

09.13.2015

The Story, Chapter 21: Rebuilding the Walls
Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

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“Well, we’re here,” Nehemiah turned and told his assistant. He had served as cupbearer to the king of Persia—which made Nehemiah kind of a big deal. But now, he found himself as governor of Jerusalem by the order of that same king of Persia. You see, Nehemiah was sent to help with the rebuilding project—y’know, finish getting the walls put back up around the city. All the way there, he was pretty excited about his new mission. After all, this was home; this was his history, this was where he belonged. Like you and I sing along to the radio on a long road trip, along his journey he sang songs of praise to the Lord, called the hallel psalms.

But now, as he got closer to this legendary city, so fondly talked about among his people back in Persia, he started to wonder what all the fuss was about. His hallel psalms were suddenly stopped short as he took in what lay before him. The city walls left in ruins, stones haphazardly scattered about, whole sections missing. The gates hung off their hinges, still blackened from the fire just less than a century and a half ago. “Oh my,” he gasped. In that moment, he knew exactly *why* he’d been sent there. He took a long, hard swallow. And in that same moment, he *didn’t* know why he’d been sent there—how would this place ever be anything more than a construction zone?

After all, it had been more than ninety years since the people of Jerusalem had first returned home. All they had to show for it at this point were some home improvements, and by then the temple was about done. But what had taken them so long to rebuild the rest of their city? Well, maybe they felt a little like Nehemiah for that split second.

After all, the odds seemed stacked against them. There were their own self-doubts about the daunting work that literally lay before them. So much to do—so much energy, so much time, so much patience required. Then, several times their surrounding neighbors—the Moabites, Ammonites, Ashdodites, and Samaritans—gave them trouble, afraid the Hebrews moving back in next door would be bad for the community. These other nations would taunt them and discourage them, undo what the Hebrews had just done, and they’d wage war against them. A handful of times they even tried to invite Nehemiah to join them in a sort of U.N. meeting, but Nehemiah was smart enough to know it was really an ambush. So, against those odds, it’s easy to see why it had taken so long.

If you’ve ever seen *The Shawshank Redemption* then you know all about this. Brooks, an inmate in the prison for almost fifty years, had been away from his home for far too long. When he finally got out and tried to get back into the routine of everyday life it was just too much for him. He tried to start over again in a halfway house, working as a grocery bagger. But it was hard for him to rebuild, reconstruct, restore his old life. Eventually, he’d had enough and gave up. And if you’ve watched the movie you know what I mean.

For you and me, people who have made mistakes, have faults, and live with our many failures, it’s easy to feel like we’ve made messes of our own lives. Like Jerusalem’s walls, we look around us and everywhere we see bits and pieces, the many times we’ve become broken. We’ve sinned against God, we’ve hurt the ones we love, and we’ve wrecked ourselves. And as cruel mementos, like nasty little souvenirs, we carry around with us our and guilt and our shame, our painful memories and wounded souls—we bear on our backs the burden of regret. With reminders like those, pointing us always to our rubble—how we’ve ruined our lives—sometimes it’s tough to feel like we can ever rebuild. We might lay awake at night or struggle through our days wondering how we can ever get back to good.

Well today, Ezra knows how. And Nehemiah knows how. And all of Jerusalem knows how. It’s impossible. Absolutely impossible. Except for one thing—God. With God, nothing is impossible.

Left to themselves, even guys like Ezra and Nehemiah could've never made it. Either the enormity of the task, or the threats of all the nations, or their own weakness, impatience, distractions would've gotten the best of them. But God wouldn't let that happen. God had been there since the project began, and He was determined to see it through.

By King Cyrus, the Lord had provided a way for them to return home and then some. And every time there was opposition, God provided a way—He even fought their battles for them. Then there was Zerubbabel, Ezra, Haggi and Zechariah—God's voices of encouragement. "You can do it," He'd say. "Keep going, just a little more," He'd say. "Good job, almost there," He'd say. And now, Nehemiah is sent by the current King of Persia, Artaxerxis, to finish the project and he had everything he needed now to do the job. And just a little while later, mission accomplished. It couldn't have ever happened without God. But God did make it happen.

