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Church

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*Building Blocks to Rebuild Your Broken World*

Nehemiah 2:1–8

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*series: Nehemiah: Rebuilding Your Broken World*

Jim Lovell is an American hero and an astronaut. I know I am dating myself but 45 years ago Jim Lovell was the commander of the Apollo 13. It was a mission to land the astronauts on the moon. But due to faulty wiring their spacecraft became disabled while orbiting the moon. Apollo 13 turned from a moon-landing mission into an amazing rescue story carried out by the brilliant engineering team at NASA. My favorite scene in the movie *Apollo 13* was when Jim Lovell, played by a young Tom Hanks, was asked by a reporter if he was ever scared in the cockpit as he flew missions in combat.

Lovell speaks of the hand of God in his life in his book, but in this story he calls himself lucky. I call him blessed. Luck had nothing to do with it. God had a plan and we can see God's fingerprints over all of it. Running out of fuel over a big black ocean, navigation scrambled, instruments going dark, but in that darkness a bright green trail formed below him that he wouldn't have seen without a dark cockpit. That glowing frothy green glow led Jim home.

As Christians we believe that God is sovereign. We believe that God is in authority and nothing happens which is not part of his ultimate bigger plan. We believe no circumstance happens by chance, and we believe no action is random. When I look into my inner world, or out in my outer world, I see bad things and ugly things and I wonder why. I have learned that God has no obligation to show me the entire script. He has no obligation to let me read the last page of the drama playing out. I have learned that I won't always be able to connect all the dots to draw a clear picture of God's hand to everything in my life. But I trust in Romans 8:28 that God is working out all things according to his purposes for his ultimate glory.

But I also see that within God's sovereign plan he always provides the space for human responsibility. A place for humans to take the right actions on faith that contribute to his ultimate glory on earth and in heaven.

What if Lovell wasn't a highly trained, skilled and well prepared pilot? Would he have been able to keep his cool under such circumstances? What if Lovell wasn't at least somewhat educated in biology? Would he have been able to recognize the churned up glowing algae and why it was there? Every circumstance in my life where I recognize divine sovereignty at work, I also recognize within God's plan my responsibility to act on faith.

The fact remains that many of us right here today are facing broken down walls. You feel like you are flying over a big and black ocean. Many of us are running out of fuel. Our navigational instruments are out and we feel like we are flying blind. But the truth is that God makes a provision for every broken wall. He leads us, he teaches us, and he instills in us a call to rebuild. But he also instills in us the way to rebuild. It may not be the way you have rehearsed over and over in your mind, but it's his way, his way for his ultimate glory.

Last week many of us identified our broken world as we connected to Nehemiah's story. We were compelled to grieve, cry out to God, and pray for our broken worlds and even drawn to write our cries out on paper and slip them into the cracks in this little wall up front. And we left last Sunday with hope.

Today we move into Nehemiah chapter 2. We are compelled by Nehemiah's story to stay persistent in our prayers for our broken world. But also to pray with an inner confidence that even over a black ocean, with our map lights and navigation shorted out, God will lead us home. And then as we pray we ask for wisdom to recognize that green glowing trail when it appears in the darkness. We ask for skill to know how to skillfully tilt the controls into the proper landing pattern and guide the plane. We ask for courage and faith to persevere through our fears and take responsibility for the specific actions we need to take to steer us home, specific actions to rebuild our broken world.

So what is required to find that frothy green glow to take us home?

### **Patience**

What did Nehemiah actually pray for as recorded in Nehemiah chapter 1? In verse 11 he prayed that God would change Artaxerxes' heart. It was like this, "Lord, I ask you to change the heart of the king; change his attitudes. Change the situation so that I may be allowed to do Your will with my boss' favor." So what happened right after Nehemiah started praying? Nothing, at least right away.

**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, 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" (Neh. 2:1-2a).**

We are now in the month of Nisan which is April. For four months nothing appeared to happen. One day, one week, one month, two months, three months of nothing happening. Have you ever had that experience? It can be disillusioning. A person of prayer must learn the discipline of patience. Why does God require patience? Because patience goes against everything human in us when we are confronted with the urgency of a broken wall. What we want to do is rush around and fix, rush around and attempt to do in our own strength what only He can do. It's good to notice that Nehemiah didn't rashly run off to Jerusalem. He was smart enough to see there was no frothy green path yet. So he laid his problem before God for up to four months and counting.

