



Recently, while attending the Global Leadership Summit, Bill Hybels, the Senior Pastor at Willow Creek Community Church, shared a powerful talk about how leaders take people from here to there. He talked about how sometimes there are problems that seem like they can't be solved. Anyone have a problem that seems like that? The job of a leader is to move people from **here** to **there**. If you want to be a leader, you must be able to stand in front of a group of 3, or 30, or 300, or 3,000 and say "We are here, but someday by God's grace, if we link-up and persevere we are going to end there." The problem is, most people don't like change. There are always people who will say, "Wait a minute, I like it here and I'm not moving!" So, what we try to do with those people is make **there** sound wonderful. But that's a mistake. We need to first make **here** sound awful.

Martin Luther King Jr. for example gave hundreds of speeches about how the **here** was not fair and needed to change. He got people following him, as well as the whole nation, to realize that the **here** was not good and they needed to get out of it. He then gave the famous speech of having a dream of going **there**. But first, he made the **here**—racial prejudice and non-integration in this case—seem so awful that people wanted to go **there**.

My job and your job as a follower of Jesus is to figure out what God wants done in this world, what your role is, and then move people from **here** to **there**. How do we do this? Hybels says we need to make **here** seem so unbearable that people want to go **there**. But something interesting happens in this process. People get discouraged. Do you know where people get most most discouraged? The middle of the journey. The beginning is easy, everyone's excited. And with the end in sight, everyone gets excited again. But the hardest part is right in the middle. This is exactly what Nehemiah faced. The future seemed uncertain. Change was needed. The people of God were stuck **here** and had no vision for what **there** could look like. Maybe that describes you this morning. You feel stuck. The future is unknown. Maybe some of you don't even have a vision for what the **there** could be like?

We are told in chapter one that Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the most powerful man on the planet, King Artaxerxes. That was like being the Prime Minister. After hearing about the crisis in Jerusalem, Nehemiah wept, prayed and fasted for four months. He then took a huge risk by asking the king to help him rebuild the wall in Jerusalem. Nehemiah sensed, deep within his heart,

a call from God to not only pray about the crisis but to step up and lead a movement of people who would make this dream a reality. With the king's blessing, Nehemiah sets out on a two month journey to get to Jerusalem to figure out a way to take God's people from **here** to **there** and it won't be an easy task, even for a great leader. Let's read Nehemiah 2:11–16.

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

Nehemiah Inspects the Walls in Jerusalem

After a long and arduous journey, Nehemiah arrives at the city of Jerusalem without any fanfare or celebration. He doesn't roll into town and announce that their great leader has come. He quietly settles down for three days. There is no doubt that the word was out on the streets that Nehemiah was in town, but nobody knew why. Most leaders like to get things done and move things ahead quickly, but godly leaders know when to wait on God to move first. Nehemiah waited three days before he examined the wall for himself. Was he praying? Probably. Was he in preparation and planning, I think so. One thing for sure, he wasn't in a rush. He was waiting on God to lead him. I am a ready-fire-aim type of person. I like to see action first and a committee meeting second. Nehemiah shows us that both are needed. Careful preparation, prayer and planning lead to rigorous action.

After three days, Nehemiah was finally ready to see the wall for himself. He didn't tell anyone why he was there and what God put in his heart to do. Instead, he took a few trusted advisors and during the night, on his horse, he inspected a small portion of the wall. The word "inspect" in the original language means "to

look into something very carefully." He wasn't casually looking around, he was carefully observing the devastation and planning what next to do.

There are a few things you should know about why Nehemiah took his time. First, the task was overwhelming. This was a huge project. This is not like the weekend fence building project at your house. This is far from the wall we built around our stage. Nehemiah would need to rebuild a wall some 1 ½ to 2 miles in circumference. We're talking huge boulders. We're talking major construction. And this would have to be done all by human hands and archaic building methods. They didn't have a Bobcat or any of the machinery we have today. Because the task was so overwhelming, no one was able to rebuild the wall for 150 years. There was a long history of defeat. People had tried but failed. This was worse than the championship drought of the Cleveland Browns, Cleveland Indians and Cleveland Cavaliers combined!

Not only was the task overwhelming, but the people were greatly discouraged. The remnant of Israelites that moved back had tried to rebuild the wall and failed. And every day they live their lives in Jerusalem, they are reminded of that failure. Every day they are worrying about enemy attack and the safety of their families. They were discouraged, depressed, and burned out. Morale was at an all time low. It's hard to focus on the **there** when you are discouraged **here**. Discouraged people tend to look around and all they see is what can't be done. Discouraged people look back and say, "See, it's been 150 years and it's never been done." When you look at your problems, do you tend to get discouraged or are you able to look past them and see them as opportunities for God to work?

