

Walk Through The Bible

*The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
8The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
9The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
10More to be desired are they than gold, Yea, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
11Moreover by them Your servant is warned, And in keeping them there is great reward.
(Psalm 19:7-11. NKJV)*

*25But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does.
(James 1:25. NKJV)*

Lessons From The Great Generation

January 22nd, 2012

Nehemiah

Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Open your Bibles this morning to Nehemiah chapter 4. It is becoming quite common today to speak of the differences that can be observed in the various generations. We see books like “Boom, Bust, Echo” and we talk very frequently today about baby boomers and Generation X and Generation Y. We understand that all generations are not created equal and that we tend to get caught up in cycles that tend to lift us all up into seasons of collective greatness or drag us all down into seasons of collective collapse. It is very common today to hear people talk about the Greatest Generation, meaning those folks who lived through the Great Depression, fought a war against tyranny and came home to build the communities and the culture we all live in today. I know these folks only from the funerals I do and never got to really know them in their prime and so today we write books about them in the hope that some of their greatness can be captured and communicated to the generations that are up and coming so that we can achieve more and live better as a culture. There is certainly some merit to that. Wise people, Christian or pagan, should observe history and attempt to learn its lessons. That is what I want to do this morning, I want to look in Scripture at one of the Great Generations and to mine their stories for lessons we can use today to serve the Lord more effectively in our time.

Over the past few weeks we have been studying the story that is found in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther. The story takes place over 100 years in three great narrative sections and we've talked now about the first two of those narrative sections over the last two Sundays. This week we look at the last chapter and the main character in this narrative section is a man called Nehemiah. Nehemiah came about 15 years after Ezra's arrival and so Ezra is still around but he fades into the background now as the younger, more energetic Nehemiah takes the stage.

Nehemiah is one of the most fascinating characters in all the Bible. He was a high ranking official in the Persian government and he asks the King, Artaxerxes I, for a transfer from his position as, what we would refer to as "Chief Steward of the Palace" or something along those lines to the position of Governor in the newly formed nation of Israel. His request was granted and he sets out with a mind to BUILD. Nehemiah is a builder, he is an organizer and he is a LEADER in the truest sense of the word. He leads the Jewish people to a fresh highwater mark in this new cycle of God's redemptive story.

Nehemiah is most famous for his perfect pairing of spirituality and practicality. A great leader in the house of the Lord is not purely spiritual, neither is he purely practical. He doesn't pray and then have a nap. Nor does he build without first spending much time on his knees. A great leader prays and builds, worships and works. And that is what Nehemiah is known for. Let me show you just a few of the characteristic verses in the Book of Nehemiah that bring that to light. Look at Nehemiah 4:9. They were rebuilding the wall here and a bunch of local leaders and tribal associations opposed the work and threatened to attack and murder them all if they didn't stop. Look at how Nehemiah responds:

⁹Nevertheless **we made our prayer** to our God, and because of them **we set a watch** against them day and night. (Nehemiah 4:9. NKJV)

We had a great prayer meeting, we got down on our knees and asked the Lord to protect us and then we got up off our knees and sharpened our swords and stood watch. I love that! He didn't pray and then take a nap, he didn't let go and let God, he prayed and then organised a militia! That's awesome! That is the perfect blend of spiritual and practical! Let me show you one more. Look at Nehemiah 4:14, same basic situation, there was a report that the tribes were planning an ambush to slaughter the workers and so Nehemiah says:

“Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.” (Nehemiah 4:14. NKJV)

Isn't that great? He says: “Let's have Bible study now. Let's read the stories of how God has delivered our people in the past from the Egyptians and the Midianites and the Moabites and the Ammonites – let's read the stories and have Bible study and remember the Lord who is with us. And then let's sharpen our swords and prepare to throw down.” That's awesome! That's leadership! God will tip the battle in our favour, but you need to have a sharp sword and the courage to fight. He doesn't always send hailstones from heaven, sometimes he just strengthens your arm in the battle. That's the blend of spirituality and practicality that marks great leaders and great generations in the outworking story of our God. Now, if that was all the time we had, that would be a pretty good story in and of itself. But I want to pull this apart in some more detail and I want to unpack this tremendous balance of spirituality and practicality in order to learn some valuable lessons from this great generation. I will only have time to pick out a few stories from this great book to support these principles but you will discover the rest of them as you complete your readings on your own time.

