

# Looking Back, Looking Forward

Nehemiah 9:6-37

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February 13, 2022

The words that inspired this sermon were written by Ralph W. Klein in his contribution to the *New Interpreter's Bible Commentary on Nehemiah*: "The truth for one generation is only partly the truth for the next. All of us struggle with how to express the faith of our heritage in the language of our children."<sup>1</sup> As soon as I read it, I loved that quote, especially the first sentence. "The truth for one generation is only partly the truth for the next." I wondered if Ralph W. Klein, whoever he was,<sup>2</sup> wrote it and then basked in its glory for a few minutes before moving on to the next sentence. It's a sentence that I've been pondering for weeks, trying to make sense of it, and here's where I ended up.

As children, my grandparents learned that Christopher Columbus was the man responsible for the discovery of the Americas. He might have also been credited at the time with discovering that the Earth wasn't flat, depending on who you asked. He was a lionized figure, with tremendous amounts of praise heaped upon him for his courage, persistence and ingenuity. There was a movement within the Catholic Church to have him canonized. His birthday became a national holiday, and he started any list of the figures responsible for the country in which we now live. Columbus, despite being Italian and sailing under a Spanish flag, became a critical figure in American patriotism.

When my parents coursed through school, Columbus was still a revered figure credited with discovering America. He was essentially the solitary focal point for talking about the New World—my mom said that she remembers being surprised when she eventually learned about others who made their own voyages westward. The calls for canonization, however, had pretty much faded away. And Columbus Day wasn't a day off of school, but they did celebrate and study him every year specifically on that day in October.

When my generation was growing up, we learned that Columbus was one of many explorers who crossed the Atlantic. He wasn't the first—we were taught that some Vikings came first—nor was he the most thorough. In fact, we kind of glossed over Columbus and spent more time talking about some of the others, men who had traveled further or made more trips or established settlements. We also didn't get Columbus Day off from school, and I don't really remember celebrating him on that day. It was more like he was another name in the list of important people we studied when we did a unit on explorers.

Now, my kids are learning mainly that Columbus was not a very nice guy. Wikipedia says that he is currently depicted as "the environmental hatchet man or the scapegoat for genocide."<sup>3</sup> Columbus is often deemed to be lucky more than bright or courageous, selfish more than adventurous. He certainly isn't showing up on any lists of critical faces for sparking American patriotism. And last year, the federal government announced that it would officially recognize October 11<sup>th</sup> primarily as "Indigenous Peoples' Day."

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<sup>1</sup> Klein, Ralph W. "Ezra-Nehemiah," *New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume 3, 813.

<sup>2</sup> It turns out Ralph W. Klein was an Old Testament professor at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. He penned multiple commentaries and passed away just last December.

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher\\_Columbus#Legacy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Columbus#Legacy)

Whatever Columbus did five hundred or so years ago hasn't changed in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Whether he was a forward-thinking adventurer or a greedy, imbecilic pillager—or both—the acts that he undertook are fixed. But the truth behind those acts—why they are important and how we apply them to our lives—has changed drastically over the past few generations. The truth for one generation is only partly the truth for the next.

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It's not just the truths of our history that have changed. The same applies to science...you might remember an episode of *Friends* where Phoebe challenges Ross's scientific stance by saying, "Could you just open your mind, like, this much? Wasn't there a time when the brightest minds in the world believed the Earth was flat? And up until 50 years ago, you all thought the atom was the smallest thing...until you split it open and this whole mess came out."<sup>4</sup> The same is true with nutrition: who can keep track of whether eggs or milk are good for you or bad for you? With all of these things, the facts themselves do not change—the makeup of eggs, milk, and atoms is the same—but the way we understand and apply these facts does change, and that means that the truths that surround them also change.

All of this is extremely relevant as we return once more to Nehemiah and the Israelites and their new, old wall.

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A quick recap: at the time of Nehemiah, Jerusalem is a fallen city, with many of the Israelites living in captivity elsewhere and the remnant dispersed throughout Judah. Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem to rebuild the city wall, the project encounters opposition but remarkably gets completed extremely quickly, the Israelites settle in the new town and begin a new chapter as the chosen people of God. Last week, we read a story where they gather to worship and to celebrate, a celebration that lasted several weeks. After a day off, the Israelites come together again for a different ceremony, and that's when today's events take place.

It is a far cry from the celebration of the previous chapter. Scholars refer to this chapter as a prayer of "repentance" or "confession." It is a period of formal mourning, with the Israelites repeatedly acknowledging that God has remained faithful while they and their ancestors have not. It is essentially a history of the entire Torah, referencing the call of Abraham and the Israelites' escape from Egypt, the Ten Commandments and the golden calf, the presence of manna in the wilderness and of milk and honey in the Promised Land. Throughout it all, there is an understanding, a declaration, that God sought humanity and that humanity turned God away.

The Israelites are looking back. They are aware that the wall-building of the past several months—the wall-building fraught with danger and disappointment but ultimately one that has united the people of God in one place for a momentous and joyous time of revelry—this wall-building and uniting have come about because of the experience of their ancestors. But, as they also recognize and articulate, that ancestral experience wasn't particularly positive. That experience was one that led to captivity.

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<sup>4</sup> *Friends*, Season 2 Episode 3: "The One Where Heckles Dies"

The Israelites are gathered in the same city gifted to them by God generations ago. They have rebuilt the city wall from largely the same rock and rubble of the first wall, in pretty much the same footprint, with basically the same motivation. This is a new, old wall.