Nehemiah was not discouraged by what he saw. He knew what God had put in his heart to do. He knew what **there** looked like. But first, he wanted to do his research and prepare. He needed the right information. He had only heard reports of the wall, now he wanted to see it for himself. It's interesting that he didn't look at the entire wall but only a small portion. Why? Because timing is everything. If he told everyone about his plan on day one, they would have thought he was crazy. If he had waited forever, they would have thought he didn't know what he was doing. After three days, although he didn't have all the information, he had enough to move ahead. Great and godly leaders don't wait too long before moving ahead and they don't rush either. They earn the right to be heard. Nehemiah now needed to inspire the people to move from **here** to **there**. Let's read how Nehemiah did that in 2:17–18.

Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

Nehemiah's Vision was God's Vision

Rebuilding the wall would be a monumental task and just as big would be motivating the people to do it. I've learned that when things are going well, it's pretty easy to motivate people. Everybody's happy and onboard when all is well. But, it's when things aren't going well that it's tough to get people going. How does Nehemiah inspire people? How does he move people from **here** to **there**?

He identifies with them

Look at how he uses the personal pronouns "us" and "we" in his vision talk. He says, "**We** are in this trouble together! Come let **us** rebuild. And **we** will no longer be in disgrace." Great and godly leaders identify themselves with the problem and the need. They say, we are going to do this together! I'm in this with you! This is called servant leadership. Jesus was the ultimate example, "***For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many***" (Mark 10:45).

I'll never forget the time we moved into this facility. Before our grand opening on Sunday three years ago, we had a work and cleaning day. My job was to work with a team to clean the bathrooms. And as I was cleaning the bathrooms, Monica, who now works for us, couldn't believe the pastor was cleaning bathrooms. That's what she told me. I said, "Monica, I never want to ask anyone in our church to do something that I am not willing to do myself." She said, "And that's what I love about CPC!" I share that not to make myself look good, but to remind us all that this is **our** church. We are in this together. When people talk to me about a problem at the church, sometimes they will say, "You need to fix it. Or you need to do something about it." And with love I try to remind them, "No, **we** need to fix it. **We** need to do something about it together." We are the Body of Christ and we are all important to his work.

He inspires the people by telling them this is God's work

Nehemiah is not in Jerusalem to build an empire for himself. He is there because God has called him to lead the rebuilding of the wall. He is there out of obedience to God. Nehemiah reminds them of how God's hand has already been seen in this project so far. In verses 8 and 18 he says, the "***gracious hand of God was upon me***." He says, "Listen, God first gave me incredible favor with King Artaxerxes. I have all the official papers to do this work, take a look. Not only that, but all the timber we need is on its way too. And it was free 99! God provided all this timber from the king's royal park. This isn't IKEA compressed wood, this is the real deal. And, in case you didn't notice, I rolled into town with a few of the king's army officers and his cavalry. I had a safe trip for some 1500 miles. Do you see? God is at work!" China Inland Mission founder Hudson Taylor, who I quoted twice a few weeks

ago, said, "God's work, done God's way, will never lack God's supply." Nehemiah reminds God's people of that fact.

He casts a compelling vision

The Bible says without vision the people do... what? Perish. Nehemiah gathers all the people of Israel together and says, we are **here** but we need to go **there**. He says, look around, we can't stay **here**! He then makes **there** seem not only amazing but reachable. He offers an invitation to work alongside one another and their God to make the impossible possible. Nehemiah casts a compelling God-sized vision to everyone because he knows how quickly vision leaks. When it comes to vision, we all are like a cup with small holes. Everyone has a million and two things draining their vision of where to go. Most of these things are everyday responsibilities and relationships. Vision gets poured in and over time, it leaks out. The vision bucket for the people of God was bone dry. Nehemiah needed to refill it. A good leader will continue to refill the vision of why staying **here** is not possible and why we still need to get **there**.

Does Nehemiah's vision talk work? You bet! The text simply says, "they began this good work." Leaders influence people. They have a following. John Maxwell is famous for saying, "If you think you are a leader but have no followers, then you are only out for a walk!" Nehemiah, by God's grace, was able to motivate and mobilize a group of people to do what everyone else thought was impossible. He did this by identifying with them and the crisis. He reminds them of what God has already been doing. And he casts a God-sized vision that grabbed their hearts. He did all this without signing bonuses or raises too! Their only motivation was internal. They are doing something worthwhile, something good and something for God. Nehemiah says, and if we do this, "***We will no longer be a disgrace***" (v. 17). That's all the motivation they needed.

