

*Proverbs 29:18 (The NET Bible)*

When there is no prophetic vision the people cast off restraint,  
but the one who keeps the law, blessed is he!

*Nehemiah 2:11-18 (NRSV)*

<sup>11</sup>So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. <sup>12</sup>Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal I took was the animal I rode. <sup>13</sup>I went out by night by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. <sup>14</sup>Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool; but there was no place for the animal I was riding to continue. <sup>15</sup>So I went up by way of the valley by night and inspected the wall. Then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. <sup>16</sup>The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work.

<sup>17</sup>Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." <sup>18</sup>I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good.

*Everyone ends up somewhere, but few people end up somewhere on purpose.<sup>1</sup>*

There's a show on cable television about bad jobs. Week after week the host takes on one nasty task after another. There's even a British version of the show that looks at the worst jobs in history. Nehemiah has one of those jobs. He is the Persian king's cupbearer. Yes . . . Nehemiah's job is to taste the drink before giving it to the king in order to make sure the king isn't poisoned. On the one hand, Nehemiah is clearly expendable. It makes one wonder how quickly Artaxerxes (see the page two text box) ran through cupbearers. But on the other hand, Nehemiah must have been highly trusted by the king. In today's story, Nehemiah relies on the king's trust to move forward with God's plans for Jerusalem.

Nehemiah has learned that Jerusalem is still in a terrible state, even decades after exiles began returning to the city. Though cupbearers are to come before the king with a smile on their face at all times, Nehemiah is unable to hide his sadness. When the king asks him what is wrong, Nehemiah describes his deep concern for "the city of his fathers" and asks permission to go to Jerusalem to oversee the rebuilding. Nehemiah had prayed to God about this and his prayers were answered. Artaxerxes grants permission and even helps Nehemiah in his mission, providing safe passage and building materials.

*"Put into my heart"*

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem, he doesn't tell anyone about his mission. But he's got one and he's confident that God is behind it: "I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem."

When I read the stories of the Old Testament prophets, I'm sometimes a bit envious. They have such a strong sense of purpose. Their dreams and visions fuel them and the work they do. I wonder what the visions were really like. What did Isaiah and the rest see? What would I have seen had I been there with them? And the visions of the prophets provided vision for the people. The prophets brought the people purpose and direction from God. Their prophetic vision kept the people from wandering aimlessly in life, from casting aside all restraint and living only in the moment. The prophets called the people back to God, back to God's way and the joy of a life lived before God.

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<sup>1</sup>This is a wonderfully wise and easy-to-remember saying that we've borrowed from Craig Groeschel who borrowed it from Andy Stanley. Isn't the body of Christ a wondrous thing! A sermon series by Groeschel titled "Chazown" was the inspiration for this series. *Chazown* is the Hebrew word for "vision."

Nehemiah was not a prophet. His mission to Jerusalem was not born in a vision. He prayed and, in his own words, God put it on his heart. Nehemiah was sure what God wanted from him and seemed sure of the best way to go about it. Whatever Nehemiah felt in his heart, it emboldened him to ask a lot of the Persian king.

What I like about this story is that, frankly, I can identify with Nehemiah more than I can with the visions of the OT prophets, such as Isaiah's commissioning in Isaiah 6. I've never had a vision or a dream remotely like Isaiah describes. But God has placed purpose and direction into my heart as God placed it into Nehemiah's heart.

### *A personal vision*

Nehemiah's story reminds us that God speaks to different people in different ways. Some of us might have a "spectacular" experience of our own. For others, like me, God's speaking is quieter, forcing me to shut up long enough to hear. Most often, God speaks to me through

#### Persian Kings, the 300, Esther, and Nehemiah

Given the popularity of the recent movie, "300," about the battle of Thermopylae, it is a good time to review the Persian kings and their ties to the Bible.

Cyrus was the Persian king who conquered the Babylonians and allowed the Jews exiled in Babylon to begin returning to Jerusalem in 539BC. He died about 10 years later and was succeeded by a son. When that son died, the throne was seized by Darius the Great (522-486BC). Darius led the Persians in a campaign against the Greek city states, but was routed at the Battle of Marathon (from which we get the 26 mile race.)

Darius was succeeded by his son, Xerxes (485-465BC). This is the Xerxes of the "300" and the book of Esther. His depiction as some sort of weird, Mr. Clean, body-pierced giant is mythological, not historical. But Xerxes did lead the Persians into Greece and was met by King Leonidas and a small force of Spartan warriors at Thermopylae in 480BC. After suffering a naval defeat at Salamis, Xerxes was defeated at Plataea and took what was left of his army back to Persia.

Xerxes is called Ahasuerus in the book of Esther, but it is the same guy. Xerxes is Vashti's husband. Xerxes falls in love with young Esther. The events as described in the book of Esther match up pretty well with the chronology of Xerxes' reign and his military campaigns.

When Xerxes dies, he is succeeded by a son, Artaxerxes (464-424BC). Nehemiah is cupbearer to Artaxerxes. It is Artaxerxes who allows Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the city and its walls.

Sometimes God uses the most surprising people. Cyrus allows the exiles to return. Xerxes' love for Esther saves the Jews in Persia. Artaxerxes is instrumental in the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

the pages of Scripture. It is in these stories and letters, such as today's, that God punches through my busyness and distraction.

The writer of today's proverb gets this. Even when there is no "prophetic vision," we still have God's Word. There are many Christians who believe that God doesn't speak to anyone anymore the way that God spoke to Isaiah, that with the coming of Jesus Christ, there is simply no need for it. We have Scripture and a Spirit-filled community in which to read and interpret it.

This is why it is so important that we not come to the Bible seeking merely a set of principles about how we ought to live or even a systematic presentation of our beliefs.

