



THE STORY



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Speaker: Paul McIlwraith – Teaching Pastor
Scripture: *The Story* - Chapter 21 - Nehemiah

Red Bridges Barbecue Lodge serves us some of the best comfort food in all of North Carolina. Located in tiny town of Shelby, it has become a favourite hangout for locals for generations. Red Bridges was in the news recently, did you see it? Oh, it wasn't written up in some foodie magazine. It wasn't featured by Guy Fieri on the Television Show, *Diners, Drive Inns and Dives*. It made the news because one of its faithful patrons recently passed away.

For nearly seven decades Billy Graham, yes, the evangelical preacher, was a devout and faithful customer of this small barbecue restaurant in his home state of North Carolina. A little known fact outside his inner circle but Billy Graham loved Barbecue and almost every week, he visited Red Bridges Barbecue Lodge and ordered the same dish: the barbecue pork plate platter with baked beans, hush puppies, and coleslaw. Even as his health began to deteriorate over the last several years, his family would regularly pick up an order to go of his favorite dish.

For years “America’s Pastor” as he was known, visited the restaurant with his wife Ruth and his children, then his grandchildren. Often times he would pop in as he was travelling between his home and the Charlotte NC Airport. On his way to preach at another Gospel crusade in the U.S. or any number of places around the world. The restaurant does not have a special tribute area for Graham, but there are a few photos of him scattered throughout the establishment. Doug Bridges, the manager of the restaurant said the last time he served Billy Graham was in December of 1999, and on that day he asked for his autograph. “His picture had just been in the Charlotte Newspaper and I asked him to sign a copy,” Bridges said. “His Parkinson’s was getting worse and he was apologizing for taking so long to sign it. I was trying to explain to him what an honor

it was to know him and he just looked at me and stated clearly,

‘Sir, I’m just an old country preacher.’”

That old country preacher, died last week, February 21 at his home in Montreat, North Carolina. He was 99 years old. That old country preacher has had the most significant influence on the global Christian movement over the last 70 years. That old country preacher was a confidant of presidents and world leaders and the most widely listened to Christian preacher in history. That old country preacher, Billy Graham has preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to more people in live audiences than anyone else in history. In fact, I would probably not be standing in front of you today, if not for the influence of that old country preacher. I surrendered my life to Jesus at the age of 11, after watching a movie produced by his ministry. And I am certain, many of your lives have been touched by him as well.

Just an old country preacher.

Doesn't it demonstrate the impact one simple life can have when it is surrendered to God for his purpose?

Welcome to North Park Church. My name is Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor here. A special hello to those watching via video in the theatre.

It is good to be back after being away on vacation and yes, you can thank me for retrieving the sun from Florida and bringing it back to London where it belongs.

If you are just joining us, we are in week 21 of a massive 31-week message series we started last September and it will take us all the way to June.

We are studying, *The Story*. God's plan and purpose for humanity, and the world. And we are using as our resource, the book called, *The Story*, which is really just scripture, Genesis right through to Revelation is contained in this book. Arranged in chronological order it sets out God's story, what we have been calling the "Upper Story" and then our place in it, referred to as the "Lower Story". If you have been following along in the book, you may have noticed that today we mark an important milestone.

We are in Chapter 21 which is the last chapter that references the Old Testament. In Chapter 22, we move into the New Testament. And this is exciting because with each chapter we get closer and closer to the climatic point of God's Story. Everything we have read to this point and everything we will continue to read, is pointing to Jesus. Let me give you a brief snap shot of what has happened up to chapter 21. It is important for us to know the context of what is going on to be able to jump in and understand what is happening in the text.

In Genesis the first book of the bible, we have the creative work of God. He made the heavens and the earth, animals and then, his masterpiece, he made us, humanity. He had a plan and provision for us but almost immediately we have the first sign of what would distinguish humanity's ongoing relationship with our creator, disobedience. Sin enters the world in Genesis 3, but God restores and provides for his people as they turn back to him. In Genesis 12, God promises a nation of people to his chosen man Abraham and He makes a covenant that He will bless Israel and use them to be a blessing to other nations. The population of Israel begins to grow but there is more disobedience

In Exodus, the second book of the bible, we find the Israelites in slavery to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. They cry out to God for help, he gives them Moses, who rescues them and begins to lead them to the Promised Land. But the people grumble and complain along the journey and their lack of faith leaves them wandering in the desert for 40 years and that generation of Israelites never reaches the Promised Land.

