

NEHEMIAH

Part 2: “Catalyzing Change”

Nehemiah 2:9–20

By David A. Ritchie

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Scripture Reading

“Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King’s Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work. Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.’ And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ So they strengthened their hands for the good work. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, ‘What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?’ Then I replied to them, ‘The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem.’” (Nehemiah 2:9–20, ESV).

Introduction

We are continuing our study of the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah is a story of revival and renewal. It is a story about what the people of God can do when they unite together for a God-sized vision for restoration.

The book of Nehemiah takes its title from the main character—a Jewish man named Nehemiah. At the beginning of the story, Nehemiah is high ranking official in the royal court of Persia.

The time of Jewish exile has officially ended, but the once glorious city of Jerusalem lies in shambles and shame. Nehemiah hears a report of the brokenness of the Holy City, and it moves him to heartfelt prayer. He humbly confesses his own sin and the sin of his people, and he asks that God would give him favor to create change. Nehemiah, then, boldly asks the King of Persia for permission, provision, and power to rebuild the city. And he is granted his request.

But now what?

Nehemiah has made the deal. He landed the client. He got approval for his audacious vision. Now, he has to do something far more difficult than having a good idea—he has to make it *happen*.

Have you ever had an idea for a home improvement project or a new garden or a new project at work that can be a game-changer? There will always be giant obstacles that stand in the way of getting the ball rolling toward any type of positive change we seek to make in life. And the bigger the change, the bigger the obstacles.

Restoring Jerusalem is no easy task, especially for Nehemiah. The problem that Nehemiah is trying to solve is decades in the making. The root causes behind Jerusalem's destruction are centuries in the making. Nehemiah, in other words, is going against a lot of negative inertia.

Yet, astonishingly, while our passage starts with the situation unchanged, by the end of the chapter, a movement of restoration has been catalyzed and launched into action.

How does this happen?

In chemistry, a *catalyst* is an external agent that causes a reaction to accelerate. It accelerates change and transformation. Here in chapter 2, God uses Nehemiah's leadership as a catalyst for change both within the city of Jerusalem and among the people of God.

So, for the rest of our time today, we are going to talk about "*Catalyzing Change*" as it relates to loving our city and being faithful to our call as the people of God.

Exposition

1.) Anticipate Challenges and Plan to Overcome Them

Nehemiah gets permission to rebuild the walls. But as soon as positive change occurs, it is met by resistance. As soon as the status quo is threatened, the powers that be try to gravitationally pull Nehemiah away from his vision.

Look at the text: "*Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard*

this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel” (Neh 2:9–10).

Nehemiah has lived in Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire (located in modern-day Iran). Jerusalem is 760 miles away, in an outlying province known as the trans-Euphrates, or the province Beyond the River (see image [1Map of the Persian Empire](#)). This province was effectively ruled by governors—Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite—who seemed to enjoy bullying and taking advantage of the Jewish people.

But now, this uppity Jew named Nehemiah is going to disturb Sanballat and Tobiah’s comfortable lives. It distresses them that some would seek the good and the welfare of the people of God.

In the story of Nehemiah, Sanballat and Tobiah often represent the spiritual powers of darkness that seek to enslave us in old, self-destructive, self-defeating patterns of life.

Normally, they could use their limited authority to keep any unwelcome visitors out of their domain. They are gang lords who can guard their territory by threats, intimidation, and violence.

But their normal tactics don’t work on Nehemiah. Why? Because Nehemiah rolls up with officers and horseman. Even more, he has letters from the King of Persia himself that grant Nehemiah authority in this territory.

Why did Nehemiah have these letters? Just a few verses before Nehemiah asked that king would give him this very thing: *“And 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 let me pass through until I come to Judah”* (Neh 2:7).

Nehemiah is not surprised by the resistance he faces almost immediately. In fact, he anticipated challenges, and he made a plan to overcome them! And he overcame them by receiving an authority that lay outside of himself—an authority that was received while standing in the royal court of the king.

