

Rise and Build, Nehemiah 2:11-20

Illustration: In the winter of 1940-1941, before Pearl Harbor brought America into what would become World War II, mail arrived on the desk of a United States Senator detailing waste and profiteering at a new military camp going up in the Senator's home state.

The Senator was Harry Truman. In the first few months of his work, Truman was commonly known not as the Senator from Missouri, but the "Senator from Pendergast" — T.J. Pendergast being the corrupt Kansas City politician whose political machine first selected Truman for public office.

Had Senator Truman been the "go-along, get-along" politician most Washington insiders had taken him for, he would have let the disturbing letters go. But T.J. Pendergast—who would go to jail for tax evasion and later gamble away his ill-gotten fortune — had given Truman probably the best advice ever spoken to a newly elected Senator: "Work hard, keep your mouth shut, and answer your mail."

Truman did all three, and he learned more and more about widespread waste and corruption in America's build-up in what President Roosevelt called an "Arsenal of Democracy." At the time, the country was working to supply England in its desperate battle with Germany.

Incensed by what he read, Truman decided to investigate the matter for himself. He got in a car and drove around the country, alone. He drove an estimated 10,000 miles on the trip, taking two-lane roads as far south as Florida, through the Midwest and on into Michigan, visiting plants and military installations, taking notes on what he saw with his own eyes. He took no aides, he hired no planes, he visited no golf courses and he stayed in no first-rate hotels.

What Truman saw was even worse than the letters had described. Contractors were paid cost-plus to build plants and warehouse—and so they not only inflated their costs, but they built things badly. Surplus equipment was left out in the snow, to rust, owing to no controls and no accountability. Surplus workers with nothing to do were getting paid to sit around playing cards and smoking.

Truman came back to Washington and reported his findings to President Roosevelt, but no action was taken. So the Senator from Missouri made his own report to the Senate, reporting what he'd seen with his own eyes on a 10,000-mile road trip. It was a bombshell, and it changed everything, not only for Truman but for the country as a whole. It was a road trip that truly changed our nation.

The Senate established what became known as The Truman Committee to look into waste and excess in the war boom. The Truman Committee produced 50 reports over time, exposing flaws and suggesting steps to shore up the American war effort. Truman's work saved the country some \$15 billion, and more importantly, untold thousands of lives of the men who would soon be using the machines of war after America soon joined World War II.

And one other thing. Harry Truman isn't known today as the Senator from Pendergast, or even the Senator from Missouri. Instead, he is known as one of the greatest Presidents America has ever known.

Source: Harry Truman's Drive, taken from "Jeff Matthews is not making this up" blog. Also from "Truman," the biography of the president by David McCullough.

It didn't take Nehemiah nearly as long to ride around Jerusalem, but he did, indeed ride around his city. With a Harry-Truman-like determination, Nehemiah rode a horse around the ruins of his beloved city, at night, alone, and took notes. When he came back, he made his report. He took hold of the problem, cast a vision, and started a great process of change. Like Harry Truman's road trip, Nehemiah's shorter journey changed his nation, too.

In addition to sparking the rebirth of a great city, Nehemiah landed a place in God's history as one of the heroes of the Bible. In other words, he thrived in the midst of difficult times. While all around him seemed to be satisfied with just surviving, Nehemiah excelled. He thrived. He was the Bible's version of Harry Truman, you might say, but thankfully, the buck didn't stop there. It continues on, right to this moment, and you and I have the same opportunity to thrive in lean times if we will have the same trust in God that Nehemiah did.

God gave to Nehemiah a vision for restoring Jerusalem and so Nehemiah followed that vision and challenged the people to join him in the work.

Let's see how that happened:

I. Consider God's Vision. (Neh. 2:11-15)

Turn to chapter 2 and let's begin reading in verse 11 of chapter 2.

11 So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days.

12 Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem; nor was there any animal with me, except the one on which I rode.