In their wandering, God gives them worship guidelines, sacrificial rituals and the Ten Commandments to restore relationship with him

when they sin. Finally, they enter the land God has given them, He provides direction for his people through leaders such as Joshua and there are some good times, with leaders like David but mostly the vicious cycle continues. God's people doing evil in his eyes, worshipping other gods, idolatry and getting themselves into trouble. Then out of desperation turning back to God. He restores them but very soon they go back to their old ways. Until finally, during the time of Solomon, the nation of Israel self-destructs. It splits and divides into two kingdoms, Israel in the North and Judah in the South. The city of Jerusalem is in Judah.

It's the capital city and it is deemed the holy city of God. Kings continue to try to lead these two kingdoms but much more often than not, they do evil in the eyes of God, until finally, the kingdom of Israel in the North is over taken by the enemy forces in the 722 BC. The southern Kingdom of Judah holds on a little longer but finally around 586 BC, they succumb to Babylon led by King Nebuchadnezzar who destroys the city of Jerusalem and takes thousands of Israelites into exile in Babylon.

Eventually Babylon is defeated by the Persians of King Cyrus and King Xerxes and that is where we find ourselves today, chapter 21 in *The Story* or the book of Nehemiah in the bible. Nehemiah is the last historical book of the Old Testament. In it, we find Jerusalem in ruins. Many of the Israelite people are in exile from their homeland, scattered throughout the other nations. It is the low point in their history. Jerusalem, God's chosen city, with its' history of worship and sacrifice, the city where God's presence dwelt in the temple, it is in shambles. The infrastructure is shattered. Walls and buildings are destroyed. Think of some of the pictures we saw this past September of the damage left by Hurricane Irma in places like St Maarten or Puerto Rico and you get a bit of an idea of what Jerusalem was like in this day.

The Old Testament books of Ezra and Nehemiah would have originally been one combined book penned by a single author and they tell the stories of three waves of Israelite exiles who were eventually allowed to return home. Home to the devastation of Jerusalem. Can you imagine?

I guess it rained a little bit in London while I was away a few weeks ago? Did you notice? Believe me, we were getting updates in Florida. I was a little shocked to see the area around Windemere and Adelaide Street under water. That is not far from where we live. We were getting a little concerned that we may return to a flooded basement and the mess that goes along with it. Maybe you came home to water damage in your home last week. That is never a pleasant experience.

Similar to the mess that awaits the Israelite exiles who are finally allowed to return to Jerusalem but instead of trepidation, the returning of the exiles was actually met with much optimism and hope because it represented something deeper to them. It was the fulfillment of a promise made years before. Before they were overtaken by the Babylonians, God had his Prophet Jeremiah warn the Israelites of their impending doom. At the time, Jeremiah told them that they would be taken into exile but, one there would also be a day when they would return. It was a promise that exile would not be the end of the story for God's people, they would one day come back home.

And now with the fulfillment of that promise, it triggered some hope in the people that some other promises God made would also come true. Do you remember them? In scripture, God promised his people that:

- one day, a messiah will come from David's lineage and save the people.
- one day, the temple would be rebuilt where God's presence would dwell with his people.
- one day, God's Kingdom would come over all the nations and bring his blessings.

The exiles returning home, was proof that God hadn't given up on his people. He was still at work behind the scenes, crafting the Upper Story. That instilled hope in the people.

Carolyn and I left for vacation on Saturday February 17. On the Wednesday before we were to leave, we discovered a leak in our roof. Panicked we called a roofing company in hopes that they would be able to repair the problem before we left because we had seen the forecast of heavy rain in London the week that we were away.

When we called, we got their answering machine. We received a call back from the company on Thursday. They promised they would have a look at the problem on Friday. We were now down to our last day before we left. We trusted that they were true to their word. Sure enough, a guy showed up and diagnosed the problem, we needed a new roof but that could take a few weeks. At this point, I begged if they could please repair it in the meantime so that we had some peace of mind going away. He promised they could fix it. Sure enough, that very afternoon a crew was sent out to tarp it off and this past week, they completed the new roof just as they promised. The fulfillment of the first promise gave us hope this roofing company would stay true to the next promise, which gave us confidence they would honor the next promise.

