

REBUILDING A HOPE-FILLED FUTURE FROM THE RUBBLE OF YOUR PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES - Studies In Nehemiah - Part two

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Nehemiah 2:1-20 - "In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. [2] And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid. [3] I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" [4] Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. [5] And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it." [6] And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. [7] And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, [8] and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me. [9] Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. [10] But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah, the Ammonite servant, heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. [11] So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. [12] Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. [13] I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. [14] Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. [15] Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. [16] And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. [17] Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." [18] And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work. [19] But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" [20] Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."

We're looking here at people who are miraculously brought back out of bondage into freedom. They are finally back into their rightful place - the city of Jerusalem - the place where they belong.

The work of restoration had begun in Jerusalem. Some of the walls of the Temple had been reconstructed by earlier groups of workers. It's possible that sacrifices were once again being offered to Jehovah, the true God. ***But the fact that the work was begun didn't mean there wasn't still much work to be done.*** God had brought some of them back. God had brought a measure of deliverance. Now they had to rebuild. It's one thing to be ***delivered***. It's another thing to learn to live in this new dimension of life and freedom.

This is the way God always works. ***Redemption doesn't preclude reconstruction.*** God's grace follows those who obey His principles. ***God did love these people. They were objects of His care and restoring grace.*** But that still didn't mean God wanted just to wave a magic wand over their heads and make all their problems go away. ***He wanted them to learn to rebuild their lives on His terms rather than theirs.***

They had brought much of this rubble on themselves, ***and would do so again if God didn't teach them how to rebuild their lives piece by piece according to His will.***

We are redeemed people who live in a fallen world. Each one deals with his or her own areas of brokenness and rubble - ***some corner of circumstance where things don't just seem to automatically come together.***

This should do for us what it did for Nehemiah. It should drive us - ***not to despair- but to fresh prayer and dependance upon God!*** The scope for rebuilding their lives while under Babylonian captivity was very limited. Now, as released and delivered by God, there was much reconstruction to be done. The work, in a sense, was just ***beginning***.

Several things begin to form in Nehemiah's soul as he percolates in God's presence for about 5 months: ***First***, he sees the ***terrible result of the people's sin***. ***Second***, he begins to ***hunger for purity of worship and restoration with God***. And ***third***, he sees the ***need for his own involvement in the rebuilding process***.

1) **KNOWING WHEN THE TIME IS RIGHT FOR ACTION**

Nehemiah 2:1-3 - "In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. [2] And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid. [3] I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

It's probably difficult for us to imagine how hard it must have been for Nehemiah to bide his time for five months. ***He has not said anything about what has been burning in his heart.*** He has never said anything to the king before.

In the KJV chapter two begins with those telling little words, “...and it came to pass....” That about sums it up. You pray. You watch. You serve faithfully. And you simply **wait**. You see days and weeks and months roll by while you continue to seek God. It’s easy to wrongly conclude that absolutely **nothing** of significance is taking place.

Then, one day, something just “**comes to pass**.” A door opens. Circumstances gradually start to loosen. You aren’t doing anything different. You aren’t praying any harder. You aren’t being any holier. You don’t feel like you’re doing anything. Something just “**comes to pass**” in God’s timing.

There’s a lot to learn from Nehemiah here. He really does **two things at once: He prays and he watches**. He **intercedes** and he **thinks**. He has that wonderful combination that’s all too rare in the body of Christ. He’s both **anointed** and **wise**.

Nehemiah knows he can do the right thing at the wrong time. He knows he can wait too long or he can blow it by rushing ahead too fast. I think Nehemiah knows he’s on thin ice here. **Everything seems to hinge on Artaxerxes**. And Artaxerxes is not a godly man.

That’s why, even in his praying, Nehemiah has been careful and thorough. He knew a lot hinged on the king. He knew this would be a difficult issue. That’s why he prayed specifically about this problem:

Nehemiah 1:11 - “O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” Now I was cupbearer to the king.”

How do you measure the importance of one man’s prayer? Generations from now there will be people worshipping in the temple. Children will play safely inside the walls of the city. **Nobody will dream that it is all the result of one man’s prayer that his conversation with the king will go well and be fruitful.**

Not all the rebuilding is obvious. Not all of it is spectacular. Not all of it is even immediate. But over time, it all finds its place in the plan of God.

