

CONSIDER THE TRICKY AND OFTEN UNPOPULAR  
**CALL TO RESTORATION**  
NEHEMIAH 2.1-20

Tucked into a crease in the Old Testament are two little books, Ezra and Nehemiah, that tell us most of what we know about Jewish history in the years after Jerusalem was leveled by the Babylonian forces of Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BC. Most of the Jews still alive after the destruction of Jerusalem were carted off into captivity and for almost 150 years Jerusalem is a pile of rubble. Things begin to change when the Persians come to power, and a few Jews make an attempt to rebuild Jerusalem. They fail. They fail because two local warlords write a fawning letter to the new Persian king claiming the Jews are planning a rebellion, and get permission to wipe out any progress toward restoration.

These locals, Sanballat and Tobiah, take their royal 'cease and desist' order as an excuse for a massacre, and book of Nehemiah starts as a band of Jews... possibly survivors... arrive in Susa, the winter capital of the Persian king. There they seek out Nehemiah, cupbearer to the king, also a Jew.

This is where we will pick up the story, and I'd invite you to listen not just for a few interesting facts from one of the darkest periods of Jewish history, but for more... for God's word to you: Nehemiah chapter 2

In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes (AR TAH SAS TA), when wine was served him, I carried the wine and gave it to the king. Now, I had never been sad in his presence before. <sup>2</sup> So the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This can only be sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid.

<sup>3</sup> I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors' graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" <sup>4</sup> Then the king said to me, "What do you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup> Then I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor with you, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my ancestors' graves, so that I may rebuild it." <sup>6</sup> The king said to me (the queen also was sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me, and I set him a date. <sup>7</sup> Then I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may grant me passage until I arrive in Judah; <sup>8</sup> and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, directing him to give me timber to make beams for the gates of the temple fortress, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the gracious hand of my God was upon me...

<sup>10</sup> When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

<sup>11</sup> So I came to Jerusalem and was there for three days. <sup>12</sup> Then I got up during the night, I and a few men with me... [and] I went out... by the Valley Gate past the Dragon's Spring and to the Dung Gate... and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire... I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest that were to do the work.

<sup>17</sup> Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." <sup>18</sup> I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me.

Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good.<sup>19</sup> But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, "What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"<sup>20</sup> Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historic right in Jerusalem."

As a culture collectively and individually, we love new things. Almost all of us, that is, love new things. New cars. New TVs. The latest fashions. The most recent Oprah or Janet Jackson diet. Toothpaste that not only fights cavities but freshens breath, whitens teeth and attacks gingivitis... whatever that is.



USA Today this week had an interesting article as a follow-up to the election... interesting because it didn't count electoral votes or demographic shifts or even mention the colors red and blue. Instead it was about the people who will try to cash in on the Obama buzz and turn the current crisis into a sales pitch. "You can participate in this history-changing moment" Carl Moog, an advertising psychologist says, "by buying the stuff Obama buys."

"Why that's horrific," we say, but before we vote Mr Moog off the island consider how true what he says probably is. A lot of people probably will pay attention to what our new president buys.

But it's not just as shoppers that we like what's new. We do much the same with relationships... thinking that surely the grass must be greener on the other side of the fence. We do it with new projects, new initiatives, new mission statements, new ideas.

Let me give you a personal example. If you've ever been in my office, you probably noticed I have a fair number of books... and there is just as many at home. But have I read them all? No.

There is always a new book coming out with the latest way to preach or teach or cook risotto. I buy it and I read the introduction and put it on the corner of my desk here at the church or next to my bed at home. The problem is that far too often before I get back to that book for chapter one, I hear about another book that I really should have and I buy it too. Karen, I suspect, might be planning an intervention.

But why am I telling you this as we continue our series on the call of God?

It is because I believe that even in terms of call we so often are drawn to what is new. And new might not be what God is calling you to. Bad grammar but a great point: new might not be what God is calling you to.

Instead, God's call in your life right now... like the call to Nehemiah... might be to something far more complicated and far less flashy work than something new. God's call to you might be to rebuilding and restoration... in your life and in our world.

What's new is always going to be grabbing the headlines and creating internet buzz, but our God is not a Madison Avenue god on a hip trip, and so often it is in the ruins of our lives and the ruins of our world that God does God's best work.





Where is the  
**rubble** in your life  
that God intends  
to be a wall again?

That is the story in the book of Nehemiah, and it is often the story of our lives too. Where is the rubble in your life that God intends to be a wall once again? Where is the rubble in your neighborhood? Where is the rubble at work? In your family or among your friends? Where is the rubble in our world?

Maybe that rubble... personal or global... has been there a while... maybe a long while. And maybe you've intentionally put geographic or social or emotional distance between you and your rubble.

And that isn't all... maybe you are good... really good... at the new that you do. Nehemiah was...

By the way, this might surprise you, but I think Nehemiah was **5<sup>th</sup> century BC foodie**. Given my personal fixation with food, I'm sure you will suspect me of bias and textual distortion here, but I think I'm actually on solid ground. We read that Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king. The cupbearer of the king served two functions... one was security... he was the one protecting the king from poison and as such should be classified as part of the Persian Secret Service. But his other function was to taste and approve the wine served the king so he needed to know his wines... think master sommelier. He needed a good palate and a great nose, and it would have been critical that he know about **food and wine pairings** such as what wine to serve with roasted quail and what paired best with sea bass or a leg of lamb. Believe it or not, archeologists working in modern Iraq actually uncovered a document that that confirms my suspicions...

I think Nehemiah was a foodie.



