

January 14

“Turn the Page to Rebuild”

Focus on Nehemiah 2:5

⁵ and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

Special Music: “Rebuild”

Synergy Worship

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czTGaf6RWcc>



Nehemiah 2:1-6

1 In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before,

2 so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.”

I was very much afraid,

3 but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

4 The king said to me, “What is it you want?”

Then I prayed to the God of heaven,

5 and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

6 Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?” It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

THE SWING SET

Stacy stared at the old, neglected swing set in the backyard. There were so many great memories that ran through her mind as she surveyed it, and each memory brought a smile to her face. The frame that held the sand under the set was all but gone. Several of the chains on the swings were broken and the plastic seats were hard and cracked. She remembered them to be bright yellow, but now they were a faded, dusty, washed-out tan. The slide was lying on its side nearby. The wooden turret was now dried out with a torn canvas roof. The steps and ladder leading up to the platform were broken. The climbing rope was lying on the ground, rotting in the weather.

Even in this condition, the memories came flooding back as she thought about her brother and all their friends who had played here, constructing castles in the sand with toy trucks, swinging together to see who could go highest, climbing the rope pretending to touch the clouds. The turret had been their castle stronghold, perfect for their misfit pirate adventures. This play area had been the foundation for their imaginations growing up.

Stacy's father had passed away recently, leaving her and her brother the house they had grown up in. Since she was renting a cramped apartment, she talked it over with her brother and he had agreed that she should live in the house with her kids. Her husband had left her the year before and life had been difficult as she struggled to make ends meet for herself and her kids, Jake and Elliott. Being able to move into the house and not having to pay rent was a tremendous blessing and a great relief for her finances.

The house itself was in good shape with a new roof and relatively new heat and air conditioning. And the thought of continuing to build memories here excited her. Being the divorced mother of two young boys had taken its toll on her and being in this house would be a welcomed relief. Not to mention how great it would be for the kids. They would each have their own rooms and since the house had four bedrooms, she would also have an office/hobby space for herself. And this backyard was the place where dreams were made.

But the swing set was where all the magic had happened when she was young, and it certainly could not be used by Jake and Elliott with the condition it was in. She had set her mind to change all that. Her brother kept the boys for a week so that they would not be underfoot while she worked. Toolbox in hand, Stacy began to take the swing set apart, laying each piece aside in the order that she removed it so that she could either fix each one or replace it. She knew the project would take her at least a week but realized it could take longer when it took a whole day just to disassemble it.

There was not enough wood left of the frame around the sand pit and there were too many weeds and vines. Stacy took the extra time to dig up all the growth and remove the old sand. She threw away the rotten wood and picked up treated wood to build a brand-new frame and lined the ground with plastic so the weeds wouldn't come back. Once it was complete, she purchased enough sand to fill it up. Looking at the fresh sand pit, Stacy knew that she had made the right choice to restore the swing set. With the weeds and vines gone, she could

envision how the swing set was supposed to look and that was enough motivation to keep her going.

There was no way to repair the broken plastic of the slide and the swings, so she just ordered new ones online. While she waited for them to arrive, she examined each piece of wood to see if she needed to replace it or just sand it down and treat it. Stacy also ordered some canvas to make a new roof for the turret and made a trip to the local hardware store to buy a new rope for climbing.

After a few days of work on the wooden parts, she started reassembling the framework, steps, and ladder. By the time she had finished, the new swings and slide had arrived. It took her another day to assemble the slide and bolt it to the frame. She was then able to hang the new swings. And while she was working on that, the canvass arrived for the turret roof. After a day of sewing, she was able to install the new canopy.

Then she stepped back to look over her work and once again the memories came streaming back. It was exactly as she had remembered it. She was really hoping that Jake and Elliott would enjoy their time playing here in the sun as she had with her brother and friends.

“Yes,” she said to herself. “The decision to repair this place of wonder was much better than to just buying a new one.” This way the memories that her boys would create would be an extension of her own memories, a legacy of sort. Sometimes, it is better to rebuild what is broken than to build something new.

Because, when we rebuild, we retain the legacy of what has been and enable future generations to enjoy the same sphere of wonder.

Nehemiah had a struggle going on in his spirit. His brother, Hanani, and a few other men had come to him from Judah with heartbreaking news. This was after Judah and Israel had been conquered and many of the people had been carried off to work for foreign rulers. Nehemiah was serving in Susa (in Persia), in the court of King Artaxerxes as the king's cupbearer, tasting the king's wine before he drank it. Artaxerxes trusted Nehemiah and thought well of him and Nehemiah enjoyed working in the king's court.

Nehemiah's brother still lived in Judah with the remnant of the Israelites, but he came to visit Nehemiah. When Nehemiah asked how things were back home in Judah, we read his response in Nehemiah 1:3-4:

3 "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

Nehemiah responds by saying:

4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah was completely unsettled by this news. Jerusalem holds a special place in the hearts of all Jews. It was bad enough that Israel and Judah had been conquered, but to hear that Jerusalem, the city of David, had fallen into such a deplorable condition was enough to break Nehemiah's heart.

In all fairness, there was a reason for the city to be in this condition. After conquering Judah and the destruction of the temple, the conquering kings did

not want the Jews remaining in the area to rise back up in rebellion, so many of the walls around Jerusalem had been torn down and gates burned, leaving the city vulnerable. It is almost 150 years later that Hanani comes to Nehemiah. During this time, the temple gets rebuilt, but not the walls, so the city is still extremely vulnerable.