Lessons From The Great Generation:

The first lesson I want to draw your attention to is found in chapter 8:1ff. Let me read to you:

Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that *was* in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel.

²So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who *could* hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month.

³Then he read from it in the open square that *was* in front of the Water Gate from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people *were attentive* to the Book of the Law. (Nehemiah 8:1-3. NKJV)

So the first thing we see is that:

1. A Great Generation is deeply devotional

These people had a six hour church service and they spent most of that time standing! They didn't have pews in churches until very recently, you used to stand for the sermon out of respect for the Word of God. What is really cool about this story is that it seems that Ezra would preach

on a section of the Word of God and then he had 7 priests up there with him who would move among the people in small groups and make sure they understood what had been taught. This is the equivalent of our Going Deeper groups. You see this technique developed down in verse 8:

⁸So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped *them* to understand the reading. (Nehemiah 8:8. NKJV)

They had long sermons and then Small Groups with FAQ, just like we're doing. Listen, not to beat this into the ground but there is a direct correlation between your tolerance level for Biblical teaching and your effectiveness in Christian living. 6 years ago we had 65 minute services and 25 minute messages. Put up your hand if you remember those days? Now we have 90-100 minute services and 45 minute messages and what are we seeing? A lot more fruit in our ministry. The Great Generations understand this. You can't live a victorious Christian life for 6 days a week in a viciously pagan culture off of 25 minutes of Chicken Soup For The Christian Soul. You just can't, the math doesn't add up. You can't drive a 1000 km on 10 litres of gas and you can't live as salt and light for 6 days on 25 minutes of Bible-Lite; it's just math. These folks were DEEPLY devotional. They sat long under the Word and they responded authentically. Look at Nehemiah 9:1ff where another church service is described:

¹Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the children of Israel were assembled with fasting, in sackcloth, and with dust on their heads. ²Then **those of Israelite lineage separated themselves from all foreigners**; and **they stood and confessed their sins** and the iniquities of their fathers. ³And **they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law** of the LORD their God *for one-fourth* of the day; and *for another fourth* they confessed and worshiped the LORD their God. (Nehemiah 9:1-3. NKJV)

This is another pretty long service! They spent three hours reading, preaching and explaining the Bible and then another three hours in confession, worship and response! Very practically friends, if you find spending 2 hours in church once a week to be deeply burdensome, you will never minister effectively in the Kingdom of God. Great Generations are deeply devotional.

2. A Great Generation is highly committed

Look quickly at Nehemiah 4 again. Look at verse 6:

⁶So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its *height*, **for the people had a mind to work**. (Nehemiah 4:6. NKJV)

So these people were not just devotional, they were extremely HARD WORKING. This was no sandcastle that they were building this was a massive fortified wall around a CITY. One of our elders who has night time issues and can't sleep properly, I'm not saying that it was Andrew Robertson, but it might have been, actually WALKED the walls of Jerusalem one night when we were there and it took him the better part of the night and I think he only did half. This is a massive endeavour but they DID IT because they had a mind to work. Look at verse 21 of the same chapter:

²¹So we labored in the work, and half of *the men* held the spears from daybreak until the stars appeared.

²²At the same time I also said to the people, "Let each man and his servant stay at night in Jerusalem, that they may be our guard by night and a working party by day."²³So neither I, my brethren, my servants, nor the men of the guard who followed me took off our clothes, *except* that everyone took them off for washing. (Nehemiah 4:21-23. NKJV)

Are you hearing this? These guys were all pulling double duty! They laboured on the wall during the day – they did a 12 hour shift in construction, and then they pulled guard duty at night. They didn't have time to change their clothes, they were working so hard. Let me tell you something, loser generations talk a lot about BALANCE. Great generations talk a lot about commitment. I get so sick of hearing what passes for Christian wisdom today. We throw around words like balance and moderation and perspective – THAT'S LOSER TALK! That's lesser generation speak! Nehemiah didn't talk that way, your grandparents didn't talk that way, the Apostle Paul didn't talk that way. He said:

⁶For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. ⁷I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. (2 Timothy 4:6. NKJV)

Paul says: "I didn't live a balanced life. I poured my life out like a drink offering on the altar of God and I'd do it again. I have fought the fight and run the race. I have kept the faith."

