

From Rubble to Return: A Prophecy of Pain

Nehemiah 4:1-20

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~Pain can draw us to a place where we return to pursuing our pleasure in Christ~

Please open your Bibles to the book of Nehemiah. If you've been with us for the last three weeks you should be getting a rough idea where that is. It is a bit to the left of Psalms if you are new with us this morning. And today we are in Nehemiah chapter 4.

Just to bring you up to speed on where we have been in this book, it's about a guy named Nehemiah – which shouldn't surprise you. He was an educated man and was likely the author of this book and Ezra which are actually one book in the Hebrew Bible – Ezra/Nehemiah. It's also quite possible that he wrote out the book of Esther – which you are probably aware takes place a few years earlier. Esther lived under King Xerxes, and Nehemiah served king Artaxerxes. Both of them kings of the most powerful nation in the world at its time, and kings who oversaw the 70-year captivity of Judah in Babylon.

And in the series we've been looking at how the book of Nehemiah is both descriptive and prescriptive. It's descriptive in that it is a book about Jerusalem in 400BC. And so it describes the life of a guy who was a wine taster slash city wall builder. And probably very few of us are professionals in either of those categories – thou perhaps you'd consider putting your resume in for wine taster.

But at the same time there is a prescriptive message underlying the descriptive details of this story that is very applicable to us today. There is a template here for how we are to live our lives. And one of the main messages that Nehemiah centres around is the maturing process of a disciple of God. And we can take this a step further and say "Nehemiah is about what it means to grow in Christ-likeness."

So as we get into this book we need to be asking ourselves am I a disciple of Jesus? Am I actually growing to look more like Him? Have I been getting results? As I look back over the last year or decade is there evidence in my life that I'm a disciple? Or have I gotten stuck at a particular level of immaturity. These are the prescriptive questions that Nehemiah asks us.

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So three weeks ago we looked at chapter 1 where we found Nehemiah living an incredibly cushy life. Just sample some cheese, sip some chardonnay, not fall over dead. That was his job. Now yes there was risk, but at the time Babylon was the undisputed world power, and it was a relatively benevolent kingdom. Artaxerxes was pretty accommodating to the nations he controlled even to the point that he allowed Judah to return to Jerusalem and rebuild God's temple. What this meant as far as Nehemiah was concerned was that no one was trying to poison this king. People loved him. So Nehemiah was living the high life.

And then he learns that there are Jews in Jerusalem who are in great trouble and disgrace.¹ And in spite of the fact his situation is very different and far away, God touches him and gives Nehemiah His heart for these people. And when this happens he begins to care about people who aren't anything like him at all. That's a miracle!

And then in chapter 2 he takes this care to prayer. And as he prays we see a few things. First he demonstrates two characteristics of a healthy prayer life. So he sets aside a quantity of time to pray. And we call this "quiet-time prayer." But he also demonstrates trigger-finger prayer. When stressed his reaction is to go to God.

Nehemiah also shows us a deep level of expectation through his prayer. So he ties the foundation of his request for help to the character of God – He is the "Great and Awesome God who keeps His covenant of love – Nehemiah 1:5. He is the God who remembers His promise that if His people repent then He will gather them from where they have been scattered and bring them home – Nehemiah 1:8. He is the God with a history of redeeming His people by His great strength and mighty hand – Nehemiah 1:10. And because this is who God is Nehemiah feels free to ask for favor.

It's like Nehemiah says, God this is who You are. And because this is who You are I'm confident that I know what Your will is in this situation – You want to redeem Your people. So use me to do it. That's prayer with expectation.

And then we see that prayer like this leads to eyes able to see God move. So when the king grants Nehemiah favor he doesn't credit his genius acting skills, he says "Because the gracious hand of my God was one me, the king granted my requests."²

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Then in chapter 3 Nehemiah moved out from prayer and into action. He left the comfort of his wine tasting, to throw himself into rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. And Nehemiah didn't do this alone, he surrounded himself with a small group of like spirited people. And he shared God's vision and favor with them. And then the scriptures record over 50 names of people who responded and joined him – this tastes like victory!

So Nehemiah cares for people who aren't like him; and he prays with expectation, and shares his vision of God's will with them, and he invites them to partner with him in following God. And through all of this we get a picture of the life of a disciple growing in maturity. It starts with the grace of God pouring into a person, and that changes their heart and they begin to grow in their knowledge and understanding of God. And they become sensitive to His involvement. And soon they partner with what He is doing.

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Now, if Nehemiah only had three chapters it would be done now and we'd have a very encouraging but ultimately inaccurate picture of what it means to be a disciple of Christ. And with this picture we would run out into the brokenness of a sinful and self-centered world and we would grow disillusioned and discouraged. But the ironic good news is Nehemiah doesn't end with the encouragement of chapter 3. Isn't that good news?