Nehemiah mourns and prays about this matter. He feels God tugging him to return to Judah to deal with the problem. It takes a great deal of courage for him to approach Artaxerxes and ask the king to let him return to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls. The king must have had a great deal of trust in Nehemiah to allow him to return to the city and refortify it, but he allows him to go and even helps him with money and supplies.

When Nehemiah arrives home, he realizes that the condition of the city is much worse than his imagination; the city wall is now rubble, the burned gates rotting on the ground, and the city is in complete disarray. And, even worse, much of the remnant population is unwilling to help fix things. Some local leaders feel if the walls are repaired, the Persians will attack them and kill them all, even though Nehemiah has letters to the contrary from the king himself telling everyone that it is okay for Nehemiah to do what he is doing.

As Nehemiah looks at the destruction, he must have thought, “Well, it might be easier to finish tearing down the walls and starting from scratch.” But this is Jerusalem, the city where David danced, where Saul, David, and Solomon reigned. History was written within those walls. Even with the terrible condition the walls are in, there are memories of a time when the city was great, a testament

to God and his children. This worn and broken edifice still held the magic of the greatness of the Israelite nation. To start from scratch might leave the impression that those memories and that history were not worth redeeming, not worth saving, not worth restoring to their former glory.

Nehemiah gathered around him all those of a like mind, and together they began restoring the vitality and sanctity of the city that was a tribute to God himself. Ignoring the taunts and plots of those who did not want this project to happen, the people continued to mend the walls, rebuild the gates, and restore the bulwarks and ramparts to their former glory. Rock by rock the people worked relentlessly to rebuild what had been lost. It was a glorious project that brought about a resurgence of Jewish presence in a region that had become defeated and deflated, a shadow of its former importance to the remnant population. Once again, the city of Jerusalem had stature and significance in the land of their fathers.

The story of Nehemiah and the work of restoration of the walls of Jerusalem is a prominent story of Old Testament tenacity. It is a story that recounts the vision and leadership skills of a cupbearer to the king. It is a story of resolve. It is a story of cooperation and encouragement against all odds. It is a story of not giving up or giving in. But most importantly, it is a story of remembering the importance of the past and how it influences the lives of future generations. We need to remind ourselves of where we come from and what our ancestors achieved. We have a need to remember both the good and the bad in order to embrace our successes and learn from our failures. History itself is

neither good nor bad. But remembering the past allows us to keep perspective on what is important now, in this moment.

So, why “Turn the Page to Rebuild?” We often get stuck in a mode of neglect in our lives. We get stagnant and complacent. Things that we used to care about, really care about, start to rot and fall apart from negligence. The musician that lays down their instrument because life happens. The craftsman who stops building because of changes in their circumstances that forced them down a different path. The doctor who tires of the long hours and frustrations. The ministers who become overburdened by the apathy around them. The mechanic that struggles with keeping up with newer technology. The artists that lay down their brushes after years of trying to claim a place of acceptance among their peers. Life happens and somehow our priorities and passions are lost in the practicality of survival.

And one day we look around us and what we once valued so very much, lays in shambles at our feet like so much junk collecting dust. Our quality of life deteriorated into a pile of disconnected and dispassionate memories. And we have to make a choice. Do we sweep the mess under a rug, vacuum up the cobwebs, and deeply bury what we can't seem to get rid of? Maybe just ignore the past. Give that instrument away, disperse our tools to our friends. Change our career and never look back? Decide that we are too old to change with the times and just bury ourselves with our disenfranchised passions?

Or do we realize the value of what life has taught us and how we can use it to teach others. There is value in the lessons that we have learned. There is

value in our past that we can share with a younger generation. We can teach someone to play our instruments. We can show someone how to embrace our craftsmanship, learn to use our tools. We can share our experiences with a new generation that wants to learn what we know. We can help each new generation to not make the same mistakes that we did, not to abandon their passions when times get tough.

If we do that, we will find our passions reignited and perhaps we will be excited to regain what we have lost. By repairing that swing set, rebuilding the walls of a neglected city, renovating that home, restoring that old table our father built, we can embrace a remnant of our past and share it with our children.

When we think about the ways that Jesus taught us about his father, heaven, and how to live our lives, he often quotes passages in the Old Testament to remind us that our present is built on the foundations of the past. He takes the old to create the new. When he tells us in Matthew:

³⁷ “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’

³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.

³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’

⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

He’s not saying that the Law needs to be overwritten. He’s telling us that it isn’t about the details, but about the intent, that the Law serves a purpose. And that

purpose is Love. Love of God, love of family, love friends, love of neighbors, love of acquaintances, and love of strangers.

And all that love that we show one another points both to and from the cross. The example set by the cross gives us the ability and the authority to love everyone that we come across. And in doing so, we can point those same people back to the cross. The cross does not remove our past but becomes a new foundation for our rediscovered faith. The blood of Jesus washes away all the dirt, grime, and neglect in our lives and rebuilds us inside out. The sacrifice of the cross doesn't take away our abilities or skills, but instead enhances them and builds on them. We become better caretakers of the blessings God has showered upon us.

I want us all to think about that this week as we go about our lives. Let us ask ourselves, "What have we put down that we need to pick up again? What do we need to restore that we have neglected? Are there relationships we need to mend? Are there skills we need to sharpen? Is there someone we haven't heard from in a long time that we need to visit or call?"

We all have the opportunity to be a Stacy or a Nehemiah in this world. There are so many opportunities to right the wrongs and repair the abandoned. We need to ask for God's guidance, knowing that he will show us those things in our lives that need repairing and restoring. We should welcome his voice as God reminds us of what is important in our lives.

God bless you All,

AMEN

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