Listen to me friends, all you who were baptised today. You are at the starting line of a RACE! This is not a walk in the park. Run TO WIN! Fight the FIGHT! Be committed. Be invested. If you think of church and ministry as something you do for 65 minutes a week you will live like a Christian loser. I don't have time to lie to you, that's the truth. If you want to live victoriously, if you want to minister fruitfully then you put Christ at the CENTRE of your life, at the TOP of your daytimer and at the HEART of your cheque book. He is FIFTH BUSINESS in no one's play. He is centre stage or you walk alone and you lose. A Great Generation is committed.

3. A Great Generation organises and orders

Look quickly at chapter 10. Look at verses 32-35.

³²**Also we made ordinances for ourselves**, to exact from ourselves yearly one-third of a shekel for the service of the house of our God:

³³for the showbread, for the regular grain offering, for the regular burnt offering of the Sabbaths, the New Moons, and the set feasts; for the holy things, for the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and all the work of the house of our God. ³⁴We cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for *bringing* the wood offering into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at the appointed times year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God as *it is* written in the Law. ³⁵**And we made ordinances** to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the LORD; (Nehemiah 10:32-35. NKJV)

This is just a sample, we could look at numerous verses where we see the leadership organising and making structure around the principles they observed in the Law. They read in the Law about how they were supposed to be a worshipping community so they made rules and structures to support that. They built governance and policy around PRINCIPLES because that is how a revival gets built into a lasting and sustainable REFORMATION. And these were not small matters, they were making BIG decisions that had massive impact on individuals. Look for example at chapter 11, verses 1-2.

Now the leaders of the people dwelt at Jerusalem; the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to dwell in Jerusalem, the holy city, and nine-tenths *were to dwell in other cities*. ²And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered themselves to dwell at Jerusalem. (Nehemiah 11:1-2. NKJV)

The leadership understood that to become a functioning society they needed an appropriate ratio of urban to rural life. You need a central urban area for financial services, worship services, government services and for a prosperous market system. Farmers have to have a place where they can come and SELL STUFF. So we need a city. The problem was no one wanted to live in the city because it was choked with rubble – all the houses were still in ruins and there was no real water supply. Jerusalem has no natural springs or rivers, it is a place you would never build a city unless God told you to. So everyone preferred to live in the country side. But the leadership decided we need to have about 10% of the people live in the city or this won't work. So they cast lots and they directed people to become city folk. Can you imagine that today? Can you imagine if after the service we drew lots and one in 10 of you were forced to move to Bay and Adelaide Street? There would be riots and gnashing of teeth. This generation understood

that you have to allow leadership to organise and make some decisions that will benefit the greater community.

Do you remember the book “Good to Great”? It was very popular and it said a lot of really intelligent things. The idea was that sometimes companies or groups stall at the level of good and never really become GREAT, and the book reflected on what the barriers are that have to be overcome on the way from good to great. In the Christian life this is one of the MAJOR barriers that keep a lot of people, a lot of churches and a lot of generations from every becoming great. There are a lot of Christians out there who are very devotional. They read their Bibles, they pray, they sing, they fast – they are lovely, devotional people. And many of those same people serve. They are highly committed, they usher, they lead a small group, they visit in the hospital and the peel carrots in the kitchen. But. This is where they drop out. Don’t you dare try and tell me anything. Don’t get all political on me, don’t try and get me to follow your man made rules, I won’t have it. And so good churches never become great churches because the leadership is denied the ability to organise and add structure.

