

Legacy

Part 3 – Rise Up

Intro

Over the past couple of weeks, we have been on a journey with Nehemiah, one of Scripture's most fascinating people. As we began his story and place in history, we took a step back to catch a wider view of the context and landscape in which his life appears.

Nehemiah and many of his people are currently in captivity in Persia [the world's leading power], while others are still in exile in Babylon [the world's previous leader], and yet others have returned back to Jerusalem to begin rebuilding the city that was destroyed nearly a century before.

Nehemiah's brothers happened to be one of those who had been to Jerusalem. One day, he and a few other men made the journey to Persia. During their visit, Nehemiah asks his brother for a report of all the things taking place in their home city. Since the Persian king had allowed the Israelite people to begin returning home and rebuilding their Temple, Nehemiah naturally assumed things were going well.

Nehemiah's World Shattered

However, what he heard was not at all what he had expected. Instead of the city flourishing and his people thriving, the city walls were still in ruins and his people were living in shame. Other peoples had moved in and taken part of their territory, producing crops was nearly impossible, and adversaries had continually risen up against the Israelite people.

In that moment, Nehemiah's world changed. He saw a picture of the world he could not forget, heard someone's plight he could not unhear. Nehemiah was faced with a decision – what was he to do with what he now knew. Would he turn a blind eye? Would he hope *someone* [not him] would step up and help? Would he sit back in his comfort and be thankful for all he had – glad it wasn't him?

Perfectly Positioned & Resourced

Instead of sitting back and wishing something would change, Nehemiah spent 120 days in prayer – allowing God to fortify in him a passion and burden to be the one to do something to help. Nehemiah had a very unique opportunity. He was the cupbearer to the Persian king, which meant he had influence, money, and access. Nehemiah was perfectly positioned and resourced to bring about change in his world.

Unfortunately, approaching the king would take the greatest act of courage Nehemiah had ever been required to display. Nehemiah's boss had previously received exaggerated reports about the Jewish people and had forcefully declared that the work to rebuild their city must be stopped.

The king could have taken Nehemiah's request to help his people as disloyalty or insurrection. Nehemiah was putting his reputation, his position, and even his life on the line. But he had come to a deep place of conviction – that this was his moment, his purpose, his legacy. And he was willing to sacrifice everything to follow God's prompting in his heart.

As he brought his burden, request, and plan to the king, God granted him favor. The king not only allowed Nehemiah to lead return and begin rebuilding the walls, but also provided him with the necessary resources and authority to do so – which we see as we continue his journey.

2:9-10

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. 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.

For nearly 100 years, the Samaritans [and other peoples who had moved into the area] opposed the rebuilding effort in Jerusalem. They are the ones who sent the letter to the Persian king, persuading him to halt the work before. So Nehemiah knows, to have any chance, he has to come with proof – and not just a piece of paper, but with a presence.

Can you imagine this scene? Riding into town was a Jew, with the force of the Persian army behind him. The Israelites hope had returned. However, their adversaries were seething. Two of those main opponents were Sanballat and Tobiah.

Sanballat & Tobiah

Sanballat was the governor and leader of the people of Samaria – the ones who moved into the Israelite's land and a constant tormentor of the reconstruction.

Tobiah came from a group of people who historically were enemies of the people of God. The title *servant* indicates that he too was likely some type of official.

These adversaries were well-connected, planning to assert their power, and clearly threatened by Nehemiah's presence.

I love Nehemiah's response.

2:11

So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days.

But, no Nehemiah, they bowed up. This is your opportunity to return threat for threat – or people won't take you seriously. You have to respond in kind. If you don't, everyone will think you're weak. You can't simply ignore this.

Typically, our response to those who threaten us is not quite as reserved. Instead of closing our mouths and moving on, we want to vindicate ourselves – either in the public square or quietly among friends. Nehemiah had the confidence and resolve that he did not have to defend himself. He had a calling from God and the backing of the king.

A fool gives full vent to his spirit, but a wise man quietly holds it back.

Proverbs 29:11

Answer not a fool according to his folly, lest you be like him yourself.
Proverbs 26:4

Jesus captured both of these principles when He was threatened most.

When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly.

1 Peter 2:23

Unfortunately, we often pattern our society more than our Savior in moments like these.

2:12

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.

Nehemiah determined to [quietly] assess the situation, appraise the size of the project, and work his plan.

2:13-15 [Inspecting the Gates]

[Map of Jerusalem Wall & Gates]

2:16

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.

Here's what Nehemiah understood: you don't reveal your plan to everyone right away. Sharing about the project or starting it prematurely could have led to a half-built wall, which would have left Nehemiah and the people in shame.