One morning something special happens. It really didn’t seem like that big a deal at the time. Nehemiah always went before the king in the morning. The only thing different about this day was that the king **took some time to make small talk with his cupbearer**.

“You’ve been looking a little down lately. Is everything all right?”

There it was. Just a simple observation and question. Nothing of the weight and importance of that brief moment was obvious - except to God and prayerful Nehemiah. Here was the little question that changed a nation’s history. And, because his heart had been so long tuned to God in prayer, Nehemiah was discerning enough to see his opportunity. Nehemiah was **looking** for God to be at work.

2) **THE IMPORTANCE OF PRAYING WITHOUT CEASING**

Nehemiah 2:4-5 - “Then the king said to me, “What are you requesting?” So I prayed to the God of heaven. [5] And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ graves, that I may rebuild it.”

One of the battles I face with my daily prayer life is the accusation that comes into the back of my head saying, **“That prayer was too short to count! A real man of God would have been on his face for three days. That was only a couple of sentences!”**

Look at this story. Between the king’s question and Nehemiah’s answer, Nehemiah puts a prayer. He’s been praying for five months. Now he fires off a sentence. **It’s a beautiful thing to see a life so soaked in seasons of focussed prayer that it becomes natural to reach out instantly in time of crisis.**

I think this is what Paul meant when he talked about **“Praying always with all prayer...”** and **“praying without ceasing.”**

Never let the devil quench the impulse to pray. Let all the daily circumstances of life be fuel for your prayers. Go to God for grace **“in your time of need.”** That’s not just the times when you’re guilty of sin. It’s **grace for times of pressure, times of pain, times of confusion, times of decision.**

Keep praying throughout the day. Don’t quit every time the Devil tells you to quit.

3) **THE POWER OF PRAYER MUST BE BACKED UP BY SOUND CHARACTER AND DILIGENCE**

Nehemiah 2:5 - “...And I said to the king, “If it pleases the king, and **if your servant has found favor in your sight**, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ graves, that I may rebuild it.”

Prayer and life are tied together. **You can’t pray well and live poorly.** Prayer isn’t something you add on to the rest of who you are. **It flows out of the way you walk before the Lord on a daily basis.**

Nehemiah didn't just pray for Artaxerxes. **He did a good job for him every day of his life!** And that's what enabled the Holy Spirit to use Nehemiah so powerfully in this great time of deliverance and reconstruction in his nation's history. It was the quality of Nehemiah's **work** for the king that made the king concerned about Nehemiah's health. Nehemiah's diligence at a simple, perhaps boring daily assignment opened the door for his life-changing conversation with the king.

Even in this point, there is great application to our lives today. You pray for your unsaved boss. That's good. But it's not enough. **Do you do a good job at the office? Do you show up for work on time? Are you content with your pay, like the Bible says?**

You pray for your teenager. **Are you a good example in what you watch on TV? Do you sacrifice material things so you can spend time with them? Do you make sure you have your family in church together regularly on Sunday? Do they see you fight with your wife?**

You pray for your church. **Do you gossip or complain? Are you attending and tithing regularly? Do your children hear you bad mouth the brethren?**

All of these are just examples. But the point is, the power of prayer is greatly magnified when it's linked with the power of godliness. **Prayer is powerful when my actions and my prayers don't cancel each other out by destroying a confident faith in God's promise.**

You see this taught throughout the Scriptures. The Bible links **the power of faith with a good conscience before God: 1 Timothy 1:5 - "The aim of our charge is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith."**

This combination is a powerful force for God in this fallen world. It will open doors that prayer alone never will. Perhaps the strongest statement of this principle is found in 1 John 3:21-22 - **"Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; [22] and whatever we ask we receive from him, because we keep his commandments and do what pleases him."**

Please don't misunderstand the basic truth of this point. I'm **not** teaching that we **earn** God's answer to prayer by our good lives. Our best deeds can never earn credit with our Creator. What I **am** saying is God looks with pleasure on the faith of the one coming in prayer. And a life lived in **known contradiction** to the will of God only allows a shabby, half-hearted, condemnation-filled approach to the throne of grace. And our loving heavenly Father pleads with us not to neuter our confidence in divine grace.