Likewise, God has not changed throughout. The prayer in these verses asserts as much: God is constantly providing, constantly seeking, constantly good. And despite this, the Israelites are unable to stay committed, to resist temptation, to return the good on their end. This, too, is a consistent repetition.

Essentially, by recounting the history from Abraham to Moses to Promised Land to captivity, these verses in Nehemiah are asking, “will this time be any different?” It is not a question they will be able to answer—it never is, whenever any of us ask it. God promises many things, but clairvoyance is not one of them.

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There is another question the Israelites are asking, the question of “why did we build this wall?” Nehemiah himself is never particularly clear about this question and its answer—he is deeply motivated to build the wall, but he doesn’t offer much of an explanation as to why he is so motivated. I’ve contended (throughout our exploration of Nehemiah) that one of his primary reasons for building the wall is to rally the Israelites. In this theory, he is less concerned with the wall itself than he is with the actions necessary to accomplish the task. He cares more about his compatriots working together, sacrificing together, and eventually living together in the unified city than he does about the state of the rock and mortar surrounding those people. This explanation suggests that Nehemiah is concerned about the present. The Israelites build the wall to accomplish something for their current state of being.

But the reading today suggests that they are also building the wall because they are concerned about the past. They know that they as a people have invariably let God down. The prayer in this chapter and the wall itself are both confessions of that shortcoming and acts of repentance. These verses suggest that the wall is an act of atonement. It is as if the Israelites are saying that they know that they have crumbled before, that they have offered something less-than-whole to God in the past...but now they have a complete wall, one taller and stronger and fuller than before, and that is what they hope to give to God this time around. If building the wall is an act of atonement, then it is not only an act to accomplish something for the present but also to rectify something from the past.

And, again, if they are doing this with an eye to the past, then they are also doing it with the other eye to the future. They are looking back...and they are looking forward. Why do the Israelites rebuild the wall? They are struggling to express the faith of their heritage in the language of their children.

The question “why did we build this wall” can be answered many ways, but it’s worth addressing temporally—did we primarily build it for our past, our present, or our future? Obviously the easy answer is “all of the above,” and while that’s a technically correct one, it’s not a particularly helpful answer. Even if the Israelites built the wall for all three—to atone for the past, to unite in the present, and to offer hope for the future—there is a good chance that one of those stood at the forefront of their minds as they gathered up stones and stacked them atop one another.

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If the Israelites are primarily concerned with the past, then this is the climax of their experience. They have struggled through from Abraham to the present, recognized and atoned for their sins, reestablished a relationship with a heavenly Creator, and this wall now stands as a testament to this restored relationship. As we know from the rest of our Bible, that's not quite how things play out. This is a seminal, positive moment in the story of the relationship between Yahweh and humanity, but this is not the climax. There is more story—much more story—to be told.

I also find myself skeptical of the idea that the Israelites are primarily concerned with the present. There is too much magnificence in the ceremony, too much permanence to their creation, too much celebration for merely the present. This is a community that feels—or at least that hopes—that they have achieved something that will last beyond their time.

This feels like a community looking forward. They are attempting to take actions in the present built on the heritage of their past that will resonate in the future...but the key is that resonating. The key is the hope.

The Israelites do not know that this time around will be different, but they hope. Otherwise they would not bother trying to express the faith of their heritage in the language of their children—if it's dying, they would not care if their children ever understand this faith. But they do care, and so they struggle, and so they hope.

Knowing that this sense of the future, this looking forward, this hope took priority for Nehemiah and the others helps us locate the truth within this story.

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The church—both our congregation and the larger worldwide Church—finds itself at something of a crossroads. We live in an antagonistically divided culture that is primed for outbursts. We are emerging out of a pandemic that has critically altered our world. Technology is changing us as humans—the way we interact, the way we think, the things we value—faster than we can keep up with.

We are the Israelites, living in a broken world, but a broken world that comes with the opportunity to rebuild. And the question of how we rebuild—with an eye primarily on the past, the present, or the future, prioritizing one of these even if we are cognizant of all three—is the same for us as it was for them. It is the question of truth.

In the past, the truth is that Columbus was a hero. In the present, the truth is that he is a villain. None of us knows what the future truth will convey about him.

The church has a long history of primarily focusing on its past. We are reluctant to accept or pursue change. We are potentially the only institution who utters “we’ve never done it that way” not with curiosity or excitement but rather with dread. Even this chapter in Nehemiah spends 80% of its verses on the past.

The church, most of the time, is so focused on its past that it's not even that good at handling the present. Too often, we are the last ones to the table when it comes to responding to community issues or everyday needs. We use the word “contemporary” to describe a worship style that is older than I am. Our sense of the present is sadly more indicative of the past.

That Nehemiah was able to achieve something in the present—the rebuilding of the wall—that still honored and respected the nation of Israel’s past is remarkable. That he did this while also turning the hearts, minds, and souls of the Israelites toward the future is a minor miracle.

We are good at clinging to the faith of our heritage—and it’s a good thing that we are, because that is a vital piece of all of this. But the next step is to continue to try to express that faith in the language of our children, particularly during a time when the world is turbulent, when words are shouted angrily instead of spoken compassionately, when the wall is waiting to be rebuilt.

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It may be that this sermon seems a little unfinished. Partly this is because there is more to the story of Nehemiah—we are concluding our series today with just the ninth chapter, and the book continues for four more. We’re wrapping up today because we lost a couple Sundays to the weather...but even if we’d continued through the end of Nehemiah, I suspect things might still feel a little unfinished. Nehemiah was about finishing the wall, but he wasn’t about finishing the story of God and God’s people. That story is still going, and it is our turn to determine how the next section will be written, the faith of our heritage expressed in the language of our children.