But, just as soon as they get to work, opposition comes. Look with me at 2:10 and 19–20.

When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"

I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

Nehemiah was Unwavering in the Face of Opposition

This is not news to most of you, but there's always opposition to God's plans. Sanballat along with Tobiah the Ammonite and

Geshem the Arab were adversaries of Nehemiah, furiously trying to prevent him from rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. All throughout this book, these guys will try and stop the project. Here, they first try to mess with the people emotionally. It says they "mocked" and "despised" Israel. They said, "You guys are ridiculous and out of your minds! You ain't gonna build this wall. People have tried and failed. We don't even think the king wants you to be doing this!" They even tried to remind Nehemiah of the old policy. I think Nehemiah whipped those papers out again and reminded these guys who he was and what he was sent to do.

The great theologian Taylor Swift recently sang, "Haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate, hate. And Nehemiah said, "Baby I'm gonna shake, shake, shake, shake, shake. Shake it off! Shake it off!" Nehemiah was so convinced God was in this and leading him, he wasn't going to allow anyone to talk him out of it. Great and godly leaders have to learn how to handle criticism well. If you never get criticized you're probably not doing much of anything. I've had to learn over the years to have thick skin and trust me, I'm still trying to grow even thicker skin! I all too often take things personally. It's something the Lord is working with me on. Now, there are times you need to listen to your critics, especially if they are mature men and women of the faith. But, Nehemiah reminds us that there will be opposition. That opposition can be both here on earth and in the heavenly realms. Apostle Paul reminds us in Ephesians that we are in a spiritual battle with the Devil and his minions. So he tells us to put on the full armor of God. There is opposition we can see and opposition we can't see.

Six years ago when we started the North Campus, we met at Mills High School in the old auditorium. Thankfully we were able to store some of our equipment there. Someone, we don't know who, called the Freedom from Religion Foundation, which is a group of atheists who try vehemently to oppose all forms of church and religious practice in public spaces. They are the ones who fought to remove the 10 Commandments from several court houses and won. This group sent a letter from their lawyers threatening to sue the school district for renting space to us. I had to meet with the school to ensure them that nothing illegal or out of the ordinary was going on. In that meeting, I reminded them of our religious rights to assemble and that, like any other group, we were paying to use the facility and we were not getting any special treatment. We even had to have our storage inspected for any religious materials, i.e. Bibles, information papers, etc. which we didn't store in that closet. At the end of the day it all worked out. To be honest, initially I freaked out a little and thought we'd get kicked out of the school. But I remember Frank, one of our elders saying, "Rob, this is just more evidence that we are right where we need to be!" No matter what we do or where we go as a church, or as a follower of Jesus, we will experience opposition. Get used to it!

I don't think it's any coincidence that we are going through Nehemiah because, once again, we sense that God is working. For close to a year now we have quietly been praying and working on a possible new site for our church campus. We haven't said much yet because this whole project could go away at any moment. The plan is to put our church campus on part of the second floor of a building in Millbrae. The first floor will be occupied by a large retail company. The owners of the building, the developer, and our elders are all excited about this project. We are currently in the conditional use permit process which includes several studies that need to be done. We will then most likely have to go in front of the city council to get it approved.

I'm telling you all this for two reasons. One, if this continues to move forward we will face opposition. Let's not be surprised when it comes. Second, would you be praying about this opportunity? Would you pray for favor with the city and with the community? Would you pray that we would, like Nehemiah, only go as far as the Lord leads? Financially this will cost a lot of money and we need to be praying about that as well. If this

project continues to move forward, trust me, you will all be in the loop. For now, be praying.

Leadership involves taking people from **here** to **there**. What about your own life? What needs to change so that God can take you from **here** to **there**? If you have a family, what needs to move from **here** to **there**? If you are in a relationship, does anything need to change? Maybe at your job you have been stuck **here**. What does **there** look like and what will you do to get **there**? It may be overwhelming. You may be discouraged. And you will face opposition. But even though Nehemiah is dead and gone, Jesus promised to "never leave or forsake you." Only he will give you the power and the strength to go from **here** to **there**. Even when we feel stuck and frustrated **here**, Jesus is preparing an incredible place, a **there**, that he will take his followers to. So, we pray, come Lord Jesus.

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

© 2015 Central Peninsula Church North, San Bruno, CA
Catalog No. 1413-3N