13 And I went out by night through the Valley Gate to the Serpent Well and the Refuse Gate, and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were burned with fire.

14 Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal under me to pass.

15 So I went up in the night by the valley, and viewed the wall; then I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned.

Notice what Nehemiah did here: He explored the situation. He was surveying the job. Nehemiah got a realistic picture of the task before him.

What did he find? Well...he found the wall in shambles: **"the walls of Jerusalem ... were broken down and its gates which were burned with fire"** (v. 13).

Before we can get a clear picture from God of where He wants us to go, we must have a clear picture of where we are now. We must see the mess we are in.

After our worship service a couple weeks ago Derek pointed out to me some of the parallels between Nehemiah and Jesus. One of those is that like Nehemiah, Jesus came to Jerusalem and viewed the city. Nehemiah saw the physical condition of the walls, they were broken. Jesus saw the spiritual condition of the people, they were also broken. Luke tells us that as Jesus approached Jerusalem, **"He saw the city and wept over it"** (Luke 19:41). And He said, **"If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For days will**

come upon you when your enemies will build an embankment around you, surround you and close you in on every side, and level you, and your children within you, to the ground; and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not know the time of your visitation."

Jesus saw the city, God's chosen people, and the spiritual mess that they were in. He saw how they would reject Him as their Messiah and King and as a result they would not know the way of peace. Their city, their walls would be destroyed again within a generation. Worse than that many of them would never receive the love of the Savior, forgiveness for their sins, or eternal life. They would die in their sin.

I wonder if we understand the spiritual mess we are in? We know that our country, our state, our community is in dark times financially; but do we see how dark is our world spiritually? We are losing a whole generation of young people to the world. The church in America is losing ground compared with the growth in population. We think we are okay because we are fairly comfortable. We have nice church buildings and good fellowship with one another. But what if we saw things from God's perspective? What if we really saw the hearts of people as God sees? What if you could see the sin that remains in my heart? What if the person next to you could see the sinful thoughts that come into your mind daily?

Do we know the mess we are in? If God does not act to revive us and work through us to reach our children and grandchildren and community with the good news of Jesus, in just a few years this church and many others like it could be called Ichabod Baptist Church, "the glory has departed" (1 Sam 4:21).

Oh, won't you today ask God to search your heart, to show you the wickedness that remains, to convict you of your spiritual laziness, to revive you again? Be honest with God about your spiritual condition. Here is a great prayer to take to God today: Psalm 139:23-24

Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

God wants to do so much more in your life and in our church than what we see today. God is in the business of rebuilding broken lives. He wants to use us to transform people's lives, to save the lost, to change our world. But we will never move forward on God's mission until we come to terms with the spiritual mess that we are in.

Verse 13 and verse 15 both say Nehemiah "**viewed the wall.**" The word "to view" or in NIV "to examine" is Shabar (saw-bar') which means not only to look at closely, but "*to wait expectantly with hope and patience.*"

Nehemiah looked at the broken walls. But instead of just seeing the destruction, he viewed them with an expectation of rebuilding. He had an expectant hope in what God could do. God gave him a vision of how the rebuilt walls would look. Vision is a picture of what we believe it will look like when we get there...When the walls are rebuilt.

If we are going to succeed at our mission.—And ultimately the core of our mission is The Great Commission, to reach and disciple people into the kingdom

of God—If we are going to succeed in our mission...then we must not only have a clear picture of the mess we are in, but we must have an idea about where we are going and what it will look like when we get there. We must know where God is leading us.

ILL Notebook: Vision (Reagan)

Some thought he was just a crazy old man, maybe a dreamer who mouthed platitudes but not really much of an intellect. Why, he fell asleep in meetings and let others do his work for him. But history has borne out this truth in the last several years, among the greatest American presidents, Ronald Reagan probably is one of them.