¹ Nehemiah 1:3

² Nehemiah 2:8

Today we are in chapter 4. And this chapter and the two after it bring the success of the start of this story into perspective. And this is encouraging, but it doesn't sound like it at first. These three chapters contain a prophecy of pain. They say "If you are following the vision God has placed on your heart, then get ready because pain's coming. Opposition is coming. Persecution is coming. Get ready, because here it comes."

Now there are some people that this won't sound encouraging to at all. And that would be people who aren't in the middle of pain and opposition and persecution – and some of you are there; enjoy that. But also know that if you aren't in the middle of pain right now, then the prophecy that it's coming might sound like bad news, but it shouldn't.

Friends, hearing that people in a sin-broken world are going to experience pain shouldn't be bad news, it shouldn't be news at all! 2000 years ago Jesus made it clear what we were signing up for. He said:

You will be hated by everyone because of Me, but the one who stands firm to the end will be saved. (Matthew 10:22)

So the prophecy of pain shouldn't be news. But it also shouldn't be depressing. And that's because while things are bad this isn't because God has abandoned us or is punishing us. Rather it's because we are living in a world of rubble that has been broken by sin and selfishness and is in rebellion against God. But sin doesn't get the last word. Friends, God has overcome the world! And so while difficulty is guaranteed, the good news is that God uses it for our good. **Pain can draw us to a place where we return to pursuing our pleasure in Christ.**

So even a prophecy of pain is not bad news. Let's look at chapter 4 verse 1.

[Read Nehemiah 4:1-2]

Sanballat is back. Remember this guy? He's the thug who is in opposition and opposing everything Nehemiah stands for.³

Now we are going to use the word "opposition" a few times today and I need to give you a definition for this since I'm not in line with the dictionary today.

So "opposition", as I'll be using it, refers to anything or anyone who threatens the perseverance of your faith, and tempts you to stop following the will of God.

And when I talk about the "will of God" I'm not talking about His secret will – like what's going to happen to you tomorrow – we don't get to know that. I'm talking about His will of desire which is the same for all Christ followers. And that is to look like Jesus in the place, and the circumstances, He has put you. That's God's will for your life.

³ Sermon outline adapted from Beau Hughes

<http://www.thevillagechurch.net/resources/sermons/detail/reality-of-opposition-denton/> (Accessed September 30, 2016)

So Opposition refers to anything or anyone who threatens the perseverance of your faith and tempts you to stop courageously following the will of God. And this is what Sanballat is eager to do. He wants to discourage Nehemiah from following through on the vision God has given him.

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Now this situation is not fair. Nehemiah and the Jews have their hearts in the right place. They've been seeking God in prayer, and they've been tuning their eyes to see Him at work, and throwing themselves into participating with where He is active, and then Sanballat and his army of mocking Samaritans show up. Why?!

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Now Sanballat has a not so secret interest in Nehemiah's demise. At this point in history he is about to be proclaimed king in Samaria. Now that might sound impressive, but really he was a big fish in a very little pond. Babylon was still in charge and they had him on a leash, so he was just being allowed to have his way in a little part of the kingdom. And now he is threatened, and maybe jealous, of what Nehemiah has been allowed to do.

So like any insecure bully he taunts them. And at this stage it is just words. But "just words" is really an oxymoron. Right? The fact is that words are powerful. They can tear people down and they can build people up.

I remember being in about grade 3 and coming home one day from school just devastated because my best friend, Conrad, had taken to calling me Danielle all day. And I remember sobbing to my mom all the way home – I wasn't exactly Pierce Brosnan.

Finally, mom recommended I return the taunt by calling him Connie and I was able to regain my composure. But this taught me words are powerful. And this isn't just true in elementary school.

So Sanballat taunts. And he does his mocking in front of his army and the people of Jerusalem, so this is public humiliation. The only thing a tactic like this needs to make it worse is a crony sidekick. And Sanballat even has that. Look at verse 3.

[Read Nehemiah 4:3]

Now I'm pretty sure Tobiah was short and scrawny and peeking out from under Sanballat's armpit as he taunts – the text doesn't say this, but there is probably a footnote somewhere. Or maybe I'm being influenced by Ralphie and the B.B. gun from "A Christmas Story" and the sidekick of that bully Scut Farkus – remember him? Either way Tobiah's nothing on his own, and so with big Sanballat as his shield he lobbs out his vocal bombs of offense.

And the taunt he comes up with is classic. "If a fox climbs your wall it's going to fall down." What a zinger! But it's malicious.

