaders equip and train us through preaching, teaching us in classes and counseling in bible studies and ministries. As we are equipped, we can do the good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

Now what is our role? It is to do the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

2) Work of the ministry

Our work is ministry or service —*diakonia*, from which we get the word deacons. Our deacons have engaged and involved so many of you to care for our congregation, you have become the hands and feet of Jesus to the needy. You are doing God's work —everyone, from goldsmiths, perfumers and merchants, engineers and artists, home makers and teachers. All of us can and must be involved, doing what we do best in our own area of influence, whether at home, neighborhood, or church. Some examples of ministry here at PBCC: growth groups and bible studies, IT and sound tech, prayer and missions, youth and seniors, music and meals. Through all of these we encourage and teach, build relationships and build up the church body. We each work on our portion of the wall, and the whole structure becomes complete and strong.

What is the result, what does it look like when we build up the body of Christ? Does it mean that our online attendance grows or the parking lot fills up? Those may happen, but those are not the focus of our ministry. Rather, the work of the ministry is measured by the spiritual health of the body: do we love Christ with our whole heart, mind, and soul? Do we love our neighbors as ourselves? In Ephesians 4, the outcome of the ministry of the saints is measured in two ways: unity and maturity.

3) Unity

. . . until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God . . . (Eph 4:13a)

“Unity of faith and of knowledge of the Son of God” encapsulates our vision at PBCC: Our faith in Jesus, our knowledge of Him, and our desire to bring Him to others is what PBCC is about. “Knowing Jesus and Making Him Known.” This is what motivates us and this unites us as a body.

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Eph 4:4–6 ESV)

4) Maturity

We are to grow to be mature in our Christian walks. We don't want to remain spiritual infants, as Paul described “ . . . tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.” (Eph 4:14)

We live in a world which bombards us with its ideas and schemes. Just as Israel's enemies tried to dislodge God's people during the rebuilding of the wall, we are constantly inundated by the world, our flesh, and even Satan.

How do we help each other be mature in the onslaught of worldly distractions? We must guard and care for each other as the Israelites did. We encourage and pray for one another; we teach and counsel one another in growth groups, discipleships, prayer groups. We help each other become stronger disciples of Christ, and as a community we reflect the full measure of the fullness of Christ.

These verses from Ephesians 4 summarize this concept of maturity:

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Eph 4:15–16 ESV)

Eph 4:16 forms a word picture: all of us joined together to make up the body, each part working properly in our own domains, so that the whole body is built up in love. And Christ is the head of this body. As a community, we aspire to reflect the full measure of Christ: His perfect humanity and obedience to God. This side of heaven, we will not achieve the perfect measure, but that is our goal and ultimate destiny as a church.

Our journey today began with the Israelites returning and repairing the walls of Jerusalem. This picture of participating in God's work launched us into Paul's letter to Ephesians, where we examined a foundational principle of PBCC: “ministry of the saints, for the building up of the body.” I'd like to go full circle back to the theme “Returning, Repairing, and Rebuilding” in the context of PBCC right now.

As you may have heard announced over the last 3 weeks, PBCC is undergoing some transitions. We've transitioned Children's ministry from retiring Bunnie to Christine. Our Middle School and High School ministries are uniting under one Youth pastor, Becca. Brian is shifting to a different focus of ministry. All of this happens at the end of the pandemic, and these changes understandably may bring for some a sense of uncertainty, anxiety, maybe even loss. Perhaps you may have doubts and questions. We recognize this. Let me be as transparent as I can.

As with some of you, your leadership team is weary and has been worn out from the pandemic and isolation. We look forward to returning, repairing our relationships, rebuilding trust and collaboration. As your shepherds, we are taking steps in this direction: we invited new elders to join the board during the pandemic, with additional elders, now each pastor has one single elder assigned to walk alongside —side by side. We are committing to pray for each other, to guard and care while we co-labor. This is Nehemiah 3 put to action.

Moving forward, we are excited by some changes on Sunday mornings like including youth and children. We continue to livestream our service to our online audience. We invite your input, participation, and prayer support as we navigate these transitions together.

Although we do not have all the answers, we are confident and are embracing changes and stepping out in faith. Why? Because we trust in Jesus who is our Head. Our confidence is in Him to lead us; we eagerly anticipate the Holy Spirit at work in you and me, and we're assured God is in this work —He's got us! And we're excited to be on this journey with you as we return, rebuild, rethink our church for the future.

We are God's people, the chosen of the Lord,

Born of His Spirit, established by His Word;

Our cornerstone is Christ alone,

And strong in Him we stand:

O let us live transparently

And walk heart to heart and hand in hand.

