

“What’s Next?”
Nehemiah 7:23-8:18

In 1780, at the age of 21 William Wilberforce was elected to the Parliament of the British Empire. In 1785, at the age of 26 he became a Christian thanks to the challenge of a former Schoolmaster. Shortly thereafter Wilberforce struck up an ongoing friendship with a former slave trader by the name of John Newton (author of the hymn “Amazing Grace”) and began his long campaign for the abolition of slavery within the Empire. Wilberforce’s first parliamentary bill to just “discuss” abolition was brought to the floor in 1788 and passed. But when the bill came up for discussion in 1789 it was hotly opposed by the commercial lobby (who made a lot of money from the slave trade) so was handily defeated. In 1791, and now a seasoned professional, Wilberforce, now backed with likeminded men known as the Clapman Sect, tried to pass his bill once more but was again defeated. It was the same in 1792, 98, 99, 1800 and 1801. It was not until February 4th 1807 that the abolition document finally passed the House of Lords and on February 22, 1807 passed Commons and was made law and the official policy of the Empire. Nineteen years had passed since Wilberforce had introduced that which today we take for granted. During those long 19 years men had grown old, and other men who had fought so hard for this change had died. When news of the abolition of the slave trade reached Wilberforce late into the evening on February 22, 1807 it was reported Wilberforce was in the company of his old friend and fellow abolitionist Henry Thorton. It was said upon hearing the news Wilberforce turned to Thorton and declared, ‘Well Henry what shall we abolish next?’ (Source: James Montgomery Boice, “Nehemiah”) “What’s next?”

The protective wall that surrounded Jerusalem was complete. What Nehemiah had set out to do, what he had told the king he wanted to do, what he felt God called him to do, seemed over, when the last stone was put in place, when the final door was hung and when the first animal was again sacrificed in the Temple, And although Nehemiah probably never asked, “What’s next” I guarantee you it was on his mind. In some ways I felt the same way after the opening service here at our church at 23449 Woodbine Avenue. For over 10 years, we were in our temporary home, the Ice Palace – setting up and tearing down, setting up and tearing down but now we abide in a building that could be left the way it was set up. We finally had a place we could call “home” because we were no longer renters but homeowners. The build was by no means easy and many of us were exhausted by the time the last roll of sod was rolled out the day before our opening service. Sure there were some who saw this building project as an “end in itself” but those people have long since moved on. Those who remained and those of you who have joined us since, like

Nehemiah share a question that should keep us up at night, and should cause us to work with brick in one hand and spear in the other and the question is.... “What’s next?”

It took little time at all, maybe even moments after the ribbon was cut for Nehemiah to say in not so many words, “What’s next?” What could possibly be “next” on Nehemiah’s “to do list” after finishing this monumental task? When most would honestly think about going back to their former life or retiring from work, Nehemiah set about his “next” planned task, which may just surprise you if you look closely at Nehemiah’s “words” in chapter 8. I say Nehemiah’s “words” you may notice a change that occurs in Nehemiah 8 that you may not have noticed as I read or as you previewed sometime this week. In fact, I didn’t even see it until it was pointed out to me in my own study this week. For seven chapters Nehemiah spoke in the first person – as in “I” or “me.” But with the start of chapter 8 the narrative shifts to the “third” person and the first person narration does not resume until the start of the account of the dedication of the walls in Nehemiah 12:27. Now please don’t misunderstand. This is not Nehemiah’s send off, pull out, or retirement party but the broadening of this ministry that was now to involve more than just Nehemiah in the lead roll. Chapter 8 then is the second stage of the work and although envisioned by Nehemiah was not his concern alone. In fact although much of this project was spearheaded by Nehemiah, (down to the last detail) another would carry on the future work and who was none other than Ezra. We have heard his name mentioned before and you may have even stumbled across his own book (just before Nehemiah) in your search for the Book of Nehemiah. Unlike Nehemiah he is not a builder or even a manager but a priest from the Tribe of Levi and unlike Nehemiah Ezra had been in Jerusalem before – about 14 years earlier. With this timeline in mind then the words that follow might be surprising and the reason that some scholars believe chapter 8 is “out of place” or has been “mis-ordered” somehow. I mean, what happens at the seventh month, you would think, should have happened much sooner, even 14 years earlier, knowing Ezra’s calling and profession. But yet it seems that now was the perfect time for what God had planned to happen “next.” Then again maybe that answers our own question that transformation can never be specifically timed or “led” by one person. Although Ezra was there that day, although he did something, it was not his action but an event orchestrated by God and followed through by the people that provoked change. But then again this is how such a thing always happens. People were “settled,” as in living normal lives, Nehemiah tells us, when they realize something is missing. At a glance no one can put their finger on it. They are back home. Check. They are again employed and making money. Check. They have their own homes and are no longer slaves. Check. But still something was missing. Someone might have said something to a neighbour. Someone might have shared something over a coffee