This was a barrier we had to deal with a few years ago, and to be honest we aren’t done yet. We had at least a dozen folks leave our church when we introduced the Servants’ Pledge. Do you remember that? We tried to do what these folks in Nehemiah did, we read the Bible and we tried to make some ordinances, some rules, some guidelines for how we do ministry. They are incredibly basic and foundational. Let me read a few of them to you, directly from the Servants’ Pledge:

1. I pledge to treat all of my co-servants, my leaders and any guests, children, or members whom I will serve with the utmost respect, civility and honour.
2. If working with children I agree to abide by all of the requirements of the Child Safety manual which I have thoroughly read and signed, indicating my agreement.
3. I agree to take my service seriously – to give my first fruits of talent and creativity to the Lord in service of the Kingdom.
4. I agree to be faithful to my assigned duties. When, because of significant circumstances, I am unable to attend to my duties, I will give due notice to my program leader.

So we asked people to be nice, be careful with children, be committed and to let us know if they weren’t going to be able to fulfil their commitments. That’s pretty basic stuff and yet at least a dozen people left the church when we asked them to sign this form. The best part was we would talk to some of them and they would say: “Well I do all of that anyway, I just am offended you

would try and tell me to do those things”. I’m dead serious, people said that. They said, I agree with this, I’m already doing this, but because you are asking me to do this, I’m leaving. Listen to me friends, one of the ways a church can stall at good and never achieve great is when too many people refuse to let the leadership organise and add structure to the ministry. They want to go back to the days of the Judges when everyone does what is right in their own eyes. When people read the Bible and then just do whatever they want. But that is not how you build a city on a hill, that isn’t letting yourself be built into a spiritual house. Jesus gave to his disciples the ability to bind and loose, meaning he wanted them to take the principles of his Word and apply them in each new generation in a way that worked for the progress of the kingdom. That is why the Apostle Peter said:

¹³Therefore submit yourselves to **every ordinance of man** for the Lord’s sake (1 Peter 2:13. NKJV)

Any yet people will say: “You don’t have the right to impose MAN MADE RULES on the community.” Yes we do, says the Bible. That’s what an ordinance of man is, a man made rule! Wayne Grudem the great Reformed Evangelical scholar says about this verse:

The inclusiveness of the word *every* makes it appropriate to apply this statement therefore to other legitimate human authorities (parents/children, church officers/members, and authority structures in businesses, educational institutions, voluntary organizations, etc.) God has established such patterns of authority for the orderly functioning of human life, and it both pleases and honours him when we subject ourselves to them. (Wayen Grudem, 1 Peter. Leicester: IV Press, 1988, 126.)

God IS A GOD OF ORDER and so he expects leadership to organise and build around the great principles of his word and a church that wants to be GREATLY USED submits to that reality so that we can build a better world in here then exists out there. That’s what it means to be salt, that’s what it means to be light. Let the world out there go to hell in a handbasket as people rebel against leadership, create political turmoil and paralysis by their disrespect for leadership and their under cutting of the political system, and let the house of the LORD ARISE and be built up into greater and greater health and effectiveness so that the nations are ashamed and come to worship the Lord. Great Generations submit to human ordinances because they want the house of the Lord to outshine the world around them. Listen to what Nehemiah said after making all these human rules. He says in verse 39 of chapter 10, “we did so because:

we will not neglect the house of our God. (Nehemiah 10:39. NKJV)

“We’re going to build this thing and its going to be GOOD and God will get his glory.”

4. A Great Generation is spiritually sensitive

Now, the word “sensitive” means a lot of different things to a lot of different people so let me explain how I’m using this. I’m not saying that a great generation cries a lot or is really good at reading body language, that’s a whole different kind of sensitive. What I’m talking about is spiritual sensitivity. A great generation knows what REALLY MATTERS in the Divine Economy and is sensitive to any potential disruptions in their relationship with the Lord. Do you remember last week when we talked about Ezra and how he reacted to the news that the people were once again marrying pagan women? What does the Bible say?