The same goes for you and me, on our own we are toast. We can't do this thing, we can't rebuild ourselves and our lives, undo our past. Left to ourselves, our cracks would just get bigger, our ruins would crumble all the more, and our mess would only get worse. But with God, all things are possible. Through Him, and with Him, and in Him, our lives can be put back together, lovingly rebuilt, graciously restored. In fact, they already are.

Just next week, we'll jump from the Old Testament to the New. A King will be born, a Savior will come. And as He grows up and journeys through our world, He will pick up our pieces and bear them to a cross. And as He, Himself, is broken . . . you are made whole. Restored, rebuilt, remade . . . or, as the Bible puts it, "reborn," "renewed," "resurrected." No matter what your doubts, no matter your opposition, no matter how difficult the job, God isn't just *doing* it, but has already *done* it. He *has* repaired you, fixed you, put you back together again. Your walls—right now—are rebuilt, your life *is* rebuilt, your self is rebuilt, because of Jesus Christ.

You just may have one problem with that though—Uh, Pastor, it sure doesn't feel that way. And that makes me wonder if we, as the church, have failed you. We talk so much about sin, sin, sin—we are all sinners in need of forgiveness—that's what we say. Maybe we talk about it so much because that's a wrestling match we still face every single day. You're a sinner. You sin. Repent—that's just how things seem to go in the Church. And, of course, that's true . . . but that's not even the half of it. The rest of it is that Jesus died for you, you are forgiven, you are not just a sinner . . . but you are also a *saint*. But I wonder if we sell that short just a bit. Too often, it's like you're a sinner first, saint second.

What if instead we talked about how you are all-saint for once and just end it? What if maybe we told you that good news and left it there? How would that change things? I wonder if a major hurdle in the way to believing we're actually rebuilt people *already*—here, now—is that we're always hearing about what big sinners we are. On account of Jesus Christ though, you are actually different than all of that. When God looks at you, He doesn't see anything but a perfect, faultless, blameless, pure, holy son or daughter. He doesn't see anything else, won't see anything else. Honestly, that's who you actually are. Not the sinner we talk about so much. What if you were to actually see yourself that same way too? What if . . . what if???

Anything else is a lie, a fabrication of the devil. He says, "Yeah, God might've done that a long time ago, but is it still true?" He says, "Jesus might've died for the sins of the whole world, but how do you know you're actually a part of that?" He says, "Sure, all sins can be forgiven, sure, but there's no possible way that that *one* can be—you know which one, don't you?—that one's just too big, just too ugly."

Luther also struggled with accepting his rebuilt-ness. He tells us about that. And, if you ask me, it's pretty good advice. Luther says that every time Satan came around listing his faults, he would say, "Devil, you're getting rusty, you missed some—there's that one from last week, oh, and yesterday afternoon too, and don't forget about that one just this morning." Then, if the devil persists in haunting his conscience, Luther would go on, "But Devil, Christ took those sins away, He died for them, they're His now. If you have a problem with those sins then take it up with Him." And last,

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Luther says, “If the devil still wouldn’t leave him alone, he’d just turn and break wind and usually,” he says, “that would chase him away.”

Fact is, you are God’s perfect project, and even though it feels like you’re a work in progress, as far as He’s concerned—thanks to Christ Jesus—you are already there. There are no more sins or failures or regrets to speak of. You are spotless, righteous, sanctified. To Him, you are *all* saint and NO sinner. That’s actually reality, what’s really real. That’s the truth, what’s truly true. That’s just how it is, so you might as well accept it.

Last Valentine’s Day my wife and I got out of the house and went to the Fox Theater. There, we experienced a show that we’ll never forget. It was the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. The performance we saw was one of powerful emotion, intense physicality, and raw beauty. It pulled together a host of old African American spirituals, inspiring quotations, and evocative movements. The general theme was the civil rights struggle from the days of slavery up to the modern context. Over and over again, as blacks were told that they were less than human, less than people, less than persons, they went back to the messages of God to be reminded of who the Lord said they really are. And with each divine passage they were rebuilt into the crown jewel of creation that God had made them to be. God alone determined who they were—not society, not even themselves, just God.

I still remember one of those quotes, here’s how it goes—“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us.’”

There it is—that is who you are. Rebuilt. A child of God. Shining with His glory. Ezra knew this. Nehemiah knew this. The Jews came to know this. And now this morning, you and I finally know it too.