Admittedly it is not a critical point that I will now mine for theological truth, but I couldn't resist telling you. Actually, the key point is that Nehemiah had risen to a position of incredible influence. So surely it couldn't be God's intention for Nehemiah to give up this position in the political center of civilization to deal with a pile of rubble in one of the most irrelevant and insignificant patches of rock and dirt on the planet at that time. For that is exactly what Jerusalem would have looked like.

Today we read the whole Bible in light of the game-changing advent of Jesus Christ, but let's not overinflate the importance of the Judah and Jerusalem historically. Judah was never a big kingdom, was almost always on the historical margin, and at the moment God taps Nehemiah on the shoulder, the

decimated province of "Yehud" was all of 25 miles wide and 32 miles long with a pile of rubble in the middle.



If you think **Apple** was close to extinction before the introduction of the iPod, you ain't seen nothing yet. You want close to extinction? Think Judah in 445 BC when a band of beaten-down Jews managed to get an audience with the cupbearer of the Persian king.

And what happens next makes no sense geo-politically... this pile of rubble, better forgotten, breaks Nehemiah's heart and he begins to pray.

As a side note... **what is it that breaks your heart?** And is there any chance that this might be more than a sentimental soft spot for you? Any chance that what breaks your heart might be God calling?

That is what it was for Nehemiah and after four months of prayer he stepped into the king's presence and let his mask of professional proficiency fall so the king can see his grief.

I hope I'm doing justice to the story of this man whose first-person narrative is as much a prayer to God as an account of his amazing work to pull God's chosen people back from complete extinction.

I hope I'm doing justice to this story, because, like Nehemiah, God's call to you and to me might not be to build something new but instead to embrace the far more complicated and far less flashy work of the rebuilding and restoration in the rubble of our lives and our world.

And if this is the case, Nehemiah has some very practical help for us. Often we divide as people into two categories: thinkers and doers... those gifted at planning and those driven to act. The classic biblical example of this division would be Mary and Martha – one delighted to sit at Jesus feet while the other is whipping up crudité and cassoulet in the kitchen. Which are you by the way?

Pop quiz, forced choice – how many of you when you hear about a tragedy in someone life will first... A. offer to pray for them... or B. offer to bring over food? Obviously you can do both, but what is your first impulse?

Nehemiah defies this dichotomy. Read this book and you will see a man who prays AND acts. When he hears about Jerusalem broken down and destroyed by fire he weeps and begins to pray... very active prayer it would seem... and keeps it up for four months (while he continues to serve the king). And at the end of this time... even as he acts... asking the king for help... he is praying.

And talk about action... when the king asks what he is requesting there is no hesitation... he has done his homework. He knows how long it will take and sets a date. He knows what documents he needs and lists them. He knows what building materials are required and which Home Depot has them in stock.

And if God's call to you, like God's call to Nehemiah, is the far more complicated and far less flashy work of the rebuilding and restoration, you are going to need to **pray AND act** as well. Restoration Nehemiah style takes both.

Restoration Nehemiah style also means we will **refuse to work alone**. We can't rebuild anything of importance on our own. Obviously God needs to be involved, but not just God... others as well. After Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem and slips out at night to survey the damage, he gathers together the survivors and challenges them to join him. And in the rousing speech that follows, he recounts evidence of God at work and he quotes the Persian king. And he must have hit the rhetorical ball out of the park, because the very same Jews forced to abandon the walls earlier now rally and cry out "Let's start building!"

Rubble restoration lesson two: refuse to work alone. Refuse to work alone even if it is just rubble in your own life you are rebuilding.

And then three... also critical... **expect resistance**. I think the primary reason restoration and rebuilding in our lives is so complicated is that there is always resistance. That resistance might not be Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite and Geshem the Arab, but it will have a name.

Of course there can be resistance to new things too, so often the really entrenched resistance camps around the places of rubble in our lives.

John has been encouraging me to rent and watch the HBO miniseries Band of Brothers that follows a company of U.S. paratroopers during WWII. Based on interviews with survivors, the series captures both the intensity of war and the heroism of the troops.

And in one scene... a turning point in the war... they are fighting to hold back the Germans at the Battle of the Bulge, and a soldier leaving the front line pulls aside their leader, Lieutenant Richard Winters, and tells him ominously: "Looks like you guys are going to be surrounded."



Without hesitation Winters replies,  
**"We're paratroopers, Lieutenant.  
 We're supposed to be surrounded."**

This was exactly the case for Nehemiah. From the moment he arrived, he is under siege from the Sanballat in the north, Tobiah to the east, and Geshem to the south. They mock and ridicule the plan to rebuild. They threaten and begin spreading lies again about Jewish rebellion. And they plan attacks under cover of darkness. But Nehemiah refuses to leave Jerusalem in rubble and faces their resistance head on. Again we see him praying and acting and in the face of imminent attack, and he records that those on the wall "labored on the work with one hand and with the other held a weapon."

As you seek to rebuild and restore, you might need to do the same... for the rubble in our lives and our world seems to attract Horonites and Ammonites like flies... and they are big and they bite.

But they are no match for restoration Nehemiah style:

### **Pray and act. Refuse to work alone. Expect resistance.**

I guarantee it will be tricky and often will kill you in the opinion polls, but like Nehemiah, God's call to you today might not be to something new, but to the far more complicated and far less flashy work of the rebuilding and restoration in the rubble of your life and our world.

God used Nehemiah to do what no one had been able to up to that point: rebuild a wall... and more... save a people. How will God use you in the rubble of your life... in the rubble of our world? I can't wait to see.

### **Consider The Tricky and Often Unpopular Call to Restoration**

Sermon Series: The Call of God – The Response of the Faithful

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