The intent is to oppose the God-honouring wall builders. They persecute to discourage them from following through on the vision God has given Nehemiah. That's what they want to happen.

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Now we live in Canada so there isn't an army of people taunting us like this – that's descriptive, but we are opposed. Right now Christianity is under legal attack which threatens our religious freedom. And on top of this there is a group of people who have made it their business to convince the country that if you are a Christ follower you are an intolerant and simple-minded bigot. So there is that. But probably little of this affects you personally. And yet all of us face opposition that seeks to discourage us from reflecting Christ.

So maybe it's a strained relationship at work that keeps you from being obvious about your faith. Or maybe it's sickness in your body that tempts you to feel defeated. Or maybe it's tension between you and your spouse that makes looking like Jesus feel impossible. Or maybe it's a teething child that won't sleep and leaves you exhausted.

Whatever it is the pressure you are facing is opposing your resolve to live in a way that honours Christ. And you feel the strain. If this would only go away it would be so easy to follow Christ. So what do you do? What does Nehemiah do? Look at verse 4.

[Read Nehemiah 4:4-6]

In the face of opposition Nehemiah does two things: he prays and he keeps acting. So he refuses to be distracted from what God wants him to do. And he doesn't even miss a beat in this. Now this tells us something. It tells us that Nehemiah isn't caught off guard. He expects Sanballat's attack. So when it comes he doesn't have to figure out a strategy, he already has one – press into God, and stick to what he decided to do when things were good.

Friends, the temptation in these moments is to say "Well, I meant good, but this new opposition changes things. I can't look like Christ in light of this, I'll set my hopes lower next time." Have you been there?

But that would be letting the opposition win. And Nehemiah doesn't do that. He goes to God for strength, and he sticks to the decision he made when his resolve was strong.

Now this is why it's important for us to get our minds around the Bible's prophecy of pain. And that's because if we head out expecting things to be rosy, then when they don't go our way – which Jesus says is going to happen – then we don't know what to do. And we are distracted by the opposition we face.

But if we take the prophecy of pain at face value, then we are prepared when opposition arises, and we can continue in our pursuit of Christ-likeness in spite of it.

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Alright, now there is something strange that we need to address in Nehemiah's prayer – I'm not sure if you felt a bit awkward as we read it. But Nehemiah prays some pretty nasty stuff down on Sanballat. Did you notice that? Are we supposed to pray like this?

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The short answer is "no", but here's why. This kind of prayer is called imprecatory prayer, and it's pretty common throughout the Old Testament. David was a huge fan of it.⁴ And imprecatory prayer is prayer that calls for God to judge His enemies.

Now you might think that sounds like cursing, but that's not what's happening here. In the Old Testament this kind of prayer was used to pray the will of God into a situation.

So when David is praying that his enemies would fall into the trap they have dug for him,⁵ he is praying this as God's anointed king doing God's will. David's enemies were actually God's enemies. So David prays for God to cause His will to be done. "Stop letting these people slander You, bring glory to Your name!"

But imprecatory prayer is unique to the Old Testament and so it is descriptive rather than prescriptive for us. And Jesus makes this clear. In the Sermon on the Mount – which is His teaching on what it looks like to look like Jesus – He says:

But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:44-45)

So Jesus says, leave justice to God. You pray blessings on your enemies. This is how you look like your Father. After all, hasn't He caused His good grace to rise over you in spite of the fact that you don't deserve it? Haven't you experienced the blessing of His rain even though you are a sinner? So take the grace you've received and give it away.

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Now, just because the content of Nehemiah's prayer is descriptive doesn't mean it is irrelevant. The prescription here is that when we face opposition we must not give up right away, we need to keep pressing forward. We must go to God for strength and stick to the action we discerned would honour Him when things were good.

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And so Nehemiah perseveres and things get better right? Not really. Look at verse 7.

[Read Nehemiah 4:7-12]

Things don't get better, something hits the fan! When words don't work Sanballat plans physical aggression. And he makes it hot. Saballat's from Samaria, so that's up north. Tobiah is an Ammonite, and so he's from the east. The Arabs were from the south. The Ashdodites are Philistines and they were from the west. So pressure comes at Nehemiah from all around. And the plan is to fight and cause confusion in order that the people let go of being part of what God is doing.

⁴ See Psalm 7, 35, 55, 58, 59, 69, 109 and 139 as examples of imprecatory prayer.

⁵ Psalm 7:15

Now these are the voices of opposition from outside. But it's even worse than this. There are rock throwers inside the camp too. So there are a bunch of Jews living in Judah who aren't part of the rebuilding effort. They haven't joined Nehemiah's vision to partner with what God is doing. And so 10 times they complain: "Nehemiah, you guys are causing us trouble. Now the bad guys are going to come and raise the whole place to the ground. And it's your fault!" And they just go on and on. They aren't willing to help; all they've got is counsel, and it is discouraging counsel.