When you try to catalyze positive change in your life—when we try to catalyze change together as a people—we will experience challenges. Whether the positive change we seek is related physical health, spiritual health, relational health, or even organization health, there will always be forces and circumstances that rise up to resist that change.

Now, in the coming weeks, we will see that the book of Nehemiah has a lot to teach us about spiritual attack. In fact, spiritual warfare (as you might call it) is a massive theme of this book.

But for now, we must know this: we must anticipate resistance when we work for any positive change. And the only way we can overcome such challenges is the same Nehemiah did: *we come before the throne of our King, and we ask him for the strength and authority only he can give us. Simply, said we overcome through prayer.*

In a practical sense, prayer clarifies our sense of calling and it gives us resolve when we encounter challenges. Prayer gives us a God-centered perspective and sharpens our focus. Prayer is a way we humbly acknowledge that we have no authority outside of the authority God gives us in Christ.

So, I encourage you to pray for your city. Pray for your church. Pray for the Church.

Pray that you experience a love for Jesus that is greater than your desire for sin. Pray that your sense of hope in Christ would outshine the discouragements that can come our way as we seek to minister to our city.

Pray that a generation of Christians would rise up and live lives of Christ-exalting humility and holiness. Pray that our Christians would display an eagerness to serve where there is need. Pray that we would be courageous to share and display our faith with those who do not yet know and worship Jesus.

Nehemiah is a uniquely prayerful book, and I hope it can challenge us to be a prayerful church. We can make no true change in our city in the Church at large outside of prayer.

2.) Run to the Brokenness—Not Away from It

Nehemiah has heard reports of the brokenness of Jerusalem. He could have given some orders, delegated his responsibilities, and presided over the rebuilding process at a distance.

But, instead, he travels hundreds of miles from his cushy job. And he stays up all night personally surveying the landscape (show image [2Nehemiah Views the Ruins of Jerusalem](#)). He circles the Holy city on horseback. He examines each gate and each portion of the wall. He identifies the specific places of brokenness. And he takes it upon himself the particular details of his overall vision.

As a result, his plan is strategic, compelling, and effective.

This is significant because Nehemiah's actions are counterintuitive to human nature. Human nature is resistant to acknowledge inconvenient truths. We do not like new information that would indicate that we have a problem or that we have been a part of a failing system. We do not like to be confronted with failure or anything that would indicate we are wrong.

And the Bible has a term for the type of person who refuses to acknowledge when they are wrong—that term is “fool.” According to the book of Proverbs, foolishness is not unintelligence. Foolishness is being wise in your own eyes, refusing to listen, and stiffening your neck when you are corrected. Wisdom, on the other hand, is the ability to humbly listen and repent when you are wrong.

Nehemiah is unafraid to humble himself before God, and he is unafraid to be a realist who acknowledges the extent of brokenness in Jerusalem.

We, too, can be unafraid to be humble. We can be unafraid of realism and truth. When we are contending for change, it is necessary to take an honest look at where there is brokenness; brokenness in our city, in our nation, in our marriages, in our families, and the Church.

This is why we must be unafraid to look at challenges that face the children and youth of our community. That is why we must seek to truly understand the plight of the refugees who are our neighbors. That is why we must be unafraid to understand the root causes of racial division in our community and nation. That's why we must be willing to understand the tsunami of mental illnesses that have arisen in our society.

How can we understand what is needed unless we have an honest understanding of the problem?

And, please hear this, where this must always begin is in our own hearts! That is why the Apostle Paul even invites us to “examine” ourselves before we partake in the Lord's Supper (1 Cor 11:28). God invites us to take an honest look at our own brokenness—not so that he can shame us—but so that he can heal us.

Where we are the most broken is precisely where we are most susceptible to experience the grace of God!

3.) See the Big Picture in Light of God's Grace

There might be some in Jerusalem who think, “What's the point of rebuilding the wall? We already lost our kingdom. We are weak and are barely getting by as it is. Why risk causing drama with our enemies?”

