

SERMON ON NEHEMIAH

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Nehemiah was a wall builder – he was involved in a construction project.
How many of you have ever been involved either in building a new house, remodeling, renovation, or some kind of construction? Anybody here? Did you all get it done ahead of schedule? There is something about construction projects. They're often a challenge – and they never get done ahead of schedule..

Nehemiah found that to be the case. He was serving the King of Persia in the 5th century BC. 500 years before Christ. Israel had been defeated over a century earlier, and they had been scattered in the ancient world.

But Israel had always had a dream; that dream was that God would build a community through his people by which he would bless all the nations of the world.

But now it seemed that all was lost.
In Nehemiah's day, some Israelites have been allowed to return to the Holy Land. People started to get their hopes back up.

Maybe this would be the rebirth of the dream...the rebirth of the community they longed for – the temple has been rebuilt, Ezra is hanging around helping the people...

But Nehemiah gets word one day that
The Jerusalem people are returning to, their sacred city, is in ruins.
The city walls has broken down, so they have no security, and the people who returned are living in fear of being attacked.

The people are in despair.
The broken wall is a big, big deal.
In the ancient world, the wall is what made the city a safe place to live.
That meant there could be commerce.
There could be trade. There could be work. There could be prosperity.
Without walls, there's fear, there's violence, there's hunger, and worse than that for Nehemiah, there's spiritual poverty.

He says the people are not just in great trouble because of the ruins...notice this...**they're in disgrace.**
They're spiritually in ruins as well.
They wonder, "**Where is God? Are we still God's people?**" They don't know. I just want to pause to say we live in a world of broken walls all over the place: communities, peoples, families.

Nehemiah finds out about this and sits down and just cries his eyes out.
Not because he is a fragile character.
Do you know what Nehemiah's job was?
His job was to be the Cup
Bearer to the king.

Do you know what that meant?
His job was to taste all the food before the king ate it to see if it had been poisoned.
If Nehemiah died, then the king knew that he was not
Supposed, to eat the food.
So Nehemiah's wife never had to ask him, when he came home from work, if he'd had a good day!

If he came home from work, he'd had a good day!

Some of you think you have a high stress Silicon Valley job! You have no idea!

Nehemiah is not a tender soul, but the fact that the wall has broken down...that Jerusalem is in ruins...truly upsets him. For days, he can't eat; he can't sleep; he prays and mourns and fasts.

I want you to take a look at Nehemiah's prayer to help him carry out this building project... It's a rich and wonderful prayer...look at it...here is how he starts

'Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.

NOTICE. How does Nehemiah start? With the problem? No. He starts with how great and awesome God is.

He starts with the perspective that only the Holy Spirit can give us...that God is greater and more awesome than any problem we may face.

That's faith friends, and that is truth.

People who have the courage to do God's work have to know that any problem pales in comparison to who God is...

And then Nehemiah continues in his prayer...excerpts

"I confess the sins we Israelites have committed... We have acted very wickedly toward you. ...These are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand... Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man (the king) ."

And then, God gives him a vision.

And Nehemiah suddenly has hope and begins to think to himself...
What if we, as God's people, as God's community, rebuild the wall?

If we can rebuild the wall, then we can rebuild the city, cause it will be protected. And if we can rebuild the city, then God can restore our community.

And if God can restore our community, then we can fulfill our destiny.

We can be God's people again in the place where our ancestors worshipped, we too can worship. We can reclaim our destiny as God's chosen people defined by our faith in him, and our rededication to following his law for us.

Nehemiah prays about this problem.

The thing about Nehemiah though is that after he prays, he does something.

He doesn't just think about doing it – he actually makes it happen...

**Some people make things happen,
some people watch things happen,
and some people wonder what just happened?**

Nehemiah does something because he feels called by God to this problem...

How many of you here have a problem? Just one problem...

How many of you are sitting next to someone *who you know has a real problem...or happens to be your problem?*

(If any one doesn't have a problem by the way, you can call the church office and we have plenty of problems and we would be happy to assign you one...)

Anyway, you want to know something that characterizes people who love God...you know what it is?

