

The Fallen City—The Broken Heart

Nehemiah 1— Pastor Jerry—February 15, 2009

The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

They said to me, "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."

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 1:1-4).

Imagine a river that has lost its deep bed and steep banks. Too much water over too much time has worn away its banks. When the rains come, it's hard to see the river. The water flows everywhere. Any good that the river could have done is lost to the flood plain.

The walls and gates to our city are boundaries like the river's banks. When our boundaries are well established (deep and steep), much good can come from us. A strong and deep river establishes an identity and is known for its blessing. It can generate power, transport material goods, and provide a constant supply of water for cities and crops.

In the same way, the walls and gates of our city can define our identity and set our limits. They contain and conserve our personal strength and resources. They ensure our security, unify our goals, and focus our efforts. They allow us to control the intrusions and influence of the outside world. And most importantly, strong walls and gates allow us to seek and serve God's will above any other.

But many of us are far from the strength of a restored Jerusalem. Many of us are in a state of ruin. Our walls are broken and our gates are burned. We are without boundaries—our city limits are overrun. Others intrude and impose their will. They consume our resources and consume our lives. They have sapped our strength and stolen our security. We no longer have an identity, a focus, or a purpose in life.

Without walls and gates (proper boundaries), meaningful relationships, a fulfilling career, hope for the future, and success in life are all out of reach. We will be vulnerable and wounded over and over. We will walk in circles and repeat past mistakes. We

will make no progress in life and build no legacy. We will miss the great joy and satisfaction that comes from doing God's will and serving his purpose.

In our nakedness, brokenness, weakness, humiliation, and loss, we are tempted to do _____ and we are filled with _____. (Ever had a dream that you were in public with only underwear on, or worse? How effective were you? How did you feel about yourself?) That is exactly where our enemies—those who would control us—want us to be. But despair and shame are not in God's plan for us. God's plan for us is strength, security, success, and service.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. The LORD will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the LORD your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom (Deuteronomy 28:12-13).

We may feel like the man in Jesus' story. We may feel beaten, broken, and bruised. Others may have stripped us naked and left us dying. Many may have ignored our pain and passed us by, but God is on his way. And he has a plan.

How do we experience the process of restoration? How do we strengthen the temple within and rebuild the walls and gates?

1st Step: the heart and heart realization that we cannot save or repair ourselves. It is God who sees our need and hears our cries for help.

Remember what God told Moses from the burning bush on the day he called him to deliver Israel. God said that he was moved to compassion because he had heard the "groans" of the children of Israel." The same is true for Nehemiah.

From the moment Nehemiah heard about the ruined state of Jerusalem, he was overcome with sorrow and grief. He said, “*When I heard these words, I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed...*” (Nehemiah 1:4). **In fact, he grieved in prayer and groaned to God for five months.** It was this sorrow that moved the hand of God and captured the attention of the king.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, ruler of the Medo-Persian empire. That meant that he was in the inner circle of the world’s most powerful king. He was trusted and had the king’s confidence. Still, better men than Nehemiah had been put to death for displays of emotion before the king.

Nehemiah was frightened when the king himself confronted him for the sadness he felt could not be concealed. “Why are you sad?” demanded the king. “You’re not sick.” But king could see beyond Nehemiah’s face. “This is sorrow of the heart,” the king concluded.

Once the secret was out, Nehemiah’s fate was in the king’s hands. But rather than offer a judgment, the king asked for a reason. “Why, Nehemiah? Why are you sad?”

When the sad condition of our lives is understood, it’s okay to hurt and cry. We need to grieve our losses and mourn. Proper grieving helps us in many ways.

1) It starts the healing and the movement toward healing. Remember: *emotion* means “to move.” Proper grieving moves and motivates me to make necessary changes in my life.

2) Proper grief moves the pain and sorrow out of my heart. That makes room for something new.

3) Grief helps direct my prayer on the important things. It also helps us focus on God even when worries escape me. God’s ears are attuned to our groaning, and he searches my face for tears. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, called tears “liquid prayer.” And King David said that God kept his tears in a bottle of remembrance and recorded them in a book (Psalm 56:8).

There is too much not and not enough tears.

4) Proper grief serves an important purpose for our future. It fixes our loss in our memory and helps us recognize our pain. There is no virtue in ignoring or forgetting pain. It is my greatest guide to health and recovery. It is my faithful reminder not to repeat past mistakes.

I hope that the pain of the Jews in the Holocaust or the suffering of the African Americans through slavery and segregation is never forgotten. May we all remember the torment of ethnic cleansing endured by the Bosnians, Kurds, and countless others like them. May we remember the misery of war victims in every age. And may we never lose sight of the anguish endured by our people and ourselves due to mistakes which must never be repeated. There truly is some pain which must never be forgotten.

5) Proper grief also prepares my heart for confession. Like Psalm 51, David’s prayer of confession and plea for forgiveness was preceded by his grief and sorrow.

So my first step to restoration and healing begins with the recognition of my pain. Like Nehemiah I face the facts and grieve the losses. But I don’t sorrow alone. I have a partner in prayer, a Comforter who cares. The Apostle Paul wrote:

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express”
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If I am able to recognize the ruin in my life and process the pain, I can grieve and move on to the next step. But if I cannot perceive the problems or feel and face the pain, I’m stuck. There is no “next step.” What’s needed now is sobriety and sensitivity. Whatever I have used to numb or kill the pain must be removed. It could be a bottle, but more likely, it’s blame or some other form of denial.

