

# WESTWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH/APRIL 18, 2010

## WHOLENESS/NEHEMIAH 1-6, EXCERPTED

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### I. THE TEXT

Nehemiah... not exactly the best-known figure of the Bible. Most of us know at least some of David's story [at the very least the giant, the slingshot and that little incident with Bathsheba]. We could chat for quite some time about Moses' story [the burning bush and the Red Sea parting – the part of his story immortalized at Universal Studios]. But Nehemiah? Fourteen pages of obscurity on our way to the Psalms. And why bring him into Easter season? Well, sometimes behind obscurity there is an important story. Nehemiah's is one of those. It begins with a problem... reading from chapter 1, verses 1-3...

*The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, <sup>2</sup>one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>They replied, 'The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.'*

Nehemiah receives the devastating news that the Jerusalem city wall is destroyed. We don't really understand the ancient world's emotional connection to a city. It was their place of safety, it was the home of their gods, it reflected their soul. For the Jews, Jerusalem was everything – their heart's home, it was where they most intensely encountered God. That emotional connection is played out even today in Jerusalem as Arab and Israeli struggle to share their sacred city. We don't fully understand it. But for Nehemiah, a defenseless, broken-down city wall was devastating. Imagine having arrived at church this morning to find it completely gutted by fire... charred cement, the roof gone, our stained glass shattered... that would evoke emotion for all of us.

Amplify that by a thousand and we get an idea of how Nehemiah felt... the city of God, the heart of his people lay in ruins... Nehemiah's story is the ancient story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. A city without walls was weak, defenseless and disgraced, it's people vulnerable and humiliated, and Nehemiah, a Jew — with many good reasons not to get involved... does. He begins by doing what does not come naturally: he looks into his own heart first. Hear Nehemiah's response to the news of Jerusalem's devastation, beginning with verse 4...

*<sup>4</sup>When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup>I said, 'O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; <sup>6</sup>let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. <sup>7</sup>We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. <sup>8</sup>Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; <sup>9</sup>but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name." <sup>10</sup>They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. <sup>11</sup>O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!'*

The wonderful story of how Nehemiah rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem continues for the next 6 chapters until we come to the story's conclusion in chapter 6, verses 15-16...

*<sup>15</sup> So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days. <sup>16</sup> And when all our enemies heard of it, all the nations around us were afraid and fell greatly in their own esteem; for they perceived that this work had been accomplished with the help of our God.*

It is a remarkable story of a journey from the rubble and despair of chapter one to the restoration of chapter six. Nehemiah's story helps us understand how it is possible to move from ruin to renewal... from brokenness to wholeness.

**II. PRAYER:** May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, o God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

### III. THE CASE FOR REBUILDING

What do you do when your life or parts of your life are in ruin? Brokenness comes in many forms – we feel them even now in our souls, the things that eat at us, things we carry around like little lead weights in our hearts. We each have our own broken places... painful relationships, self-destructive behaviors, resentments, bitterness we cannot seem to get past. Perhaps you, like the people of Israel, have at one time or another felt vulnerable and powerless, maybe even on the edge of despair. What do you do? It is not only a personal problem – nations break, communities crumble away... what do you do? Families fray. Even churches totter at times; pastors aren't perfect, members get crossways with one another – what do you do?

As we scan our culture we quickly spot several popular alternatives for dealing with the broken places of life – and they often move in this order:

- Denial – this is the ignore it and hope it gets better approach. If I just say it's not there it won't be a problem.
- Avoid – this is the “hey, that's not **my** responsibility” approach... let someone else deal with it.
- Blame – this is the “victim” approach – “look what those bad people have done.”
- Or, there is the cut-and-run response. When all else fails, when facing the difficult moments is simply too much, we just slip away.

None of these methods does anything more than keep us pinned in the rubble of our brokenness.

Taking our sacred text seriously, the gift of Nehemiah's story is in offering us the example of a different, although difficult, response... For movie-goers we might call it the “Stand and Deliver” approach, for Dodger fans the “Step up to the Plate” approach. Even Lance Armstrong's Livestrong website has an entire page on taking personal responsibility. Perhaps it is not its brevity, but its call to personal responsibility that has kept the Book of Nehemiah so obscure. It is not shy in suggesting what it takes to make life whole.

### IV. THE ANCIENT STORY

Centuries earlier Nehemiah's people had been carted off into exile and now he, a Jew, finds himself in a position of importance in the court of the king of Persia. One day Nehemiah's brother arrives – all the way from Jerusalem. Their conversation naturally turns to home... the report is not good. Jerusalem is in distress... the protective wall is a shambles, the community is defenseless, it is living a nightmare with no clear way out. Bleak news indeed – what would Nehemiah do?

He could pretend he hadn't heard a thing; he could claim it was not **his** problem – he wasn't even there; he could fly into a rage at his brother for letting such a thing happen and shoot the

messenger; he could go back to the wine cellar and let his brother fend for himself. Yes, deny, avoid, blame and run were options for Nehemiah just like they are for us in the face of brokenness.

So, what did he do? Let me read again verse 4 of chapter one...