That is the same hope the Israelite people felt when they saw the exiles returning to Jerusalem. God keep his promises. We are told in scripture about three separate waves of exiles that returned to Jerusalem.

The first occurred around 538 BC, and was led by Zerubbabel. Their focus was on restoring the temple that had been destroyed. The goal was to return it to its former glory but they faced significant opposition and the results were somewhat disappointing. The second wave occurred about 80 years later and was led by Ezra, who was a teacher and Scholar. His desire was to work towards bringing spiritual renewal in the hearts of the people but again, his efforts were met with opposition and mixed results. The third wave was led by Nehemiah about 13 years after Ezra. Do you remember Nehemiah?

Last year 2017, right around this time, we did an 8-week message series on the book of Nehemiah entitled, Count Me In. From Rubble to Renewal. Do you remember it? Of course you do, so there is little need for me to carry on. Let's pray and go home. Just in case some of the riveting information that we shared about Nehemiah a year ago has slipped your memory. Let me take a few moments to review some the highlights of the story.

Nehemiah was just a common man. Maybe like that old country preacher, Billy Graham. Just an ordinary person. Although he was an Israelite by heritage, he was born and raised in a foreign land,

his family were part of those taken into exile. He had never set foot in Jerusalem. All his life had been spent abroad. But Nehemiah would have grown up hearing the stories of his homeland. He would have heard about God and his promises to his people. Nehemiah loved and trusted in God, even in a foreign land. Even as he worked his way up and into a prominent position in the court of the King of Persia. There was still this yearning in Nehemiah, a pull towards home. He had a heart after God.

One day, as he is at work, Nehemiah gets word that the city of Jerusalem is in ruins. The wall around the city is decimated. Do you remember how he responded?

Nehemiah 1:4 or page 295 Nehemiah writes,
When I heard these things, I sat down and wept.

When he hears about the condition of Jerusalem, he weeps. Why? He had never even been there! For the city of God, the holy city of Jerusalem to be in disrepair, to be in shambles, especially its walls and gates, that was a source of disgrace to the Israelite people. It brought incredible shame to their God. The God that had been with them all throughout their history. The one who had provided a way for them, for generation after generation and now His holy city was in ruins. The walls are rubble. Nehemiah wept when he heard the news. Do you remember the question I asked you last year when we talked about Nehemiah weeping? I asked you, what makes you weep?

Five hundred years after Nehemiah, Jesus also wept over the same city, Jerusalem. In the final week of his life and he rode into Jerusalem to face his own death, it says in Luke 19:41 as he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it. The Spiritual condition of the people makes him weep.

What makes you weep?

When we look at the state of our city, our world, what does it do to us? Because Nehemiah had a heart after God, when he heard about fallen condition of the city of God and all it represented, he wept. He couldn't help it. What makes us weep?

Do you remember what Nehemiah did next in the story? He wept then he prayed. He right away, took it to God.

Nehemiah 1:4

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

It is thought that Nehemiah carried on the weeping, mourning, fasting and praying for 3-4 months. Months. That is a long time. And it is in the midst of this time spent before God, Nehemiah is convicted to do something, to take action. Tears are good, but they aren't always enough. And Nehemiah's plea in his prayers to God were, *pave the way for me, God. Lead me and grant me favour. I think you are calling me to go to Jerusalem and do something about the condition of the city of God, but who am I, I am just a common man. A foreigner in the King's court. What can I do? Grant me favour Lord, Go before me.*

Have you ever been truly stirred by something, I mean touched to the core and then felt frustrated because you didn't think you were in the position to do anything about it? I mean, who are you, just a common, ordinary person, right? So you just kind of sat around and waited for that feeling to go away.

Can I ask you something? When your heart has been touched so deeply, did you make it a matter of prayer, like Nehemiah? Not just once but you were on your knees before God, asking him to go before you, pave the way and show you what he wants you to do? Because if you have ever been touched to the core by something, and then the feeling passed, maybe you gave up on it too soon. When our hearts are set on the things of God, it is His Spirit that moves in us and stirs our heart, not just to well up in tears but also to act with compassion, to be the hands and feet of Jesus to our world.

God has given us all a purpose in our lives, did you know that? You may be sitting here today and wondering, what is my purpose? I am just a common, ordinary person. So, was Nehemiah, so was Billy Graham and so am I. But the bible tells us that we were made in the image of God and because of that, our lives have worth and we have a purpose but it only makes sense that we can't truly find that purpose apart from God, doesn't it?

