

How Do You Re-build After a Disaster?

Texts: Nehemiah 1-6

General Direction

To demonstrate how God uses an ordinary person like Nehemiah to achieve the overall kingdom purposes of God. [Deliver this message after the reading for Week 5 is completed.]

Back Story

Israel's corrupt leadership had decimated the spirituality of its people and in 722 B.C., God used the Assyrians to bring judgment upon them. It was the end of their kingdom. Then, 134 years later, the Babylonians were used by God to bring further judgment upon Judah. In Nehemiah, we observe the house of God burned and destroyed; the protecting wall of the city of Jerusalem is broken down in a pile of rubble. Jerusalem, which once represented the presence of the Lord, was a disgrace for the people. What will become of the people who have returned to Judah? What will become of the reputation of Israel's God? What will be done to re-build?

Sermon Purpose and Outline

This sermon will explore the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem under the leadership of Nehemiah, who prayed, took action, and persevered until the wall was finished.

Sermon Question: How do I rebuild after a disaster?

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| 1. No more despair, but a dream | Nehemiah 2:1-5 |
| 2. Not just a desire, but a deed | Nehemiah 2:11-13 |
| 3. No longer damaged, now done | Nehemiah 6:15-16 |

Sermon Introduction

Think back with me to a time you had to re-build something that was in a major mess in your life....got it? Maybe it was a backyard landscaping project for a garden gone to seed, or an interior re-design for a hopelessly outdated room. Maybe you've experienced a flood loss, and as you discovered your precious possessions floating in the water, you wondered how you would ever re-set the clock back to before the devastation occurred. Maybe it was in the area of relationships with your spouse, your kids, or a close friend. Can it ever be "just like it never happened?" If so, how will we get from where we are to where we want to be? Do you sit down and cry and become immobilized? Do you grit your teeth, buck up, fight back the tears and dig in to the work ahead? Do you call friends? Do you get angry?

Whatever your stress behavior may be, one thing is for sure, rebuilding takes time. It takes commitment, it takes determination, it takes more than just you, and in ancient Persia, it took a cupbearer named Nehemiah who was really not too different than you and me.

Connection to the Overarching Theme: The Journey of Faith

As the book of Nehemiah opens, the city of Jerusalem has been destroyed by the Babylonian army. Though generations have passed, the city walls are still a pile of rubble. The populace is unprotected and a laughing stock in the region. Back at the palace of the king however, Nehemiah had a burden on his heart and chose to use his influence with the king to help him achieve the dream God had given him. Nehemiah's faith journey started with prayer, and ended with the fulfillment of a daunting vision.

Sermon Question: How do I rebuild after a disaster?

1. No more despair, but a dream

Nehemiah 2:1-5

*^{1b} I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before; ² so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." I was very much afraid, ³ but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! **Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"** ⁴ The king said to me, "What is it you want?" **Then I prayed to the God of heaven,** ⁵ and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried **so that I can rebuild it.**"*

Textual Explanation

There are two things I'd like us to focus on in this text: Nehemiah's prayer, and his position.

He Aligned the Dream with God's Plan Through Prayer: Nehemiah had a sad heart, yet he did not let feelings of despair keep him stuck. He used a conversation with the king to share what God had put on his heart through prayer and at that point, God's plan of restoration began to kick in. His feelings of despair transformed into a dream to fulfill. Notice how Nehemiah does not charge ahead in speaking to the king without first shooting a quick prayer up to God. We read in the previous chapter that he had a habit of prayer (1:4-11), and it was through his communion with God that this burden for rebuilding the walls originated.

Application

Are you a man or woman who can get things done? Maybe you're so good at leading, you could get things done without prayer. You'll probably get it done, but maybe not the way God planned. Maybe he had in mind for it to be bigger than you could have done alone. Maybe he had in mind for it to be smaller than all your brute strength caused it to be. Either way, our job is to get our plans in alignment with his plans, then we act...but not before the alignment occurs.

He Used His Role as a Position of Influence: Nehemiah did not just 'taste another meal' on that day at the palace. He used his position to bring the kingdom of God into the light. He acted on behalf of the one who placed him there. What about you? If you were sent to represent your country in a foreign land, would you build a great house there, furnish it well, lock the door and stay inside? Of course not, or you'd have a hard time representing that country that sent you.

Application

Are you using the place God put you to achieve his kingdom purposes?

- Is there a mess in your family or extended family where relationships are broken that needs mending? That's why you are there!
- Is there a mess at your workplace where God is no longer honored? That's why you work where you do!

God wants you to represent the light and life of the kingdom of God.