³So when I heard this thing, I tore my garment and my robe, and plucked out some of the hair of my head and beard, and sat down astonished. (Ezra 9:3. NKJV)

He had a melt down! He was so sensitive to the dynamic of the nation’s spiritual relationship with the Lord that he immediately recognised this as incredibly dangerous. He sat down in the dust and literally pulled out his own hair and beard in astonishment. That’s spiritual sensitivity. Nehemiah had it too though he expressed it in a slightly different way. Look at Nehemiah 13:23ff:

²³In those days I also saw Jews *who* had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, *and* Moab. ²⁴And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke according to the language of one or the other people. ²⁵So I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, *saying*, “You shall not give your daughters as wives to their sons, nor take their daughters for your sons or yourselves. ²⁶Did not Solomon king of Israel sin by these things? Yet among many nations there was no king like him, who was beloved of his God; and God made him king over all Israel. Nevertheless pagan women caused even him to sin. ²⁷Should we then hear of your doing all this great evil, transgressing against our God by marrying pagan women?” (Nehemiah 13:23-27. NKJV)

There is a lot more hair pulling in the Bible then I realised, have you noticed that? Nehemiah was spiritually sensitive too, except instead of pulling his own hair out he pulled their hair out. I think a lot of people, if they had to choose, would prefer a pastor like Ezra. We want a man who is sensitive to sin, but we’d prefer that he pull his own hair rather than ours! Either way you pull it, a Great Generation is SENSITIVE to the disruptive nature of communal sin. They know that at the end of the day THIS IS THE ISSUE.

Last year I participated in a survey that was being conducted of lead pastors and some other people in ministry. They were trying to identify growth barriers. There is a kind of practical reality to managing growth that is well known within “the industry” if I can use that terminology. And this information is not unimportant. Generally speaking, for example, it is widely accepted that there are three main structural barriers to growth in a church. Parking, children’s ministry space and sanctuary seating. As soon as you press up against one of those barriers, you will stop growing, you don’t have to bump up against all three. As soon as you run out of parking spaces, nursery spaces OR seats in the sanctuary you have yourself a growth problem. We know this, we are experiencing this, we do not deny this. BUT. Parking spots are not the greatest danger to the growth of this church. And so I was asked in the survey to identify what I felt was the most significant barrier to the growth of my church. Do you know what I said? SIN. SIN is the greatest obstacle to growth in this church. Listen, if we fail to confront someone in this church who is hardening into bitterness or running rampant in gossip and slander we’ve got bigger problems than parking spots. Matt told me that we are already now seeing 4-5 cars drive into the parking lot looking for spots, failing to find them and then driving away not to come back. We see that 4-5 times EVERY SUNDAY now. It has happened every winter for the last 3 years. In the summer we can park on the grass. In the winter we struggle to get more than 510 or so people into this place. In the spring and fall, we run out of spots in the nursery. At Easter we come close to running out of seats in the sanctuary, but listen to me church we lose far more people to sin than we do to parking spots, nursery beds or pew positions. We lose people to bitterness, to gossip and to slander every week. And so GREAT GENERATIONS deal with sin directly, firmly and with resolve. They will accept the hatred and venom of the few in order to serve well the greater needs of the many. The goal of course in confronting sin is to see the sinner repent, make restitution to those he or she has hurt and then to be restored. You see that in Paul’s letters:

⁴In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when you are gathered together, along with my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, ⁵**deliver such a one to Satan** for the destruction of the flesh, **that his spirit may be saved** in the day of the Lord Jesus. (1 Corinthians 5:4-5. NKJV)

Paul says: “Kick that sinning brother out of the church! Hand him over to Satan. Not because you hate him, but because HIS SOUL IS IN JEOPARDY! Kick him out so that he might repent!” Then in 2 Corinthians he tells the church to let him back in and forgive him and restore

him because he did repent. Listen friends, we've never kicked anyone out of membership in this church in my time, but we've had to have some pretty hard conversations with people and lots of people have left all on their own. We don't do this out of anger, we do it out of love and concern for the glory of God. Nobody enjoys it, nobody wants to do it. But in GREAT GENERATIONS they demand that it be done. Great Generations care more about holiness than happiness and they receive rebuke as the wounds of a friend.

You're going to like this book but I suspect you've already decided that being a Great Generation is really hard work. It is. Maybe that's why Great Generations only come around every once in a while. Maybe that's why so many high water marks are followed by generations of collapse and decline as the children learn to love the glory but to despise the process. The call of the Great Generation is a crazy call, but at the end of the day, it really isn't an option. Its just another way of saying: take up your cross and follow me. Jody, will you come and lead us?