Rather, we step into Scripture so that we can hear God's voice for ourselves, so we can come to understand who we really are and what God has in mind for us.

Ask yourself this: do you have a big vision for your own life? Do you have a strong sense of purpose and direction that shapes all aspects of your life? Do you have focus or do you wander aimlessly from day to day, month to month?

Just as God provided focus and direction for Nehemiah, God provides it for us as well. But it doesn't happen by magic. There's no fortune cookie to crack and no crystal ball we'll gaze into. Nehemiah prayed and we are to pray. Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem and became part of the community there. We are to become part of the God's community as well, here at St. Andrew. Worshipping here each week, getting involved, learning alongside other Christians – this is how we come to hear God's voice.

In the coming weeks, we will talk about this vision for our lives, for our relationship with God and one another, for all the aspects of our lives. We don't all have the same purpose. God didn't send all the Jews to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. But we do all have purpose grounded in Christian hope. And we'll find it together.

### Return to Jerusalem

Beginning in 539BC, the returning Jews set about the rebuilding of Jerusalem and of the temple. It would take many decades. Led by Zerubbabel, Ezra, Nehemiah, and others, the city walls were rebuilt and a temple was constructed. There was little available wealth for this rebuilding, so the temple was a shadow of the temple built by Solomon, but, nonetheless, the people of God again had a place upon which to center their religious rituals.

But . . . Judah was no more a tiny province in the vast Persian Empire. Judah was not independent; they had no king. Before the exile, Ezekiel had seen a vision of God's glory departing from the temple (Chapter 10). There was no sign that God's glory had returned to his people. Yes, the Jews were back on the land, but was the exile really ended? If the Jews had been exiled because of their sins, wouldn't the return from exile mean that their sins had been forgiven? If their sins had been forgiven, why weren't all the nations streaming to Mt. Zion (Micah 4)?

It just didn't seem that this new life, though back on the land, could really be the fulfillment of all the hopes spoken to them by God's prophets. Yes, it was a life after death, but was it really the end of the story? As the decades and centuries wore on, with one oppressor after another in control, it became increasingly clear that the exile was not really over, that God's kingdom was still to come. Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi would paint pictures of this kingdom, a kingdom that would be ushered in by Jesus Christ almost five centuries after the time of Nehemiah.

## READING WITH HEART & MIND, APRIL 15-21

**Sunday, Ruth 1** The story of Ruth and Naomi is set during the time of the judges. Why do you think that Ruth decides to go to the land of the Israelites with Naomi? Why do you think Orpah does not? What sort of welcome does Naomi get upon her return?

**Monday, Ruth 2** Why does Boaz show such kindness to Ruth? What is Boaz' relationship to Naomi? Why does Naomi show such interest in Boaz?

**Tuesday, Ruth 3** Why is Naomi so set upon Ruth's getting married? What plan does Naomi devise? What do you think happens on that threshing room floor?

**Wednesday, Ruth 4** What does Boaz have to settle with his fellow townsmen? How is the marriage of Ruth and Boaz also the redemption of Naomi? Be sure to notice who is among the descendents of Ruth's baby. Why do you think this brief story is in the Bible?

**Thursday, Psalm 14** What is the psalmist's perspective on those who deny even the existence of God? What does the psalmist await? God takes care of the poor and weak in a world given over to godlessness.

**Friday, Psalm 32** Sometimes it is a very hard thing to accept forgiveness, perhaps because doing so means accepting the wrong that we've done to someone. How does the psalmist find joy in God's forgiveness? This is a psalm of David. How does the story of his adultery with Bathsheba affect your reading of this psalm?

**Saturday, Psalm 49** It is so easy to place our trust in our bank accounts and our 401k. What does the psalmist say about the foolishness of trusting in riches? What are three teachings you can take away from this psalm?

## Sermon Notes

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### **Scott's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.**

If you are not a part of a Sunday morning class, we hope that you'll visit our class. It is open to adults of all ages. Whether you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at [sengle@standrewacademy.org](mailto:sengle@standrewacademy.org).

### **A Special Bible Academy Workshop – May 5 and 12**

#### ***Higher Choices – Tools to Connect with God***

Begin now to build a successful life that honors God, and takes you on a wonderful journey of loving, laughing, growing, creating, and experiencing all of God's blessings. Higher Choices™ are the wisest, best choices for you to be consistent with God's will for you and the life God's enabling you to co-create. Learn practical tools for self-discovery and action. We'll discuss priorities and time management, vision, authenticity, balance, simplicity, mental and physical fitness, prayer, and more. Taught by Laura Zuber. Lunch provided. To register on-line go to [www.standrewacademy.org](http://www.standrewacademy.org)

## **Questions for Discussion and Reflection**

We Christians ought to be better than we are at forgetting the past. When Jesus speaks to the woman caught in adultery (John 8), he does not even address her past. He points her to a new future that Jesus embodies. Yet, we cling to our past, carrying our mistakes, the wrongs done to us, the unrealized hopes, and much more around with us, like a sack lifted over our shoulder. But God urges us to a vision for our lives, a new vision, one grounded in God's way and God's hope. In his book, *Chazown*, which is Hebrew for "vision," Craig Groeschel suggests that we each spent a little time writing our own epitaph, looking ahead to the final chapter of our lives. Groeschel asks, "How would you want to finish these statements about your life?"

- "The thing that was most important to me was . . ."
- "People say I stood for . . ."
- "I made a difference in my world by . . ."
- "God was glorified because I . . ."
- "People knew I loved them because . . ."
- "The reason I expect God to say "well done" . . ."

How do you think Nehemiah might have wanted to finish them? How do our answers to these questions sum up the vision we have for our lives? Do you think your answers have changed from what they would have been at a different time in your life? There is more on all this at [www.chazown.com](http://www.chazown.com).