In the late summer of 1987, President Reagan stood in front of the Brandenburg Gate of the Berlin Wall and dared to voice what others considered only a wild dream. He said to the leader of the then Soviet Union, "Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" He concluded his speech by assuring Gorbachev and the world, "This wall will fall. For it cannot withstand faith. It cannot withstand truth. It cannot withstand freedom."

That wall had stood as a symbol of repression and separation for over 25 years. It seemed nothing could shake it. Reagan's was a wild dream maybe, but I think otherwise. President Reagan cast a vision for the future of how things could be. No one listening to his words would have believed that less than two-and-a-half years later, the world would watch with astonishment as joyous East Germans and West Germans took sledge, pick axe, and hammer to that monstrosity of tyranny and tore it down.

Nehemiah is going to do the same thing. Only instead of tearing down a wall, he is going to rebuild. He is going to paint a picture of the future. He is going to create a vision of Jerusalem's future possibilities.

So what did Nehemiah do?...What's the rest of the story?

II. Communicate God's Vision (Neh. 2:16-18).

Notice what Nehemiah does next. He can't solve this problem alone. Certainly he needs God's help. But also God called Nehemiah to rally others to the mission of restoration.

Let's read starting in v 16:

16 And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I had done; I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, or the others who did the work.

17 Then I said to them, "You see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire. Come and let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer be a reproach."

18 And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me, and also of the king's words that he had spoken to me. So they said, "Let us rise up and build." Then they set their hands to this good work.

Nehemiah communicated God's vision. He explained the findings of his exploration with others in v. 17. Although the people were living in the ruins, it took Nehemiah pointing it out for them to not only see the mess they were in, but also to see the God who could change it.

ILL: After clearing away the rubble from the destruction of the World Trade Center, New York City conducted a survey about rebuilding the Twin Towers. In that survey, roughly half the people said, "I believe the towers should be rebuilt just as they were. Maybe one story higher."

Another 25% said, "I believe that a different set of office buildings should be built on that same location." Another 25% said, "I believe we should build a memorial park in that location."

The point for me in that survey was that virtually one hundred percent of the people said, "We need to rebuild! Whatever it is, we need to rebuild something." There's something in all of us that says that we have to rebuild.

That's the message of Nehemiah. He says to the Jews, "With the help of God, we can rebuild this wall! We can rebuild this community! We can become a great nation once again!"

Even while the city was being destroyed, God had plans to rebuild. Jeremiah prophesied during the time Jerusalem was being destroyed. In Jeremiah 29:11 (NASB) God says: **"For I know the plans that I have for you,'.... declares the LORD, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity... to give you a future and a hope.'"**

Notice though that Nehemiah's focus is not on the problem, but on God's glory and God's power to accomplish the mission. Verse 18 says, **"And I told them of the hand of my God which had been good upon me."** He told his testimony of what God had done so far, and challenged them, with God's direction, **"Come and let us build"** (v. 17). He faced the problem but he faced it with faith in God!

III. Commit to the Vision of God (Neh. 2:18-20).

I love the response of the people. **"Let us rise up and build"** (v. 18).

I believe most churches in existence today fall into one of two categories.

There are RISE UP AND BUILD churches.

Then there are RECLINE AND DECLINE churches.

RISE UP AND BUILD churches have a clear vision of God's mission and a willingness to work in order to build the Kingdom.

RECLINE AND DECLINE churches are content with just trying to maintain what they have. The bad news is that you can never just jog in place spiritually. Either you are moving forward, or you are falling backward.

On Fridays I go over to the Fountains and have Bible study and prayer with Dorothy and a few others there at the assisted living facility. We are studying the Gospel of Mark. One thing I notice about Jesus in Mark is that He is almost always moving, going from place to place, preaching and healing. He is always moving. In John's gospel Jesus says, **"My Father is always at his work to this**

very day, and I, too, am working" (John 5:17 NIV). Jesus is always working, always moving forward. You cannot just stay where you are and go with Jesus.

The RECLINE AND DECLINE Church sounds like this:

We have never done it like that.