If you are here today and you are trying to determine the direction of your life on your own,

you will never fulfill your true purpose. You are leaving out the most important element, God.

I don't like driving over bridges do you? I don't know what it is about them, it just does something to me. The Ambassador Bridge that connects Windsor to Detroit, that one is just scary. It is falling apart. The Bluewater Bridge from Sarnia to Port Huron. Well that one is too high. But have you ever driven the Sunshine Skyway Bridge that spans Tampa Bay in Florida? There are two ways to get from the Tampa Airport to where we were staying in Florida. You can drive around the Bay, or you can go across the bridge. On paper, driving around takes about 15 extra minutes. Minutes I was happy to sacrifice but my fellow travelers wanted to see the bridge. So, off we went. As we approach the toll booth leading to the bridge, the traffic was backed right up, in fact, we could see that the cars were bumper to bumper all the way up the bridge. So, that meant, I would get to experience this nightmare, in super slow motion, inch by inch as we crawled painfully up the bridge. An electronic overhead sign prompted us of the reason for the heavy traffic, Police Activity on the Bridge, it read. Which only amplified my anxiety.

As we finally neared the peak of the bridge span, we saw the reason for the delay. A single car was pulled over at the highest point of the bridge with orange pylons around it. As we passed the car, we noticed it was empty which we found strange until we began to put the pieces together. Someone had jumped. In their despair, they drove to the bridge, pulled their car over and jumped.

When we got settled in our accommodations, I was so disturbed by that scene that I tried to google any news accounts on the internet and what I came across shocked me. Since the year the Sunshine Skyway Bridge was built, there is an average of one person per month who make their way to the top and jump to their death. Committing Suicide. Incidences of suicide have been on the increase around us as well. Do you know the number one reason why people take their lives? Hopelessness. They see their lives as void of meaning and purpose and despair overwhelms them.

If you are here today and you are trying to determine the direction of your life on your own, you will never fulfill your true purpose. You are

leaving out the most important element, God. And hopelessness and despair can set into your life. Here are a few things the bible tells us about our purpose.

In the gospel of Matthew 22:37-39, Jesus responds to a question from the crowd. What is the most important thing for us to do, Jesus? He replies, do you really want to know, it's this,

Matthew 22:37-39

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

Our purpose, begins with loving God with everything. That is the catalyst that allows us to love others. In the Old Testament book of Micah, the author sums up what the Lord requires of humanity. Our purpose is,

Micah 6:8

To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.

Love God with all of our being, first and foremost, which compels us to love others, but love with justice, mercy and humility. And then in the New Testament book of Ephesians 2:8-9, the Apostle Paul says this,

Ephesians 2:8-9

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God— 9 not by works, so that no one can boast. 10 For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.

We are saved through our faith in Jesus, we can't earn salvation by our efforts, but it is this faith and the power of God's spirit in us that prompts us to action. Part of our purpose is to do good things.

So, let's summarize. As followers of Jesus we are to Love God, with everything which empowers us to love others and act with justice, mercy and humility and to do good works. That is a pretty good start to a personal mission or purpose statement isn't it? God has in mind for all of us a purposeful life.

We don't know a lot of details about Nehemiah's life leading up to the time that God stirred his heart to action. My guess was that it was pretty ordinary. Maybe he even enjoyed a little take out BBQ. But with his heart surrendered to God, this common man found purpose. He led the rebuilding of the wall surrounding Jerusalem. Oh, we know he faced opposition and obstacles along the way but instead of asking God to remove the barriers, he prayed,

Nehemiah 6:9 or Page 299

"Now strengthen my hands."

When opposition builds up against us in whatever we are doing for God, it is tempting to pray, God take it all away or God, get me out of this situation, But Nehemiah prayed,

"Now strengthen my hands" Let me dig in!

Lord, give me the strength to do what you have called me to do, what you have stirred in me. The purpose you have for my life. And Nehemiah completed this God given project. The wall was finished in 52 days. Amazing. Just a common, ordinary man with his heart faithfully set on the things of God. But when his lower story was woven into God's upper story, it was extraordinary.

