

God's
Rebuilding Process
Repent, Return and Rebuild

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THERE'S WORK TO BE DONE

Jesus said "Upon this rock, I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18) and "If I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and take you with me to be where I am." (John 14:3). Peter said, "You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:5) Often this great verse is overlooked but among other things, it states that Christians need to be about the work of building or rebuilding. We are the spiritual stones who are being set together for God's purposes.

If there has ever been a time to be reminded of the truth that God is a builder, it's now. Sadly, many churches lie in a state of ruin today. Since God adds people to His church we are speaking of people, not buildings. For all mankind and especially Christians, the church is the most important and valuable thing that God has ever built. The construction of it cost Him the loss of His Son. As it lies in neglect in some places and in shambles in others, too many people are content to just hang in there and do very little.

On an even more personal basis for many, the walls of their own lives lie in ruin—destroyed by greed, lust, alcohol or other drugs, bitterness, hatred, selfishness, pride—you name it. God is looking for people to rebuild their walls. He is calling for leaders who will call others to action. Nehemiah responded to that call, he did exactly what God wanted him to do.

About 1000 BC at the death of King David, his son Solomon took the throne and reigned for 40 years. At Solomon's death, his son Rehoboam was made king. But Rehoboam was not nearly as wise as his father. In fact, he was a very poor leader. During the reign of Rehoboam, the kingdom split, never to be united again. Ten of the twelve tribes formed what was called the Northern Kingdom henceforth to be called the nation of Israel. The Northern Kingdom was led by one lecherous, no-good, idol-worshipping king after another until, in 721 B.C., the Northern Kingdom was overrun by the Assyrians. They never again appeared on the scene of history as a nation or as a people. They were lost forever.

The Southern Kingdom composed of two remaining tribes, Judah and Benjamin, was known as the nation of Judah. Judah fared a little bit better than Israel. Most of their kings also rebelled against God's will, and under the prophet Jeremiah, God said, "You are going to be taken captive, too." Sure enough, in 606 B.C. the mighty nation of Babylon came in and swept away thousands of captives and took them back home to Babylon. Twenty years after that, in 586 B.C., the Babylonians came again and this time, they desolated Jerusalem. They laid waste to the temple and the wall. Later Persia defeated the Babylonians.

But when God predicted Judah's captivity in the book of Jeremiah, God also said, 70 years later, "I'm going to bring you back home. I'm not going to let you stay there in perpetuity." In 536 B.C., exactly 70 years after the first exile, a man by the name of Zerubbabel led the first group of Jews back home, and they rebuilt the temple. You can read about this in the book of Ezra, chapters 1 through 6.

Eighty years after Zerubbabel led that first group back, in 458 B.C. a priest by the name of Ezra led another group of Jews home. He restores public worship and the reading of the law. However, many thousands of Jews stayed in exile in Persia.

In 445 B.C., our story begins in a town of Persia called Shushan. Shushan was the winter home of the Persian monarchs and Persia, and at this time, was the dominant power of the Middle Eastern world. Thousands and thousands of Jews are exiled in Persia. One of them is a man by the name of Nehemiah.

Many of the Jews had been back in their homeland for a long time by the time Nehemiah is ready to come back home. In fact, by the time we pick up with Nehemiah, the Jews have been back in Palestine for about 100 years. The question I would like to start with is: Wouldn't you think with the people, the Jews going back home, having a hundred years to resettle and to rebuild, don't you think you would have heard a glowing report about how excited they were about being back?

Such was not the case; "The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hachaliah. In the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year, while I was at the citadel of Shushan, Hanani, one of my brothers came from Judah with some other men and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile and also about Jerusalem." (Nehemiah 1:1) "They said to me, those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire." (Nehemiah 1:3) They have been there for a hundred years, but after all

this time, the Jews who have returned are living an insecure, vulnerable, cowering existence there at home, but they are still living like exiles.

If you were Nehemiah, what would it matter to you? After all you were born in captivity, you've never even seen Jerusalem, you've only heard about it. It's just ancient history. You've been an outsider to this Persian Empire, but you have climbed the ladder of success. You are now the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes! Now cup-bearer may not sound all that impressive to you. You may be thinking of a dishwasher or a waiter at a table or a butler. No. A cupbearer was a far more prominent and important than that. The most entrusted of the king's associates, the cupbearer, tasted the king's food and sipped of the king's wine before the king would ever consume it. In other words, he was the royal guinea pig for any assassination attempt, and in that day and time, there were plenty. Ancient historians tell us that no one other than the king's wife had as much influence on all of the king's decisions than the cupbearer. So, here Nehemiah is, a captive who has grown up in this culture and in the second most important position in the kingdom. Don't you think Nehemiah would have heard the report of the deplorable conditions in Palestine and just say, "that's a shame! Got to get back to work. Got to go cash another check!" Here's what Nehemiah did. "When I heard those things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of Heaven." (Nehemiah 1:4)

This is not a moment of nostalgia. It is a man in deep, deep anguish. What's going on in this man's head? Why is he concerned about a city he's never seen? Moreover, what's the big deal about a wall? Why would that bring you down to your knees? If we are going to understand together the book of Nehemiah, if we are going to see revival among God's people, including our own personal revival, understanding verse 4 is the key.

