

“When God Inspects the Foundations”

Nehemiah 2:11-18

Second in Series “A Time to Build”

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“So they committed themselves to the common good.”

- Nehemiah 2:18

Prayer of Preparation

O Lord, help us to build our lives on the rock of your Son Jesus Christ; help us to share in the work of your Holy Spirit and so serve as blessings to others. In Christ’s name, we pray: Amen.

Message

Last week we began a new sermon series on the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament. Nehemiah, as you may recall, led the mission to rebuild the city of Jerusalem after the Babylonian Exile. We spoke about how Nehemiah started his mission in prayer.¹

We learned how he was a leader who sought to live out his mission in humility and with wisdom. From the get-go, Nehemiah was about doing God’s will as part of a much larger effort. He had a sense that the work he was setting out to do was ultimately about God, not him. He was the kind of leader who was able to focus on, and accomplish, several things all at the same time. Not easy to do.

In fact, if you have time in the days ahead to watch Tom Hanks’ new movie *Greyhound* take the time. It is on Apple TV. It is an interesting portrayal of leadership under pressure, as Hanks seeks to guide a convoy of ships during WW II across the Atlantic Ocean to Great Britain, as he tries to protect the ships from German U-Boats.

Watching the movie, I could not help but draw some analogies to our current situation as we try to navigate the waters ahead. There are several things happening

¹ See Pastor Andy Kinsey’s sermon, “A Time to Build” (Nehemiah 1:4-11) at www.franklingrace.org.

all at once, and sometimes we just cannot see what is coming toward us, or even behind us! Often, like U-Boats, the problems surface when we least expect! At other times, the waters are just rough! There is not time to focus on what is fancy, just stick to the basics!

I think this is why Nehemiah is important. He keeps to the basics of life and leadership – like trust, humility, savvy, wisdom – and he stays grounded in prayer. He simply tries to take one-step at a time.²

What Nehemiah Does

Now our passage today reflects this kind of insight as Nehemiah finally arrives in Jerusalem to inspect the walls of the city (2:15). He goes at night, and he takes with him several people who know a little about construction and the layout of Jerusalem. What is interesting is that this event occurs some four months after his prayer in Chapter 1. In that chapter, it is the month of Chis-lev; at the beginning of Chapter 2, it is the month of Nisan; it has about four months apart – probably somewhere between November and March. I think that is interesting because we have been in the pandemic now for four or five months.

And here is Nehemiah! He has been praying for four months about taking action to rebuild the city. Not four minutes! Not four hours! Not four days! Not four weeks! Four months! All in prayer.

I wonder how we are coping with our prayer lives right now. Yes, we are living through a pandemic, and yes, even during this pandemic, we are living at what can feel like warp-speed. We have everything from instant coffee to instant mashed potatoes. But the Christian life is not about speed. It is not about instant gratification, but about perseverance, patience, persistence (Hebrews 12:1). How persistent are we in prayer? How patient?

I those questions because we are running a marathon, Grace Church! We are in a time when “slower is faster,” as one of my mentors used to say, where patience is a virtue! The coronavirus does not operate by calendar. It does not respond to what we say and when we say it. Hence, the need for persistence and patience.

² Thanks to James Merritt for this insight in the sermon “One Step at a Time” (Nehemiah 2:1-10) at www.esermons.com.

There is a need for us now to take stock in what truly matters and to trust God is with us, regardless of the timetable!

Nehemiah, I think, demonstrates this kind of wisdom and patience. He realizes he is not going to rebuild Jerusalem in a day! There is no magic bullet, only faithfulness amidst the challenges.

Personal Reflection

I think that this is an important point to share during this pandemic, and during this time in history: that there is such a thing as *God's time and our time*.

As a person who does not always practice patience, I think I can speak with some sense of confidence that I do not like to wait on God, or anyone else for that matter. Indeed, when God inspects my own heart, I am sure God sees a great deal of impatience. And yet, I have come to recognize over time that God's timing is typically, well, on time, the right time!