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Now these aren't evil people, they are Jews. And they mean well. They just want things to stay safe and as they were. Isn't this common to all people? Haven't you felt this? They don't want change because it is uncomfortable and attracting attention. And so they counsel Nehemiah to stop. But this kind of well intentioned counsel is some of the most dangerous when it comes to sticking to God's vision.

Satan used this on Jesus. So in Matthew 16 Jesus was telling His friends that He was about to go to Jerusalem, and suffer and be killed and then raised from the dead. This is Jesus' vision from God for the future. But Peter, influenced unknowingly by Satan, didn't like the sound of this plan and so we read:

Peter took [Jesus] aside and began to rebuke Him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to You!" (Matthew 16:22)

Now Peter's advice here is totally well intentioned. "Jesus don't change things. Don't move forward. It's good like it is." He loves Jesus, and wants the best for Him. But his advice is still absolutely evil. And Jesus calls him on it "get behind Me Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God."⁶

Friends, what are God's concerns for your life, and the life of this church? Not what are your concerns – what are God's concerns?

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If Jesus had listened to Peter none of us would be here today. None of us would spend eternity with God. We'd all still be stuck in our sins. Of course Peter didn't know that, but that's the point. Often opposition to following God's will comes from well intentioned people inside the tent – from people who love God. But it's still opposition because it seeks to dissuade us from partnering with the new vision God wants to lead us into.

And it starts to work. The people start losing focus. The task just seems too big – there is too much rubble. There is just too much brokenness. And the strength of the laborers starts to give out.

Now here's the next level of opposition. When it strikes and stays some people are tempted to stop living their lives to the glory of God, not because they weren't expecting opposition, but because they weren't expecting it to last. And when it does they aren't prepared to persevere. And there were some among Nehemiah's wall builders who were like this. Their strength started to give out.

⁶ Matthew 16:23

And some of you are here this morning. You've set out to live your life to the glory of God but instead of enjoying blessing it just feels like it's one thing after another. And you are tempted to feel like you don't deserve this. "Come on God, I'm doing everything right, how come You aren't doing Your share? How come the chemo isn't killing my cancer? How come my boss just refuses to recognize I'm doing my best? How come my spouse won't forgive me? How come my professor keeps discriminating? Why?

Have you been there? Are you there right now?... Let me give you a couple thoughts for when opposition sticks around longer than expected.

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Friends, when this happens choose not to be discouraged, instead see this as an opportunity to deal with the illusions we all have about what we are capable of doing on our own. You see when we face small opposition we can grin and bear it and get through without actually having to depend on God. And when this happens we fall into fixing our problems on our own. Instead of relying on God even for the small stuff.

But then when we get hit with something big that doesn't go away eventually our strength gives out. And at that point two things can happen: we can realize how much we have been relying on ourselves all along, or we can give up.

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Now here's where we come back to the prophecy of pain being good news. When we find ourselves in a spot where we have no choice but to trust God or die (whatever death looks like in your particular situation), that's not bad, that's grace! But we need to trust God in that moment. The terrible thing is that so many of us hang on until this point, but then instead of turning to God when it gets too hard we throw in the towel. So we give up on marriage, or we stop serving at church, or we stop trying to bring Christ to work, or to school, or to our family. It just seems too hard.

But this is exactly what the enemy's opposition is aiming to achieve. Its crucible is designed to stop us from finding our joy in God's sufficiency. It wants to convince us that the reward of looking like Christ is too small for the effort required. But it's got no real power. God's on our side. So even with the worst the devil can throw at us we can always choose to live for Jesus. The truth is it's never too hard to honour God. If we remain faithful, He always makes a way.

Look what Nehemiah does in verse 13.

[Read Nehemiah 4:13-20]

When the opposition gets strongest and doesn't go away Nehemiah sticks to his plan of action. And he's smart and prepared. He defends the vision God has given him. And he inspires the people to keep seeing that God is in this, and focusing on the Lord who is great and awesome and fights for His own.

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Friends, you aren't going to overcome the opposition in your life because you're good or because you're strong or smart. You might be able to hold out for a while, but the prophecy of pain is that eventually you won't be enough. But that's not bad news, that's God's message of grace for self-reliant sinners.

So wherever you are today let Nehemiah's faithfulness encourage you to remember it is God who's awesome. The blood of His Son shed for you is the reason you don't have to be afraid. The power of His Holy Spirit living inside you is the reason you don't have to give up. So choose to stick to your decision to glorify God with your life no matter what comes. This is where our joy resides. And this is where we find that it is God who fights for the faithful.