1. The broken wall said something about the reputation of his God. Jerusalem was known throughout the ancient world as the "city of the Jews." It was the place of their temple. Therefore, it was the dwelling place of their God, Jehovah. Even the pagans knew that.

"In Judah, God is known. His name is great in Israel. His tent is in Salem (Salem was the early name for Jerusalem.). His dwelling place is Zion." (Psalm 76:1-2) "By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our hearts, for there our captors asked us for song, our tormenters demanded songs of joy. They said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion'. How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" (Psalm 137:1-4)

To a Jew a song about Zion and a song about the Lord was the same thing. Because Zion was where God lived. Nehemiah felt the burden because he knew the people of the world were saying, "Who is this God of the Jews? We heard a long time ago, He parted the Red Sea. We heard about how He conquered kingdom after kingdom. Tell me, where is His home? Where is the home of His people? When you pointed to a heap of ruins, it mocked His name." That is Nehemiah's burden. God is not honored by ruins and Nehemiah knew that.

2. The broken wall said something about the condition of his people, and I think that's what really bothered him. After all these years of being home, his people are still living like exiles. Rather than restore and flourish in their city, they are living like jackals. They settle for a survival mentality rather than a revival mentality.

Nehemiah isn't as interested in a construction project as he is a consecration project. He didn't just desire to go to Jerusalem to rebuild walls—he wanted to go home to rebuild a people. That's his burden! So, here is this godly man who has a burden on his heart for the reputation of his God and the condition of his people.

Why was Nehemiah chosen, why did he go? Why did a cupbearer travel over a thousand miles of desert with supplies and equipment and materials when he wasn't even a contractor?

1. He had a heart that cared. This guy had socially arrived! He was the right-hand man to the most powerful man on the face of the earth. He could have stayed on easy street and said, "Hey! It's not my problem! Jerusalem is not my home and if those people want to wallow in spiritual squalor, just let them!" It's awfully easy for those who are successful financially to insulate themselves from the real problems of the world. But instead, Nehemiah took it into his heart and he made it his burden.

You never build up the broken until you feel the burden. Nehemiah did. God was looking for a man to mourn over His city. Until you find people who will mourn over that which is in ruins, you'll have no revival. May I sadly suggest that universally the reason we have more sightseers than we have builders in the church is that too many of us have hearts that haven't mourned in a long, long time. We just plug along, doing our own business with our nose to the ground seeing what is in front of us. We don't really see a ruined world like our God does. Nehemiah saw a city in ruins and he dropped down

to his knees.

When our hearts are broken over the things that break God's heart then we'll find a way to do what's right. You can talk all you want to about technique but it has no bearing. If your heart's broken over the things that breaks God's heart, you'll find a way to do what's right.

2. He had a life that was fair. Nehemiah would never have been the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes if he had not been a man of character. One of the great misconceptions in the world is that the foundation of leadership is charisma, not character. Charisma may shoot you to the top, but character will keep you there. It's true that God calls us wherever we may be but He calls us to be something better, and empowers us to be people of character. Without it, we cannot be used mightily by God. With it we will bless everybody we touch.

"Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." (Hebrews 13:7) I think that's a call to Christian character! You look at the leaders who spoke and who lived God's Word. You look at their way of life, and you imitate it. Nehemiah was called because he was a man who was honest and fair.

3. He was a man of prayer. "For some days, I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of Heaven." (Nehemiah 1:4) Do you want to know how many of "some days" were? "In the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year." (Nehemiah 1:1) That was when he heard the report. "In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes" (Nehemiah 2:1)

he goes before the king. In other words, we can tell what that is—that's four months. For four months, this man has been praying to God. One of the greatest needs of most churches and Christians is to rebuild the walls of prayer. I'm afraid that most of us have gotten accustomed to living without those walls. Nehemiah grieved and prayed for four months because he believed in the power of prayer.

Are the walls of your prayer life in neglect? God uses the person who cares. He uses the person who is fair, He uses the person of prayer.

4. He had the will to dare. As we will see in our study, Nehemiah was going to leave his comfort zone and start a revival. That's the lesson of the incarnation, isn't it? That's the story of Jesus. If you are going to do a great work for God, you can't stay where it's easy.

Building will always be harder, more challenging, and more costly than sightseeing. But staying comfortable will never be an option for the one whose heart breaks at the things that break the heart of God.

Nehemiah couldn't stay where it was easy. He said, "Here am I, send me!" He had the job everybody wanted. The problem was a thousand miles away, across the desert, and a place he had never seen. He says, "I'll go, I'll go. I'm not a contractor, I'm a cupbearer, but somebody has to build the wall. I'll go."

We all have walls that need to be repaired. Don't we? For many of us it is a wall of prayer.

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