Too often we rush out with a great idea and good intentions, with no sustainable plan to follow through. No great work is ever applauded or remembered by how it started, but by how it stands in the end.

Keep Your Mouth Closed

This man has at least 3 times now had the integrity and maturity to keep his mouth shut.

1) He carried the burden of his people for 4 months before sharing it with the king.

2) He walked right past Sanballat and Tobiah when everyone expected him to use his assurances from the king to put them in their place.

3) He does not publicly share the purpose of his arrival or initial plans with a group of people that were no doubt clamoring for him to say something to the nation. (the man had his internal Twitter police on high alert)

2:17-18a

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." 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.

Nehemiah surveyed the desperate situation in which the city and its people found themselves...and his heart was broken. His people were not living in the blessing and promise God intended for them. Brokenness was everywhere they turned – not just physically represented by the city walls, but in the hearts and lives of the people.

For us today, there are at least 40,000+ people in our county who are not walking with God or involved in growing spiritually through a local church. Like Nehemiah, we see a group of people who are not actively living the life that God intended for them – and it should cause our hearts to break.

The hand of my God...upon me.

Nehemiah recognizes the calling and blessing of God on his life; that he was purposed and equipped for this great work. It was his life's mission and passion – to bring healing and hope to a people who had been disenfranchised, wondering if God had forgotten them.

Honestly, I think that is one of the greatest callings of this church. We, for no other reason than the *hand of God*, have a unique gift to bring that very same healing and hope to a disenfranchised people. Not because of our name or our ability, but simply that it is God's plan for this people.

To be honest, I often wonder why God left my family in Decatur all these years. It feels like there is a church on literally every corner. The joke [whether myth or reality] is that Decatur was [at one time] in the Guinness Book of World Records for the most church per capita. So why would God keep us here to replant and lead a church? Decatur didn't need another church.

I wrestled with that question for awhile, and to be completely truthful – sometimes still wonder. But I had a friend tell me a couple of years ago: *you're not there because Decatur needs another church, God has you there because the people need to know Jesus.*

Their point was that so many people in the Bible Belt, especially a city like Decatur, feel like they [and everyone else around them] are spiritual and connected to God just because we go to church or try to display good morals. But the gospel is not about niceties, polished lives, decent behavior, and church attendance. Even the secular world knows that:

Just because a city has a lot of churches doesn't necessarily mean it has a lot of religious citizens.

Business Insider

And we're not even talking about *religious citizens*. Our concern is about people who are so changed by the unconditional saving grace of God in their lives that they can do nothing else but completely submit and re-orient their entire lives around Him and His purpose for their lives.

Something Special

There is something special about this place and this ministry. We're not special. But the specific *hand of God* and calling on this place is extremely special. Our goal is not to build a shrine and kingdom to gather a large number of people and teach them how to be nice. Our purpose is to reach broken people [including ourselves] to help them see that God can take the broken pieces of their lives [because of sin] and restore them to wholeness [through the person and work of Jesus Christ] – that true forgiveness and real transformation can happen.

Broken marriages can become one. Anger can grow into kindness. Dissatisfaction can grow into contentment. Despair can be exchanged for hope. Isolation can find community. And it all takes place among a church that is founded and centered on Jesus Christ.

Church, *let us rise up and build!*

2:18b

And they said, “Let us rise up and build.” So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

Come on. This was Braveheart before Mel Gibson ever painted his face blue. Nehemiah gave one of the most compelling game-day speeches ever recorded in history. And the people responded. A people who had been down-and-out, a people who had questioned their own ability for far too long, rose up and committed to building.

Like Nehemiah, the people did not lead with ambition or good intention. They were resolved to do whatever it took to be prepared and ready to work for the glory and kingdom of God. The people ***strengthened their hands*** - they worked hard!

***Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God.
William Carey – Father of the Modern Mission Movement***

We hone our craft at work. We put in hours of practice on the ball field. We run long distances and lift heavy things in exercise. For what purpose – to get better at what we do. Why shouldn't it be the same for the things and ministry of God through the Church?

2:19-20

But when Sanballat...Tobiah...and Geshem 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?” 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.”

Just because Nehemiah developed a plan and the people discovered their passion, it did not pave the way for an easy road. People will not understand what we are doing. They will question us, discount us, ridicule us, and even seek to marginalize us.

We will no doubt face discouragement along the way; there will be seasons of disappointment; and we will surely have to withstand waves of distraction – *but [adversaries – flesh or circumstance] we are not really concerned with you or even overly worried about the king. Our focus and motivation is single-mindedly concentrated on what our God has called us to do – here and now.*

Church, will you purpose to *strengthen your hands and rise up build* what God has intended for this place and these people?!?