But Nehemiah speaks vision into this moment: *“Then I said to them, ‘You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.’ And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ So they strengthened their hands for the good work”* (Neh 2:17–18).

Nehemiah casts the vision of his mission with clarity: *we are going to rebuild the broken wall.*

He gives the motivation: *that we would no longer be derided among the nations.*

He gives them encouragement: *the king has given us favor, provision, and protection.*

Like many people who are suffering and down-trodden, the people of Jerusalem were living their day-to-day lives trying to meet their basic needs. To rebuild the wall was

important, no doubt. But they neglected what was important for the community for the sake of all the little urgent needs of their lives.

Nehemiah changes this situation by reminding them of the big picture and the power of God. We need to see that big picture too.

In our current season, some people might be asking, what's the point of church anymore? In the midst of an enduring pandemic and political division and practical challenges of life, why would we give our time, money, and devotion to something like the Church?

To these questions, I can only pray that the Holy Spirit can give you open eyes to see the beautiful hope of the kingdom of God that has been revealed through Jesus Christ.

Now, the difference between Nehemiah and us is that *we* do not build the kingdom—only God does. But we have been given the immense privilege of representing God's kingdom, of announcing it's coming, of pointing the redemption and restoration that is found only in Jesus Christ. Even more, God has filled us and empowered us with his Holy Spirit to go about this task!

So, let's strengthen our hands for this good work. Let's show our city the beauty of the gospel in our words and deeds. Let's testify to the faithfulness of our God. Let's do embody our mission in such a way that shows that the Church is not a social club or inspiration hour or an entertainment product to be consumed.

We—the Church—are the body of Christ, filled with the Spirit of Christ, called to participate in the mission of Christ. We have been summoned to participate in the most important movement in history.

Our King is restoring all things, and our lives are called to be signposts to that glorious future hope. And he has given us his blessing for the task.

4.) Find Your Specific Place in the Mission

Nehemiah identifies himself with the plight of his people. He says phrases like, “Let us build the wall...that *we* may no longer suffer derision” (Neh 2:17). Nehemiah works for, with, and among the people. And the people respond.

As a result of God working through Nehemiah, the people of God work individually, communally, voluntarily, specifically, and worshipfully. In fact, all of chapter 3 records the names of individuals, families, and trade guilds that get to work.

Here is a short sample: *“Then Eliashib the high priest rose up with his brothers the priests, and they built the Sheep Gate. They consecrated it and set its doors. They consecrated it as far as the Tower of the Hundred, as far as the Tower of Hananel. And next to him the men of Jericho built. And next to them Zaccur the son of Imri built”* (Neh 3:1–2).

Part of Nehemiah's genius lies within his administrative leadership. Notice how the impossibly massive vision is now made accessible when broken down into small pieces shared by the community.

This is how any sizable project must get done. You can't do it all at once. You have to break it down into manageable components.

For the folks who are currently in college or once went to college, do you remember the impossibly long term-paper? And one lesson you probably learned from the impossibly long term-paper is: it can't get done at the last minute! You have to break it down into steps (e.g., finding books, research, reading, note-taking, outlining, writing one section at a time, editing and revision).

Because of Nehemiah, the people of Jerusalem are now able to think, "I know I can't rebuild the wall, but my family could probably build a gate or a section of a wall. And, maybe, if we all work together, we can rebuild our broken city!"

In the same way, individually we probably can't bring about massive change in our city or within the Church of the United States of America. But we can do *something*. And if we are all willing do something, what we could accomplish together might be extraordinary!

The body of Christ has been designed with a diversity of members and with different talents so that we can perform different roles.

If you have yet to find a place of connection and meaningful service, I want you to consider four basic questions that might help you discern a way to serve.

What are your desires? What are the things you feel drawn to in ministry? Teaching, serving in the background, helping with children, working with technology? All of those things can be translated into ways of serving people and ministering the gospel.