**They take on the problems God calls them to
They don't avoid them...they embrace them**

A lot of people ask me...what problem does God want me to take on?

"What problem should I devote myself to?"

It's part of wanting to know, "What is God's will for my life?"

Here's what you need to know.

It's key to this message of Nehemiah for us today.

Very often, a sense of calling – God's purpose for you - comes when you begin to pay attention to what moves your heart.

Not just that endless list of troubles out there - but what genuinely moves me?

What genuinely causes me to have that gut wrenching sense that something has to be done.

That's what it was like for Nehemiah.

It was this gut wrenching sense that his city and his people could lie in ruins no longer.

That's why he prays what he prays, and that's when he begins to realize the vision and thinks...we can do this!

We can fix this problem – God, and I and the people working together

Now I want you to know that Nehemiah was strengthened by God to show tremendous courage

Remember, he didn't just run out and do something

His prayer time lasted for about 4 months before he acted

And then remember I told you he was cup bearer to the king

And one day the king noticed that Nehemiah was looking very sad

If you were the cup bearer to the king, you didn't want to look sad or upset, because it might mean you were disloyal

If you were disloyal you could poison the king's cup yourself...it didn't look good to show negative emotion in front of the king when you were the king's cup bearer

But Nehemiah does. I believe he chooses to let the king see his sadness – because four months prior when he heard the news initially about Jerusalem being in ruins he didn't – but now he does.

Here is a scripture from Nehemiah about this.

"In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, 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, but I said to the king, 'May the king live forever!'"

"Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

Nehemiah very much afraid

Cause In that day, if you got terminated, you got terminated. In that role, if the king asked you as the cupbearer,

"Hey, cupbearer, how are you doing?" you had one response: "This is the best day of my life, sir. I live for

this, sir. It would be an honor to take poison in your place, sir."

To deliberately display his sadness, his discontent, before the king was a life-threatening risk, and Nehemiah knows that, and Nehemiah does it, and the king notices, and the king says,

"Hey, Nehemiah.

Are you not happy in your job? Should we talk?"

Nehemiah says not, "I was afraid," and not, "I was much afraid," but "I was very much afraid..." You bet he was!

But he gulps, and he describes conditions in his hometown to the king.

You will notice Nehemiah never mentions

the name Jerusalem to the king, and there's a reason.

Again, he's navigating a minefield here. Jerusalem is the capital of a country Persia runs.

If Jerusalem gets rebuilt, it might encourage the people to say, "We can revolt against Persia and become independent again."

As a matter of fact, there has already been at least one attempt to rebuild Jerusalem.

It's written about in the book of Ezra.

Ezra and Nehemiah are two books right next to each other.

They go together talking about the same time in history.

The very king who ordered that the rebuilding of Jerusalem to stop the first time was precisely this same king, Artaxerxes – the one to whom Nehemiah was cup bearer. This king wrote the letter that we have in Ezra 4 where he said.

"Now issue an order to these men to stop work, so that this city [Jerusalem] will not be rebuilt until I so order. Be careful not to neglect this matter. Why let this threat grow, to the detriment of the royal interests?"

Nehemiah is not just being sad in front of the king. He's saying to the king, "I think you made a policy mistake about that city. I think you ought to reverse your decision."

Cupbearers did not say that to kings back in the day.

That's what's going on in this story.

That's why it's so scary for Nehemiah

He just put his life on the line to tell the king he's made a mistake, and there's silence for who knows how long. Then Nehemiah writes, **"The king said to me, 'What is it you want?'"**

What would you do at that moment?

"Then I prayed to the God of heaven, 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 ancestors are buried

so that I can rebuild it."

Nehemiah's first prayer back in the first chapter went on all day and night for four months. How long do you think this second prayer was?

Less than a second. Just a flash prayer. Ever do a flash prayer?

Help me Jesus!

Lord have mercy!

Dear God what do I say to this person? Flash prayers are in the Bible. You got one right here, and it really worked!

More silence.

"Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, 'How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?' It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time."

This is a huge moment! Yay God.

You answered my prayer.

If it would have been me... If I was Nehemiah, I would have gotten so excited to still be alive (let alone to get a "Yes" from the king) I would have run out of that room saying thank you GOD all the way – I am still alive and I am so out of here.