What do we do while we are being patient? We pray. And following Nehemiah's example we continue to serve. To change the heart of his supervisor, Nehemiah needed to do his job well; to taste the wine of the king and serve the king. Do you think Nehemiah was sometimes distracted at work? Probably! Do you think he was at times depressed? Maybe! Was he tired and weary from persistent prayer and fasting? Quite likely! But he still showed up and did his work. While we wait for God's answer, until orders change, continue to serve.

Nehemiah had not been sad in the king's presence before. But four months into this, his internal struggle had affected his outward appearance and the perceptive king noticed.

A little background here... Number one rule in serving the king: Don't be a Debbie Downer. Don't bring the king down with your problems. Put on a happy face. The king's court worked like a dysfunctional family. There was a family rule that said you couldn't share your true feelings in the presence of the king. But the burden that Nehemiah was carrying was too big to hide. He put his career, even his life, in jeopardy by the sadness written on his face.

So finding that frothy green glow to take us home not only requires patience, it also requires courage.

## **Courage**

**I was very much afraid, 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?" (verses 2a-3).**

I think Nehemiah, in his persistent prayer and seeking the courage to trust God, knew the possible consequences if he let his guard down. He took the risk and hoped the king would not respond negatively. Not only that, but Nehemiah had been praying, hoping and imagining, rehearsing how he would respond if God allowed the king, the one he knew could help, to engage him on this. And now that moment had arrived. It's really

happening. Although scared to death, Nehemiah was ready with his response.

Did you catch this? He specifically doesn't mention the city by name. As you dig deeper into the reason why, it was likely that the King's advisors told the king to issue an edict stopping the reconstruction of Jerusalem a few years before. It's recorded in Ezra chapter 4:12-13. They told the king that if the Israelites were allowed to reconstruct Jerusalem, they would stop paying taxes. So Artaxerxes had signed the order that stopped the rebuilding that led to the crumbled walls around the city. So Nehemiah did not want to remind the king of that.

Instead let's appeal to the idea of ancestors. Nehemiah knew that Artaxerxes like other Middle Eastern kings cared deeply about their ancestors and honoring them after their death. It was a brilliant God-given strategy to keep the process going. He was able to say it clearly and respectfully all the while being scared to death.

**The king said to me, "What is it you want?" (v. 4a).**

What an opportunity for Nehemiah! All the power and wealth of the kingdom was wrapped up in that question. Someone said, "Success comes when a thousand hours of preparation meet one moment of opportunity." The door of opportunity had just been cracked open. After 4 months he is finally seeing the green glow forming in the dark big ocean. We see his patience and his courage and now what did he do next?

## **Prayer**

**Then I prayed to the God of heaven, (v. 4b).**

Some have called this an arrow prayer. To me this is a "911 help me Jesus" prayer. His short prayer before the king was backed up by four months of persistent prayer. This shows me that Nehemiah was walking with God because he was talking to God.

Through all that you are going through, keep Nehemiah's example before you. Even as the door began to crack open, he continued to see himself as dependent on God. The exact place he needed to be to see the wall rebuilt.

Let's just review for a moment what happened last week. God brought his brother Hanani to give him a report about Jerusalem that disturbed him. It led him to a broken heart which led him to pray. While weeping and fasting and praying he expressed how great God is. Then while focusing on his great and awesome and holy God, he was reminded of his own wickedness and he cried out to God in confession. Then after owning his own sin, he prayed boldly to God asking for help and then trusted in the promises of God.

As Nehemiah took a deep breath and turned to answer the king, he had come to this place of being used by God, the place where faith and planning co-exist for the glory of God.

## Preparation

It's been said, "Those who fail to plan, plan to fail." Nehemiah the pray-er has spilled out for us to see. Now Nehemiah the planner is spilling out for us to see. Step 1 of his plan: Convince the king to allow him to leave his service in order to rebuild the wall around a city that had been a threat to the king in the past. Look at what he says.

**...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" (v. 5).**

Step 2 of the plan is buried a little deeper in the verse. The fact that Nehemiah was asking to be sent means that Nehemiah's plan was to convince the king to lend financial support to the building project.

**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 (verses 5-6).**

Why would Nehemiah include this part about the queen being next to him? I think it was because the queen had a favorable influence on the king in this matter. Someone said, "The husband might be the head, but the wife is the neck." I think the king and queen deeply cared for Nehemiah. He was favored. They didn't want to lose him. The fact that they wanted to know when he would return supports how much they cared for him. He obviously had earned a great reputation.

Next we see step 3 of Nehemiah's plan: Get letters from the king to the governors in the surrounding areas asking them to provide safe travel across borders along the way.