Maybe you are not a follower of Jesus Christ and you have a mess in your life that you can't seem to clean up. All the attempts you've made have resulted in nothing. Jesus said that his kingdom of light, life and love that will bring you and your family hope, healing and joy. He wants to wade into the mess with you, yes even into the flooded relationships and the burned over mistakes and restore them to the way he wants them to function.

God has placed you where you are for a reason. Your purpose may be as simple as offering water to the people who use your street as a jogging route, or as profound as praying for the kids in the homes you clean, or as life-changing as standing up against a bully. We simply know he does not want those of us who represent the kingdom of God to keep the kingdom locked up in a safe somewhere in case someone finds out that we represent Him.

Creative Teaching Tool

Show a clip from the movie, *To End All Wars*, called "Human Beings" (3 min.)

http://www.wingclips.com/cart.php?target=product&product_id=16178&category_id=532

Sometimes even a cup of water is a profound act of love, done in the name of Jesus. God has placed you in your neighborhood, your school, your family, your company, your gym, and your sports team for a reason. You can be a change agent right now in the place God has put you.

Nehemiah had a regular habit of **prayer**, which gave him a vision for the need, and he leveraged his **position** as the king's cupbearer to turn his despair into a dream that he was poised to act on.

2. Not just a desire, but a deed

Nehemiah 2:11-13

*¹¹ I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days... ¹³ by night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, **examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire.***

Textual Explanation

When Nehemiah brought his concern to the king, the king told Nehemiah that he could go and deal with the burden on his heart. He could take a 'leave of absence' as it were, and go repair the wall. So Nehemiah traded in his cupbearer's apron for a general contractor's toolbelt, packed his bags, left the palace and immediately headed straight for the disaster scene, a broken wall in Jerusalem. He conducted an honest survey of the damage, and made an assessment of the amount of work there was to do.

Have you heard the phrase, "God doesn't drive parked cars"? Nehemiah didn't just stay put and hope the wall would get better. He moved into gear, yet didn't minimize the size of the task.

Application

This is where rebuilding an area of our lives must begin—with an honest assessment of our situation by surveying the reality of the rubble. You can't walk away from it, you can't walk around it and you can't walk over it and ignore it if God is calling you to act. Whether it's your marriage, your finances, your past mistakes, or a social justice scenario, the first step of rebuilding is an honest assessment of the damage. This is where rebuilding begins.

Is there a mess in your life that you have surveyed, gotten discouraged about, forgotten to bring it before your God and walked away in despair? That is not God's plan. He doesn't want you to stay "parked." His plan is to give you a hope, and empower you to turn your desires into deeds.

Cross Reference

Joel 2:24-25

²⁴ *The threshing floors will be filled with grain; the vats will overflow with new wine and oil.* ²⁵ ***I will repay you for the years the locusts have eaten – the great locust and the young locust, the other locusts and the locust swarm – my great army that I sent among you.***

It can be very discouraging to see the damage that has been done and think about how much work it will take to do the restoration. But, that does not mean we are to sit back and just wish as we observe sin, brokenness, destruction or persecution. We are to be a people who are on the move for the purposes of the Kingdom of God. In return, he promises to restore the fruitfulness to work that has been destroyed.

Illustration

In England in 1833, there was a man who stood for God's principles as he surveyed the sin and destruction of the slave trade. His name was William Wilberforce, and he used his position of influence to pass the Slavery Abolition Act, which stopped slavery in most of the British Empire.

Creative Teaching Tool

Show one of these clips from the movie *Amazing Grace*.

Full Trailer:

http://www.wingclips.com/cart.php?target=product&product_id=16257&substring=amazing+grace

"The Principles of Christianity:"

http://www.wingclips.com/cart.php?target=product&product_id=16261&substring=amazing+grace

By the way, Wilberforce died just three days after the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act, but more than 130 years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. took the vision to the next level as he marched for civil rights and equality for all people. You see, great men and women of God practiced the very same principles Nehemiah did. They were in constant communication with God through prayer, and they were men and women of action. They used their position of influence, however great or small it may have been, to turn their desires into deeds.

3. No longer damaged, now done

Nehemiah 6: 15-16

¹⁵ ***So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days.*** ¹⁶ ***When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.***

Fifty-two days. What an accomplishment. Nehemiah accomplished his dream, and all the surrounding nations were impressed. The End. But, we skipped over all the hard parts, didn't we? We know, from reading Nehemiah's story, that it wasn't that simple. Like any rebuilding project, there were some important steps to carry out, and the journey wasn't smooth, by any means...