Not Nehemiah. Nehemiah has been strengthened in the Holy Spirit for this call...

This is what he writes. **"I also said to him..."**

You have to

love that! He's asking for more...

"King, as long as we're on the topic and you're in the mood to say yes and I'm on a roll, I have a little list of things I'd like here."

"I also said to him, 'If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah?'"

When he asked for

safe-conduct, he's essentially asking for a military escort. He's asking the king of Persia, "Will you put Persian military might at my disposal to ensure the safety of my trip and this project?" And he doesn't stop there!

He also said to the king, **"And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park...so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?"**

Nehemiah will stop at nothing!

Basically he is saying...

"Hey, king! Can I have the royal platinum credit card? I want to stop by Home Depot and have the Persian Empire pick up the tab for this whole project."

Nehemiah does this, even though he was afraid. Much afraid. Very much afraid.

He had a problem, and his problem was bigger than him.

But not bigger than his God-given vision of a renewed rebuilt Jerusalem...and not bigger than the awesome God he served.

That's the reality he's living in, and that's what moves him to say, *"King, I'd like some time off.*

I'd like to have a police escort with

cooperation, and I'd like to have you pay for the temple citadel so we can worship and the city walls so we can flourish. Then I'll need a house to live in too."

"And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests."

Unbelievable miracle.

Nehemiah had prayed, he had sought the Lord, he had felt the anguish in his spirit that was the call of God for him to embrace this problem (take it on), and he stepped forth in faith with great courage (just like Esther) given to him by the Holy Spirit. And what was the upshot?

The walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt.

There were a lot of challenges to overcome...but in the end it was accomplished. In the end the people heard God's law read and recommitted themselves to Yahweh...and they knew once again they were God's people reestablished as a nation...

Do you know the secret of how they did it?

Everybody had a part

Some stood guard;

Some helped in the design;

Some fetched water—.

Everybody grabbed a brick.

Everybody had a part to play.

And as scripture tells us **“the people worked at it with all their heart”....**

Spiritually speaking, We're on a construction project here at WVPC.

We're into building things up....we're into building things up with all of our heart

Always have been, always will be

Our “wall” that we're building here, through the power of the HS is meant to bring about changed lives...

The wall that we are building symbolizes God's work of transformation

Every time we make a difference and reach out

Every time a marriage is put back together...

Every time a child finds out God loves him or her...

Whenever a youth goes to House Boats and gets touched by God's presence...or asks Jesus into their heart

Or the compassion of Jesus gets the better of us and we sacrifice in service

Or someone comes to worship and is aware in a new way of Jesus' love or call on their life

When a neighbor you thought would never darken the door of a church comes in here and senses God's presence...

We're building the wall of a difference making community that, through our prayers, connection, and shared vision,

Brings hope...and rebuilds the ruins in people's lives

There's no greater calling than this, because

We are the church of the living God and...

We have a Nehemiah, and His name is Jesus.

He's the one who leads our church...leads our construction project

And as we said, construction projects that make a difference can be a challenge

But when we start

to think that it can't be done, He's the one who says to us,

You can do it. Keep reaching out. Keep building up. I'm right here with you. Have courage! I am bigger than the problem at hand. And through me you will build, for my kingdom...

Don't be afraid...and even if you are trust me. I am a great big God and I will supply every need of yours. Step forward, take a brick, get involved, and give your all.

I have asked session to come up....and close us in a responsive reading for our church.

These are your leaders who are dedicated and excited about the future here...

There is so much building for the kingdom that is going on all the time...I hear good stuff everyday

Just yesterday I heard that our Crash Zone kids – Crash Zone is our after school middle school program – 20-30 kids in it every week – they were asking that the Bible study that had been voluntary and discontinued because their leader left – start up again.

Jr High kids asking for Bible Study!
And someone who has the courage to lead it -

That's almost a bigger miracle than Nehemiah's wall!
Friends lets rebuild the ruins, let's have courage, and let's move forward with great vision, faith and confidence in our great and awesome God who called Nehemiah, and who calls us today.