

Rebuilding

Nehemiah 7:4

“Now the city was large and great: but the people were few therein, and the houses were not builded.”

Long before Nehemiah documented the beleaguered condition of his day, Jerusalem once teemed with people. The masses packed the city like a honeycomb and bustled in suburbs outside the city walls. What began as the golden era under David and Solomon in the tenth century B.C. when “the king made silver to be in Jerusalem as [common as] stones” (1Ki. 10:27) fell one step short of total annihilation under the terrifying cruelty of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon four centuries later.

Nebuchadnezzar dispatched Captain Nebuzar-adan to besiege Jerusalem. In about 586 B.C., Jerusalem collapsed at the brink of starvation. Solomon’s temple was burned; the walls were torn down (2Ki. 25:9-10); and, Mount Zion, formerly called “the joy of the whole earth,” was left a shattered mess. The graphic decimation was foretold in Psalms 79:1-4:

“O God, the heathen are come into thine inheritance; thy holy temple have they defiled; they have laid Jerusalem on heaps. The dead bodies of thy servants have they given to be meat unto the fowls of the heaven, the flesh of thy saints unto the beasts of the earth. Their blood have they shed like water round about Jerusalem; and there was none to bury them. We are become a reproach to our neighbours, a scorn and derision to them that are round about us.”

“Nebuzar-adan . . . left certain of the poor of the land for vinedressers and for husbandmen” (Jer. 52:16). Otherwise, “them that had escaped from the sword” were deported to Babylonia (2Ch. 36:20). “To fulfil the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah” the land “lay desolate” for more than half a century (2Ch. 36:21).

Praise the Lord! The heavenly day appointed to begin restoration finally came. “[T]he LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom” that the Jews may return to the Promised Land with his blessing and financial support (Ezr. 1:1). Ezra counted the “whole congregation together” who returned as only 42,360 plus servants and singers (Ezr. 2:64-65).

History recounts that six men stood higher than all others as God’s instruments of renewal: Jeshua, Zerubbabel, Haggai, and Zechariah followed by Ezra and Nehemiah. The first four men lead phase one of the rebuilding, and the last two men lead the second phase. Jeshua was high priest. Zerubbabel was Judah’s governor (Hag. 1:1). Haggai and Zechariah gave prophetic guidance (Ezr. 5:1; 6:14). Ezra was a priest and “a ready scribe in the law of Moses” (Ezr. 7:6). Nehemiah also served as Judah’s governor (Ne. 5:14).

The people’s response to seeing progress divided on the generational fault line. When the older generation, who knew the splendor of Solomon’s temple in their youth, saw the foundation of the

new temple, they “wept with a loud voice.” Those who grew up without a temple “shouted aloud for joy” at even seeing the foundation completed. “[T]he people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people” (Ezr. 3:12-13).

Eventually, the temple was finished. The wall was rebuilt. Religious and social order were restored. And, Jerusalem was re-inhabited with families.

Since Nehemiah’s time, Jerusalem has excelled and declined many times over. In 1844, there were only 15,510 residents (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jerusalem>). Today, there are approximately 732,000 (http://www.cbs.gov.il/hodaot2006n/11_06_106e.pdf).

What do we learn from this story? A metroplex of activity can become a ghost town; and a desolate city can thrive once again. God must grant favor. When God grants favor, potential enemies become friends. One man is not enough. God uses diversity in leadership and a loyal flock to rebuild. Success requires efforts on many fronts. Fixing one component is only one part of a multifaceted dilemma. Progress comes in stages and often includes regressions. Resistance must be endured. Building is hard, but rebuilding is harder. Clearing a plateau of disarranged, charred stones not only stresses the back muscles, but wrenches the heart. Rebuilding comes with the overcast of past glory, of past ruin, and of present vulnerability. Familiarity with past glory mixes lamentation with the joy of new zeal. Facing challenges afresh requires courageous men with indomitable resolve. Brothers, please keep a tool in your hand and never quit out of slack-heartedness nor dereliction.