What are your abilities? Do you have an ability to play a musical instrument or sing well? Do you have a certain skill-set that could connect you to the mission of God?

What are the unique opportunities before you? Has God placed a unique and timely opportunity right in front of you to serve and make a difference in the church or in the community?

What are the unique needs around you? Where is the need the greatest?

I can remember in the early days of Redeemer, before we had the money to afford a cleaning service, the very first volunteer teams we had were the cleaning crews. We had three or four teams that took turns each week cleaning the church. And many of the people who became key leaders of our church got their start in those cleaning crews.

There are needs all around us. There are great needs in society. And there are bad ways and good ways of trying to create change.

For example, you might be really concerned about the direction culture is going and how rapidly younger people are falling away from Christianity. Let me tell you will not help that situation: angry ranting on social media. Let me tell you what might help: becoming a volunteer in Redeemer Kids, Redeemer Youth, or Redeemer College Mission.

You might not be able to change the direction that culture is going. But you could take the responsibility to help teach one child the beauty of the gospel!

You can't end the culture of outrage. But you could make a newcomer to our church feel welcomed and loved by serving on our Welcome Team.

You can't solve the problems created by expressive individualism in our society. But you can be a part of Christian community by joining a Gospel Community.

You can't protect all who are weak from the evil of this world. But you could serve on our Safety Team and help make sure our services are as safe as they are inviting.

You might not be able to fix Afghanistan. But you can be a part of serving the Afghan refugees, as well as refugees from other nations, who find a new home in Amarillo.

Conclusion

It's hard to create change. It takes time, prayer, patience, and resolve. But true change—the change we want to make—takes even more. We can do some humanitarian good deeds in our own strength. But the type of change that lasts for eternity requires a far greater power than human effort and good intentions—it takes *the supernatural intervention of an almighty God*.

But, as it so happens, we serve a God who brings life out of death. Our task is empowered by the resurrection life of Jesus. And the gospel of that resurrection power is throughout this passage. Just look a moment at verse 11: ***“So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose...” (Neh 2:11–12a)***. I've studied the Bible enough to recognize that phrases like that are not coincidental. Nehemiah, all throughout, is pointing us to Jesus!

Like Nehemiah, who united himself with his people, Jesus has joined himself eternally with the plight of humanity. Though he is God, he has become man for us and our salvation!

And as Nehemiah spoke with boldness and authority to Sanballat and Tobiah, so too, Jesus has been given all authority over the powers that would stand against his people and his kingdom. Once the powers of sin and death had a claim upon us as individuals, once it had a claim to our city, and the nations of the world. But no more. Through

Jesus, their power is broken, and we have been called to join Christ in his work of restoration.

So, Redeemer Christian Church, may we be a prayerful people who do not lose heart when we encounter challenges. May we have open eyes that see where there is pain and brokenness around us. May we have hearts that believe in the bigness and glory of God's plan of redemption! And may we have the courage to find our place in the mission, and catalyze the change of restoration!

AMEN.

Discussion Starters for Gospel Communities

- 1.) Read Nehemiah 2:9–20. Summarize the events of this story in your own words?
- 2.) Why are the “letters” in verse 9 so important in overcoming the initial resistance he faces from Sanballat and Tobiah?
- 3.) Nehemiah derives his authority to restore Jerusalem from the time he spends before his king (see: Neh 2:7). How might this passage stir us to pray to our Heavenly King?
- 4.) Nehemiah takes time to examine the true extent of Jerusalem's brokenness. Why is it so important to understand the brokenness around us? Why is it tempting to ignore problems instead of facing them head-on?
- 5.) Nehemiah mobilizes the people of Jerusalem to find their place in rebuilding the wall (see: Neh 3:1–12). What are meaningful ways that you have been a part of the ministry of the church? If you have not yet found a place of connection or service, where might you be called to connect and serve?
- 6.) In what ways does Nehemiah prefigure the work of Christ in this passage?