Paul says as much in Galatians when he writes, "When the time was right, God sent his own son" (Galatians 4:3). God does not operate on our timetable. God operates on God's timetable.

In other words, if we try to get too far ahead of God, we find ourselves out on a limb, and we can miss what God is doing. It is why we all need to develop, during this time, what I want to call "wild patience," and rightfully so! After all, it is the tortoise that usually wins!³

When God Places on the Heart

Maybe this is what God laid on Nehemiah's heart when we was inspecting the walls at night (2:12). Nehemiah was coming to grips with how long this was going to take. He was coming to realize how he was going to need the support of the people, the priests, and the governors, on the one hand, and, above all, God, on the other! He was realizing just how big the project was going to be! He was going to need to be prepared.

Indeed, one of the things I believe we need to understand during this season of our lives, when our timetables seem out of sync, is how God does not look down

³ Brian Harris, *The Tortoise Usually Wins* (London, UK: Paternoster, 2013).

upon good preparation, even now. There are things we need to be doing in any community, or any church, or in any family, that are part of the basics.

It is why I believe that Nehemiah provides an example of how we may proceed as he closely examines the walls of the city. That is, he tries to understand the facts on the ground. He is not in some bubble, as many of our leaders are, remote from the problem; rather, he is on the ruins. He is doing his homework. And he realizes that he can't do it all by himself. He is going to need help, and he is going to need a team to work with.

That is what I like about Nehemiah: before he begins the project he makes he sure God's hand is upon him, and that he has support.

Because, as Nehemiah says, the true work here is not just physical, it is spiritual: he is calling the people to inspect their own hearts. He does not want to see the people suffer disgrace again (2:17). He does not want them to go backwards. Instead, he wants them to get in line with what God is doing for the sake of the future.

Invitation to Build

And do you know what? The people respond with enthusiasm to what Nehemiah is saying. They want to begin building, and not just a physical foundation, but building for the common good (2:18). They are building not just for themselves, but for others, for those to come! For something bigger. For their children!

Maybe this is what God is calling us to do as well: to think of ways we can build for the common good!

As we have shared before, we *can* do things for others, even now. We *can* find ways to give and help. We *can* serve the Lord, even while apart. We *can* rediscover the true importance of our faith, of what really matters.

I make these statements because, if a pandemic does not prompt us to inspect our hearts as to what is ultimately important, I do not know what else will!

In other words, when God inspects our own spiritual foundations, what will God find? A house built on rocks or sand?⁴ Will the Lord discover commitment or

⁴ Matthew 7:24-27.

indifference? *When God inspects our hearts, what will God see? What kind of virtue or vice will God uncover?*

I believe that it was the Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who once wrote that “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in a lifetime; and it is why we must be saved by hope...and nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; and it is why we must be saved by love...and no virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our own standpoint; and it is why we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.”⁵

Nehemiah’s act of rebuilding the city is not about him; it is about God and the common good (2:18). It is about the future. It is about taking one-step at a time. It is about faith, hope, and love (1 Cor. 13).

Because ultimately, as Nehemiah reminds us, our work is to be about God’s work. It is about being in God’s hands. Ultimately, God is the One who makes the difference. God is the One who inspects the heart and the foundation of our lives.⁶

Our worries, our concerns, our projects, our hopes, our fears, our dreams, our future, our families – are ultimately in God’s hands. That’s good news! We are not alone! Christ is with us.

Our task is to walk with God: step-by-step, moment by moment, day by day – allowing God to build in us the kingdom, allowing God inspect the foundations of our lives...moment by moment, step by step. All for the sake of Christ! Amen.

⁵ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York, NY: Scribner’s Sons, 1952).

⁶ Thanks to James Merritt for this insight in the sermon “One Step at a Time” (Nehemiah 2:1-10) at www.esermons.com.