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The walls and gates to our city are boundaries like the river's banks. When our boundaries are well establish (deep and steep), much good can come from us. A strong and deep river establishes an i_____ and is known for its blessing. It can generate power, transport material goods, and provide a constant supply of water for cities and crops.

In the same way, the walls and gates of our city can define our identity and set our l_____. They contain and conserve our personal strength and resources. They ensure our security, unify our goals, and focus our efforts. They allow us to control the intrusions and influence of the outside world. And most importantly, strong walls and gates allow us to seek and serve God's will above any other.

But many of us are far from the strength of a restored Jerusalem. Many of us are in a state of ruin. Our walls are broken and our gates are burned. We are without boundaries—our city limits are overrun. Others intrude and impose their will. They c_____ our resources and c_____ our lives. They have sapped our strength and stolen our security. We no longer have an identity, a focus, or a purpose in life.

Without walls and gates (proper boundaries), meaningful relationships, a fulfilling career, hope for the future, and success in life are all out of reach. We will be v_____ and wounded over and over. We will walk in circles and repeat past mistakes. We

will make no progress in life and build no legacy. We will miss the great joy and satisfaction that comes from doing God's will and serving his purpose.

In our nakedness, brokenness, weakness, humiliation, and loss, we are tempted to d_____ and we are filled with _____. (Ever had a dream that you were in public with only underwear on, or worse? How effective were you? How did you feel about yourself?) That is exactly where our enemies—those who would control us—want us to be. But despair and shame are not in God's plan for us. God's plan for us is strength, security, success, and service.

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future" (Jeremiah 29:11).

The LORD will open the heavens, the storehouse of his bounty, to send rain on your land in season and to bless all the work of your hands. You will lend to many nations but will borrow from none. The LORD will make you the head, not the tail. If you pay attention to the commands of the LORD your God that I give you this day and carefully follow them, you will always be at the top, never at the bottom (Deuteronomy 28:12-13).

We may feel like the man in Jesus' story. We may feel beaten, broken, and bruised. Others may have stripped us naked and left us dying. Many may have ignored our pain and passed us by, but God is on his way. And he has a p_____.

How do we experience the process of restoration? How do we strengthen the temple within and rebuild the walls and gates?

1st Step: the h_____ and h_____ realization that we cannot save or repair ourselves. It is God who sees our need and hears our cries for help.

Remember what God told Moses from the burning bush on the day he called him to deliver Israel. God said that he was moved to compassion because he had heard the "gr_____ of the children of Israel." The same is true for Nehemiah.

From the moment Nehemiah heard about the ruined state of Jerusalem, he was overcome with sorrow and grief. He said, “*When I heard these words, I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed...*” (Nehemiah 1:4). **In fact, he grieved in prayer and groaned to God for five months.** It was this sorrow that moved the hand of God and captured the attention of the king.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, ruler of the Medo-Persian empire. That meant that he was in the inner circle of the world’s most powerful king. He was trusted and had the king’s confidence. Still, better men than Nehemiah had been put to death for displays of emotion before the king.

Nehemiah was frightened when the king himself confronted him for the sadness he felt could not be concealed. “Why are you sad?” demanded the king. “You’re not sick.” But king could see beyond Nehemiah’s face. “This is sorrow of the heart,” the king concluded.

Once the secret was out, Nehemiah’s fate was in the king’s hands. But rather than offer a judgment, the king asked for a reason. “Why, Nehemiah? Why are you sad?”

When the sad condition of our lives is understood, it’s okay to hurt and cry. We need to grieve our losses and mourn. Proper grieving helps us in many ways.

1) It starts the healing and the movement toward healing. Remember: *emotion* means “to move.” Proper grieving moves and motivates me to make necessary changes in my life.

2) Proper grief moves the pain and sorrow out of my heart. That makes room for something new.

3) Grief helps direct my prayer on the important things. It also helps us focus on God even when worries escape me. God’s ears are attuned to our groaning, and he searches my face for tears. William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army, called tears “liquid prayer.” And King David said that God kept his tears in a bottle of remembrance and recorded them in a book (Psalm 56:8).

There is too much not and not enough tears.

4) Proper grief serves an important purpose for our future. It fixes our loss in our memory and helps us release our pain. There is no virtue in ignoring or forgetting pain. It is my greatest guide to health and recovery. It is my faithful reminder not to repeat past mistakes.

I hope that the pain of the Jews in the Holocaust or the suffering of the African Americans through slavery and segregation is never forgotten. May we all remember the torment of ethnic cleansing endured by the Bosnians, Kurds, and countless others like them. May we remember the misery of war victims in every age. And may we never lose sight of the anguish endured by our people and ourselves due to mistakes which must never be repeated. There truly is some pain which must never be forgotten.

5) Proper grief also prepares my heart for confession. Like Psalm 51, David’s prayer of confession and plea for forgiveness was preceded by his grief and sorrow.

So my first step to restoration and healing begins with the release of my pain. Like Nehemiah I face the facts and grieve the losses. But I don’t sorrow alone. I have a partner in prayer, a Comforter who cares. The Apostle Paul wrote:

“In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express”
(Rom 8:26).

If I am able to recognize the ruin in my life and process the pain, I can grieve and move on to the next step. But if I cannot perceive the problems or feel and face the pain, I’m stuck. There is no “next step.” What’s needed now is sobriety and sensitivity. Whatever I have used to numb or kill the pain must be removed. It could be a bottle, but more likely, it’s blame or some other form of denial.