4) **WHEN THE OPPORTUNITY OPENS, NEHEMIAH GIVES PROPER ATTENTION TO DETAILS**

Nehemiah 2:6-8 - **"And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. [7] And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, [8] and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me."**

Notice that faith in God **didn't exclude Nehemiah's need to think through the entire situation for himself**. God **does**, at times, call someone just to act in sheer obedience without giving any thought to the consequences - **"Just follow me!"** Abraham would be a pretty good example of this kind of situation.

But while there are certain situations where God works that way, **it's not His normal course of action**. Nehemiah doesn't just say, **"Praise God! I'm going to put the walls up! Let's Go!"** No. If the walls are going to be rebuilt, here's what it is going to take:

- a) **Nehemiah gets letters of permission from the King**. Do you know what that means? **Nehemiah is already anticipating opposition to everything he's about to do!** He knows many people will question and oppose him once he arrives in Jerusalem. He will need the king's endorsement in writing.

Yes, he knows it's God's will. Yes, he trusts in the Lord to be with him. But he's not stupid. He knows there are enemies. He knows that all the opposition isn't likely to disappear over night.

Do you know how many Christians start out in any number of fine Christian ventures and **end up surprised by the opposition they face from those around them?** Or, if they encounter trial and difficulty in their ministry or undertaking, they assume what they're doing must somehow **not** be God's will after all.

- b) **He's calculated all the materials he's going to need, not only to start the job, but to finish it**. To do any work, you need supplies. Work wears you down. Construction takes resources.

"Praise God, let's get building the walls!" Fine, Nehemiah, **how are you going to build the walls? How long will it take to finish? How much material will you need to get the whole job done?**

There's a **cost** to accomplishing anything for God. You can't run very far just on emotion. Excitement fades over time. Jesus taught very pointedly about the importance of thinking things through to the **completion** even as you **begin** anything as a disciple:

Luke 14:27-30 - "Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. [28] For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? [29] Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, [30] saying, 'This man began to build and was not able to finish.'"

We're talking about rebuilding different areas of our own lives. Here's one reason lives remain in rubble. It's not because people **couldn't**, with God's help, put them back together. And it's not because people don't have a **general desire** for things to be better than they are right now.

Generally, lives remain in rubble longer than God would like because people fail to give the attention to important **details** in the reconstruction process of their lives. After they've repented and after they've prayed, **they don't see the importance of the little steps of reformation that would open their lives up to the strong resources of God's helping, renewing grace!**

Remember, **major breakdowns come from small details overlooked for too long!**

5) **GOOD WORK PUBLICLY REQUIRES GOD WORK PRIVATELY**

Nehemiah 2:12-16 - "Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. [13] I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. [14] Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. [15] Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. [16] And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work."

As far as we know, Nehemiah had never actually **seen** the devastation of the broken down wall for himself before this moment. **He won't allow anyone else to be his eyes for him.** He wants an accurate picture of just how bad the situation is.

He's eliminating surprises that may lie up the road. Where are the areas that are worse than the others? Where will the special craftsmen have to be deployed? Nehemiah doesn't want anything to hinder the work once it's begun.

Jesus talked about this step of preparation: **You don't go to battle until you've figured out the size of the enemies' army. You don't start construction until you've calculated the amount of goods needed to complete the entire project.** Nehemiah had **heard** all about the sorry state of the cities' walls. **But that's not the same as seeing the rubble for himself.**

I wonder how many people never get things back together in their lives because, unlike Nehemiah, they never take the three days time, alone in the dark, to get so desperately disgusted with their present state before the Lord they want wholeness more than anything else.

How hard it is for us to actually come to the place where we thoughtfully and mournfully and repentantly say the words: **"I'm a liar" - "I'm an adulterer" - "I'm an idolater" - "I'm a complainer" - "I'm a hypocrite" - "I'm hopelessly backslidden" - "I desperately need Jesus!"**

In this study the assignment we need to have the Holy Spirit press into our souls is the **need for thoroughness** in the rebuilding of our lives. Whatever is broken didn't get that way overnight. And, even though **forgiveness** is instantaneous, **reconstruction** is not. Don't confuse the initial thrill of forgiveness with the ongoing assignment of discipleship. That's the only way to keep your life free and clean in Jesus.