William Franklin Graham, Jr. was born on November 7, 1918, in Charlotte, North Carolina, to parents William and Morrow Graham. Billy Frank as he was called in his early years, was the oldest of four children raised on the family's dairy farm. His upbringing was ordinary for those days. In hindsight, there was little indication that Billy Graham would one day preach the Christian gospel to over 200 million people in live audiences in over 185 countries. But in 1934, the sandy haired, lanky 16 year-old Graham went to a church rally in his hometown of Charlotte and heard evangelist Mordecai Ham preach and he was intrigued by what he heard, so he went the next night. It was that night that changed everything. He responded to the gospel and became a follower of Jesus.

Now with his heart set fully in Christ, his lower story was woven into God's upper story and it became extraordinary. God used his preaching to change the lives of millions of people. To share with others that there is hope. That their lives do have meaning and purpose and as I said earlier, one

of those lives that Billy Graham's ministry touched was mine.

Do you see this? It is the first third of my thesis that I have spent the last ten months writing for my Doctoral studies at Tyndale Seminary. It is entitled, My Personal Preaching Identity Outline. In these 60 pages, are a detailed account of the way that over the past 54 3/4 years, God has woven my lower story to his upper story. And as I proofread it again this week, I only have one word to describe it, extraordinary. It's extraordinary. I don't mean the quality of the writing, although I do hope my professors feel that way, but I am talking about the work of God in my life to bring me to this point where I am right now, standing in front of you. Extraordinary, that God could use me; just an average, ordinary, slightly introverted Joe blow.

And the truth is, at this very moment, I look out on a bunch of extraordinary stories right here in this auditorium. Every week, I meet with many of you and hear your stories of faith, the way that God has woven your lower story with his upper story and the results have been extraordinary. I don't mean that you have preached to millions of people or you have led a revival by rebuilding the walls of a city. If fact, you may not have led anything in your life, ever. But with hearts set on God, many of you have faithfully followed and obeyed wherever he has led you and whatever he has called you to do and your life has made a difference in our world.

I want you to know that. You have purpose and hope and people notice. Can I encourage you to continue to be live your lives with open hands and hearts to whatever God has in mind for you? Daily rely on and follow him. There may be some here today, and you too have a lower story, we all do. It is the circumstances and situations that have occurred in our life to this point that have shaped who we are. That is our lower story.

But some of you have never invited God to weave his story into yours. (FYI, he has been at work in your life whether you like it or not.) You have simply been trying to direct your own path. Trying to determine the direction of your life on your own, but you will never fulfill your true purpose. You are leaving out the most important element. You are forgetting God. That can change today. We never did get to the end of Nehemiah. The city of

Jerusalem was restored, the temple rebuilt, the walls and gates repaired. But the main problem persisted. The hearts of the people still resisted God. Nehemiah and Ezra tried to encourage spiritual revival and things looked promising for awhile but the people went back to their old habits. God called Malachi, the last of the Old Testament Prophets to offer a final word to the people but their hearts remained hard. Then God went silent for 400 years. But he didn't give up on his people, his redemption plan was in place, it was the dawning of the New Testament and the birth of Jesus, who would come to save humanity for all time.

God has woven his upper story into our lower story by sending his son Jesus, to take away our sin, to give us new and eternal life in him and to give our lives hope and a purpose. If you have never received Jesus, what is stopping you? Today, can be a new beginning in your life. The day you weave your life with his. Amen? Amen. Let's Pray

Points to Ponder

THE STORY – Chapter 21

Nehemiah - Rebuilding the Walls

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. Has your life been impacted by Billy Graham and his ministry? If so, share some of your thoughts and feelings around his death. If you don't know who Billy Graham is, then share about the one person who has had the most profound impact on your faith journey.
2. Has there ever been a time when you have unexpectedly come upon a "mess"? Describe the situation and your reaction to this unexpected chaos. Nehemiah chose to enter into the "mess" of Jerusalem. When and how have you chosen to enter into a difficult situation? How did you see God at work through that experience?
3. Have you ever had your heart deeply stirred by a circumstance and didn't respond? Why didn't you take action? Do you have any regrets? If so, what are they?
4. Do you know the purpose of your life? How are you living out of this purpose? Has there ever been a time when you questioned your purpose? Describe those feelings with your group.
5. *When our lower story is woven into God's upper story, it is extraordinary.* Ponder some of the major events of your life. How have you seen God weave your lower story into His upper story?

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray specifically for the faith journey of each member of your group. Pray for the ways that God is weaving His upper story into the lower story of your life and the lives of those around you.