*When I heard all this, I sat down and wept. For several days I mourned and did not eat. I prayed to God, 'Lord God of Heaven! You are great and we stand in fear of you. You faithfully keep your covenant with those who love you and do what you command. Look at me Lord, and hear my prayer, as I pray day and night.'*

The first thing Nehemiah does is to take the brokenness seriously and personally... he owns it. Nehemiah honestly faces the truth of the situation, and pours his heart out to God. Always a good beginning place. As did Nehemiah, we make the decision to get real and honest about the brokenness... we weep and grieve and talk to God. But Nehemiah doesn't stop there, his prayer continues – *"I confess... both I and my family have sinned. <sup>7</sup>We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments..."*

For many of us these are not easy words to speak. In other words – Nehemiah says, some of this is in fact my fault – there is no blaming, no sloughing everything off on that dastardly Persian army or those weaklings who couldn't put up a fight. There is no attempt either to excuse or to blame others... instead, Nehemiah takes a good long look at himself and acknowledges his own wrong, his own participation in the situation. That can be pretty unpleasant work... but if we don't ask how we are part of the problem, the brokenness never gets mended.

In prayer, Nehemiah does three difficult, necessary and faithful things – he faces the brokenness honestly, he confesses his own participation in the problem, and then he lets God make him a part of the solution. Nehemiah simply asks God for specific help in his plan to mend the broken walls. His prayer continues... *Listen now to my prayer and to the prayers of all your other servants who want to honor you. Give me success this day...*

He asks for grace and strength to take a beginning step on the road to rebuilding the walls, to restoring a sense of hope and community for his people. If the broken places of our lives and our communities will ever be restored, it will be because each of us has taken a first step. Tolstoy famously wrote: "Everyone thinks of changing the world, but no one thinks of changing himself." We must – simple as it may seem – start somewhere. Maybe it is an apology or an explanation. Maybe it is giving up a self-defeating practice, or asking for advice and accountability. We can't guarantee success by trying, but we can guarantee failure by not trying. To get to chapter six, you have to start at chapter one.

The rest of Nehemiah's story is a fascinating recounting of all of the rest of the steps that it took to get the ruins rebuilt. It required the courage to make a decision and the humility to ask for help... but the job got done... and it all started in the heart of one man who was willing to do the hard work of looking first at his own life, who took responsibility, and then gave himself over to the work of a Easter God who specializes in resurrections.

We come again to chapter six... *After 52 days of work the entire wall was finished...* For the Jews this was the restoration of peace, of community, of life as it is intended to be.

## **V. REBUILDING**

In her book "Traveling Mercies" Ann Lamott tells of a broken down place in her own life... a broken relationship with a woman she actually had come to hate... the mother of one of her young son Sam's class mates. Everything about this woman felt offensive to Ann – [the enemy, as Ann calls her] always dressed like she had just come from a workout with her personal trainer – while Ann reports that she forgot to start working out after her son was born. Ann's first-grade

son had a hard time reading, the enemy's son was reading way ahead of schedule. The enemy not only showed up on time to pick her son up from school, but always drove for class field trips... Ann sometimes showed up late to pick up her son and just couldn't carve out field trip time. The enemy even baked homemade cupcakes for the first grade farewell party, Ann brought cupcakes purchased from the neighborhood Safeway.

Ann's walls crumbled into contempt for this woman – this woman who was so superior, so competitive, so condescending. But Ann didn't like what her hate was doing to her and so she, a Christian who attends a small Presbyterian church in Marin City, decided to ask God for help with this ugly situation. One day Ann was sitting reluctantly in the enemy's home – their sons were friends. And Ann was self-righteously refusing the enemy's offers of tea and muffins... when right there in the living room Ann had a revelation... the help she had asked God for, arrived. In Ann's words:

"I finally got it. The veil dropped. I got it that I am mad as a hatter. I saw that *I* was the one worried that my child wasn't doing well enough in school. That *I* was the one who thought *I* was out of shape. And that *I* was trying to get her to carry all this [ugliness] for me because it hurt too much to carry it myself.

I wanted to kiss her on both cheeks, apologize for all the contempt I'd been spewing out...all the bad [stuff] I'd been putting on her by thinking she was the one doing all the harm... [But this was about me.] [and here she was] *She* was the one pouring *me* more tea, she was the one who'd been taking care of my son... [this was about me, not her.]

I felt so happy there in her living room that I got drunk on her tea. I started speaking sweetly to everyone – to her, to the boys. And my sweet voice started [spilling] all over me, like sunlight, like the smell of the [pastry] baking in her oven, two of which she put on a paper plate and covered with tin foil for me and Sam to take home... [OK,] now, obviously the woman has a little baking disorder."

Ann has rebuilt the wall, the city that holds them both... she concludes with this celebration... "And I am glad."

## **VI. OUR RESPONSE?**

Who of us is without some rubble in his or her life? And who among us would not like to be made whole? From Nehemiah some 400 years before the Common Era, to Ann Lamott, to you and me some 2,000 years after, the process is the same and it has Easter's resurrection written all over it... The formula is simple, but not easy: to move from rubble to restoration you refuse to deny, avoid, blame or run. Instead, you face it, you own it, you confess it, and – then with God's help and in God's ways – you do all you can to change, to rebuild what you can. Nehemiah rebuilt broken walls through honesty, prayer and the help of his countrymen. Ann Lamott rebuilt the rubble through honest self-reflection, prayer and the lessons learned in the little church she attends every Sunday near her home. Face it, own it, confess it, and – then with God's help and in God's ways – change it.

This is how cities and churches, families and our own lives are rebuilt and restored and sustained. It just takes a little faith, a little courage, and a God-shaped vision of what life ought to be.

**VII. PRAYER:** Lord, we long to be whole... to build up what has broken down. Whatever our broken places may be, grant us the courage to face them and move through the rubble to the lives and communities that are stronger than ever. To the hard work of rebuilding we commit ourselves... in the name of Christ... **AMEN AND AMEN.**