at the local Tim's. But everyone, I mean "all" the people shook their heads in agreement when it was understood what was missing. Without prodding from Nehemiah or guilt from their pastor, a local craftsman or a gifted handyman built a platform. And another (or maybe the same person approached Ezra saying something like, "Remember that Book of the Law our ancestors used to read from? Would you mind bringing it to the Square tonight?" According to Nehemiah the construction was complete, people had moved into their own homes and then according to chapter 7, life was "well-ordered". But again something was missing. As Chuck Swindoll writes, there was a "spiritual vacuum in Jerusalem". So what happened in the square that day was a "wake up call" for the people of God. In times past, us church folk, would call what we see occurring in Jerusalem that a day a spiritual revival. But notice this was more than just the establishment or re-establishment of the church or even a program for the church to run better or act like a "well-oiled-machine because "Swindoll goes on to say, "Many a church (including the church in Jerusalem) is like an impressive machine. 'It had hundreds of wheels, cogs, gears, pulleys, belts, and lights which all moved or lit up at the touch of a button but when someone asked, 'What does it do?' the inventor replied, 'Oh it doesn't do anything – but doesn't it run beautifully.'" (Source: "Hand Me Another Brick")

Here were God's people back together in the land of their ancestors and things seemed to be running beautifully: the wall was built, the Temple open and the people practicing their faith but yet still something was missing. So they asked the Priest Ezra for help. They mentioned to Ezra to bring something to the Square. Most of our homes are full to overflowing with what Ezra brought that day. But with it came a "transformation" that only comes once in a generation, if even that. And to everyone's surprise, including us, it was not a personality, (one teacher, one orator, even one priest) as we often want or believe who changes people's hearts but an act, one simple act which was the reading of God's Word. The people prepared for it (they prayed and built the stand from where it would be read from), they asked for it and then they listened intently. Now understand the words were read in Hebrew (the original language) but it was then translated into Babylonian for those who gathered. And then upon hearing and understanding they responded in a way that was unexpected, in a manner that rushed through the crowd like a tidal wave, sweeping them from their feet to their knees and then to their faces, because they wept. Why were they crying? They seemed to be overcome by guilt, overwhelmed by the words they had heard. But Ezra told them not to weep. This was not the end but the beginning, As C.S Lewis once wrote, "You can't go back and change the beginning but you can start where you are and change the ending."

Here we are in this lovely building and not in a rental space. Here we are, within a church that runs beautifully (at times) but what does it actually do? What's next for KesPres? Maybe Nehemiah can help. As the people in Jerusalem heard and then understood God's Word something caused them to not just listen but act on what they heard and it wasn't just their initial emotional response. Somewhere in the hours of reading and interpretation that day, Ezra must have read in that long but engaging reading of the story about an ancient ceremony known as the "Festival of the Booths". It was, as Nehemiah reminded the Jews and us today, of a time when Moses commanded the people to live in "booths" or thatched structures soon after they returned from the first Exodus as a reminder of where they had come from. Those listening did not hear these words, however, as an ancient story, but a lesson for them today. So they actually did what the story told them to do. So they again celebrated this ancient festival. And it sparked something within the people.

So are you with me? I'm cutting down some branches and making a structure for me and Allyson and Lily, and even Toffee, after worship today. I mean, look at what happened the first time and even the second time it was done. The change that occurred following in people's minds, hearts, attitudes and actions was undeniable! Would you not like to see that kind of spiritual hunger here? It's not impossible. But then again it's not about following one festival we find in the Old Testament. But it is about doing what our ancestors did and far simpler than you might think. For when God's Word is opened God speaks and when God speak and people hear, people respond. It's really that simple. All past reformations have happened this way. And all future revivals will occur this very same way.

So what may God be asking of you, asking of us? To build booths? Not necessarily. What if, for example, we as a church committed to God and to one another to open God's Word here, at our homes at our places of work on lunch hour? What if we committed to God and to one another to study and interpret God's Word? I think, no I know, God would do a new thing in our midst. God would bring some of us to our knees and others of us to the air laughing with an inexplicable joy but even more I believe He would move us all to do what He has been asking us to do for some time. And not just for our sake. Here this. Not just for our sake but for the sake of our children, our grandchildren and generations to come. What you may not know, but need to know, is that what happened in Jerusalem that day changed the ethos of a city for the next 400 years. So you see by opening, listening and responding to God's Word we are not simply re-writing our story or the present story of our community but the stories of those yet come here and those yet to be born. This is what's next for us! Thanks be to God.