**I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" (verses 7-8a).**

And finally step 4 of Nehemiah's well thought out plan: Work out a deal with Asaph, keeper of the king's forest, to be provided enough lumber to build the city gates as well as a home for Nehemiah. Another sign of God's hand in this: If Nehemiah wasn't the cupbearer for the king, would he have even known who Asaph was, let alone that he was the one needed to help him.

Have you ever thought about the fact that God honors order and organization? The old revolutionary War Soldier used to say, "Trust in God but keep your powder dry." Pray to God, but make your plans, set your sights, think through the hurdles. Imagine if Nehemiah hadn't planned ahead when he came across the first official outside the province of Susa.

"Where are you going Cupbearer?" "I'm going to Jerusalem." "Okay, where are your letters?" "I don't have letters." "Then go back and get them."

Now picture him approaching a trans-Euphrates guy, "Here is a letter from the king." "Okay, who wrote it?" "Artaxerxes. See, right there." "Okay, go on through..." Then he would enter Asaph's territory. I can imagine that Asaph was probably a tightwad. "What do you want cupbearer?" "I want some timber." "Nope. Only by requisition." "Well Mr. Timber Keeper, Artaxerxes requisitioned me to have all the timber I want." I'm sure Asaph checked out that requisition pretty carefully before he cut the timber for Nehemiah!

This isn't luck. This isn't random chance. God answered Nehemiah's prayer. Look at our final scripture and see what Nehemiah sees.

## Divine Providence

**And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests (v. 8b).**

From Artaxerxes, Nehemiah hears the word, "Granted." Nehemiah is now able to connect the dots. He now can see the frothy green glow of God's pathway home and he sees that his responsibility was to wait patiently, show courage, pray, and prepare until God opened the door of opportunity. Then he sees God's divine hand in governing and directing. Theologians call this divine providence.

What do we mean by divine providence? Divine providence means that God is in complete control of all things and that he governs and directs all things in the universe, whether they are personal things in my life or whether they are world events. He governs and directs them all with wisdom, love and care all for the ultimate glory of God.

We believe that the ultimate glory of God is to rebuild broken worlds. Whether it is something broken in our inner world or some kind of unfairness, injustice, or abuse you see wrong in your outer world.

I believe that God is faithful to show us that glowing path that leads us to rebuilding our broken world. Understand if you seek first the kingdom of God right where you are, you are not wasting your time, you are not spinning your wheels, you are not wandering in a wilderness. You are positioned perfectly for God to prepare you as you wait, pray and plan, and as you show the courage to trust and step through when that door opens. It may be difficult to connect the dots right now, but it will come together. It always does.

I have shared with many of you that moving to a new area and having older kids has made it difficult to meet and build relationships with people outside the walls of our church. I have made

lot of wonderful connections with people since arriving at CPC, but 99% of them seem to be through church.

So in the past few months God has laid on my heart a burden to connect with people in our condo complex. Two months ago an opening appeared on our condo association board. I really prayed about this. Was this the crack in the door? Was this the glowing green path I was seeking? I stepped through the open door and decided to put my name in the hat. I have to say I ran a successful campaign for condo board member. I also have to say I ran unopposed. But I was still proud of my campaign!

Anyway, the point is that I believe that God has called me to engage with my neighbors. That was my broken world prayer last week. And God is telling me to patiently serve on this board, show courage to step out of my comfort zone and out of my busy schedule, to pray, and to prepare for that door to open further when service and availability and relationship building leads to spiritual conversations, which will lead to conversations about Jesus. I had a great conversation two weeks ago with a fellow board member over morning coffee in the lobby. We are becoming friends. Thank you Lord for your divine providence.

One tribe of Native Americans had a unique practice for training young braves. On the night of a boy's thirteenth birthday, he was placed in a dense forest to spend the entire night alone. Until

then he had never been away from the security of his family and tribe. But on this night he was blindfolded and taken miles away. When he took off the blindfold, he was in the middle of thick woods. By himself, all night long. Every time a twig snapped, he probably visualized a wild animal ready to pounce. Every time an animal howled, he imagined a wolf leaping out of the darkness. Every time the wind blew, he wondered what more sinister sound it masked. No doubt it was a terrifying night. After what seemed like an eternity, the first rays of sunlight entered the interior of the forest. Looking around, the boy saw flowers, trees, and the outline of the path. Then, to his utter astonishment, he beheld the figure of a man standing just a few feet away, armed with a bow and arrow. It was the boy's father. He had been there all night long.

Like this boy's father, our heavenly Father is always present with us, like a glowing green path on a dark sea, unseen for a while but as we lean into him, waiting patiently—serving, praying, planning, showing courage—our Father's presence becomes more real, more assuring, and more powerful than any daunting circumstance we find ourselves in.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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