I like the way we have always done it.

That would cost too much.

We could never do that.

That is the craziest thing I have ever heard.

The RISE UP AND BUILD church sounds like this:

That's a great idea, let's pray about it.

With God's help I believe it could happen.

Let's pray about that and see how God provides.

We are willing to step out in faith.

I think we could reach people by doing this.

I think every pastor's dream is to lead a church where the people cheer...."RISE UP AND BUILD!" And perhaps every church's dream is the pastor who loves them and believes in God enough to say "With God's help, we can do it."

Now here is the tough question.....

Is success in our mission going to be a walk in the park? Was it a walk in the park for Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem? NO!

They hit some roadblocks along the pathway. They Faced opposition... particularly there were three guys Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem who allowed themselves to be the instruments of Satan and did all they could to stop the forward progress of the mission going forward.

Verse 19 reads, **"But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they laughed at us and despised us, and said, 'What is this thing that you are doing? Will you rebel against the king?'"**

I want you to know that God is always bigger than the Sanballats or Tobiahs or Geshems we face. If the people will focus on God and the mission... and NOT focus on or give place to the ones trying to muck up the whole mission then we shall succeed. But honestly....Yes...we can count on some opposition.

Someone once defined a Christian as someone who is completely fearless, continually cheerful, and constantly in trouble.

How do you overcome opposition?

Like Nehemiah did. Look at his response in verse 20: **"So I answered them, and said to them, 'The God of heaven Himself will prosper us; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no heritage or right or memorial in Jerusalem.'"**

What did Nehemiah do? He stayed focused on God and he stayed focused on the mission. Do not let opposition, or hard times, or trouble or anything else distract you from the call of God on your life. He has called you to be on-mission with Him. We can be a RISE UP and BUILD church if we will:

Stay Focused on Godand Stay Focused on the Mission.

Have you ever heard of the Christian singer Renee Bondi? Well, neither had I until I recently read her story. In 1988, she was a music teacher and a terrific Christian singer. And she was happily engaged to her fiancé Mike. Her wedding was just two months away.

But in a freak accident, she fell out of bed and broke her neck and the 4th vertebrae of her spinal cord. They took her to the hospital. And the doctors told her, "You'll never walk again. And you'll never sing again. You'll only be able to whisper."

But while she was in the hospital, one song kept going through her mind: "*Be not afraid. I go before you always. Come, follow me. And I will give you rest.*" It was God's way of telling her, "I'm going to help get you through this. You're going to be all right."

She got out of the hospital and she married her fiancé. And she worked hard at her therapy. One day a musician friend came over. And said, "Renee, try singing along with me on the piano."

And she started to cry. She whispered, "Jim, I can't do it." But Jim started playing, *Be not afraid. I go before you always*. The same song God used to comfort her in the hospital! How could he have known about that? So she started singing! And by the end of the song, they were both singing and sobbing. God had given Renee her voice back!

Since then, she has recorded five albums. In 1995, she became one of the few quadriplegics to give birth to a son. She travels all over the world telling people that God is the God of the impossible and that he can rebuild broken lives.

Maybe you are in the middle of a rebuilding project right now. Some of you are trying to rebuild the trust in your marriage. Or you may be trying to rebuild your career, or your finances, or your sense of confidence. And maybe you're starting to wonder if you're dealing with an impossible situation. But Luke 1:37 says "NOTHING is impossible with God!" God specializes in impossible situations!

Remember Nehemiah's enemies were saying, "You can't do it, it's impossible." But God made the impossible possible. God is in the business of rebuilding. Just as God rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. And Renee Bondi. God can rebuild the ruins of your life. Turn to Jesus, He is the savior, the builder of lives.

Maybe the next step on your rebuilding project is to become a part of this church family. God has given us a mission to proclaim the good news of Jesus and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them. If God is calling you here, He has a job for you to do, a place for you to serve. During our invitation time, the Lord Himself invites you to be a part of this church.