How Nehemiah got from “damage” to “being done:”

He got people to work with him

After his survey of the destroyed city walls, he called the people together and announced:

“You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.” Nehemiah 2:17

Textual Explanation

Many people assess the damage, then simply never take the first step toward rebuilding their broken lives. But not Nehemiah. He got a group of people to buy into a common vision, and inspired them to work with him to rebuild.

Timeless Principle

Rebuilding takes a team – it's often a big job that takes specialists in different areas, so it's not something to be tackled alone

Creative Teaching Tool

This reminds me of the TV show, *Extreme Makeover, Home Edition*. There are literally hundreds of people making each re-building project happen.

Show the “Let's do it!” part of one of the episodes, where the team of volunteers marches to the house and gets started on a renovation project.

Or, show a picture of that scene.



<http://abc.go.com/primetime/xtremehome/index?pn=index>

Application

Now, I'm not suggesting you ask hundreds of people to join in on helping you repair your credit rating or resolve your conflict with your teenagers, but if the problem is of disaster proportions,

call in the specialists and don't try to fix it alone. In the next week, I challenge you to take action to form your restoration team.

- Schedule that appointment with another couple or a marriage counselor.
- Set a lunch date with a trusted friend from whom you can receive guidance.
- Set an appointment with your boss.

He kept going in spite of obstacles

Nehemiah and his team had to overcome several roadblocks along the way in their rebuilding project. They were ridiculed by outsiders, discouraged by the enormity of the task, and distracted by other competing needs.

- **They were ridiculed by outsiders:** There were numerous attempts by Sanballat and Tobiah to intimidate Nehemiah to scare him away from the project. But Nehemiah prayed, and set up a system of defense.

Nehemiah 4:8-9, 17b

*They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it. ⁹ **But we prayed** to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat. ^{17b} Those who carried materials did their work with one hand and held a weapon in the other.*

Application Question: Are you letting the disbelief of other people convince you the rebuilding can't be done? Move "from damage to done" by praying and asking God to keep their words from having any power over you.

- **They were discouraged by the enormity of the task.** The work itself was so overwhelming and the mess so great, the people got discouraged at the halfway point. Nehemiah reminded them of God's protection and got them to return to work, and work more closely together for encouragement.

Nehemiah 4:10, 19-20

*¹⁰ Meanwhile, the people in Judah said, "The strength of the laborers is giving out, and there is so much rubble that we cannot rebuild the wall." ¹⁹ Then I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is extensive and spread out, and we are widely separated from each other along the wall. ²⁰ Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, **join us there. Our God will fight for us!**"*

Application Question: Are you discouraged because you think you'll never get all the work done? Move "from damage to done" by asking God to fight for you when you don't feel like you can keep going, and remember to lean on your "restoration team" for help and encouragement.

- **They were distracted by other competing needs.** The builders were hungry from not having enough money to pay taxes *and* buy food, so Nehemiah championed a tax break for them and set up a plan to feed them from his own pantry (5:6-19).

Nehemiah 5:4, 16a

⁴ *Still others were saying, "We have had to borrow money to pay the king's tax on our fields and vineyards..."* ^{7b} *I...then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, "You are exacting usury from your own countrymen!"* ^{10b} **...Let the exacting of usury stop!** ^{16a} *Furthermore, a hundred and fifty Jews and officials ate at my table.*

Application Question: Are you being distracted by other pressing needs? Take care of them as you go. Do you need to pick up the phone and call a person you have wounded and seek their forgiveness? Do you need to get your child a tutor for his schoolwork? Do you need to address problems your tenant is creating? Move “from damage to done” by taking care of some of the spinoff problems that are acting as roadblocks to getting your re-building done.

Closing

Remember that once the wall was completed, all the surrounding nations realized that the work had been completed with the help of God? There is no more powerful picture to a watching world of who God is than when he helps his people re-build after a disaster. What about you? What is God asking you to rebuild? What rubble surrounds you? Is there a project that has you down? A mess that you can't see how to get back to the way it used to be? Like Nehemiah, we need to pray regularly, assess the situation through God's eternal perspective, get to work with the help of friends and allies, persevere through the obstacles, and finish the job with God's help to achieve the purposes to which he has called us.

And if you're currently in the process of rebuilding and are discouraged, I want to encourage you to persevere. Don't give up! God used Nehemiah to restore the honor of his city, his people, and his name by rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem which had been destroyed generations earlier. God used William Wilberforce to abolish slavery and Martin Luther King, Jr. to change a culture. How will your community, your church, your corporation, your family, your world be more in alignment with the kingdom of God because of you?