

Coram Deo
Soli Deo Gloria, Soli Deo Gracia, Soli Scriptura
Agnus Dei, Qui Tollis Peccata Mundi
Deo Volente
Sermon Preach at Stouffville United Church
By the Rev.Dr. John S. Niles MSM CD

From Rebuilding Walls to Rebuilding Lives

Nehemiah 7:1-73

October 30 2022

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRc3OD_bxZ8 play until 2:21 When it says, I'm coming back

“Whatever you are going through today has not come to stay. It has come to PASS.” If you aren't dead. God isn't done with you yet!

My daughter sent me the story of a king in Africa who had a close friend with whom he grew up. The friend had a habit of looking at every situation that ever occurred in his life (positive or negative) and remarking, "This is good!"

One day the king and his friend were out on a hunting expedition. The friend would load and prepare the guns for the king. The friend had apparently done something wrong in preparing one of the guns, for after taking the gun from his friend, the king fired it and his thumb was blown off. Examining the situation, the friend remarked as usual, "This is good!" To which the king replied, "No, this is NOT good!" and proceeded to send his friend to jail.

About a year later, the king was hunting in an area that he should have known to stay clear of. Cannibals captured him and took him to their village. They tied his hands, stacked some wood, set up a stake and bound him to the stake. As they came near to set fire to the wood, they noticed that the king was missing a thumb. Being superstitious, they never ate anyone who was less than whole. So untying the king, they sent him on his way.

As he returned home, he was reminded of the event that had taken his thumb and felt remorse for his treatment of his friend. He went immediately to the jail to speak with his friend.

"You were right," he said, "it was good that my thumb was blown off." And he proceeded to tell the friend all that had just happened. "And so, I am very sorry for sending you to jail for so long. It was bad for me to do this."

"No," his friend replied, "This is good!"

"What do you mean, 'This is good?' How could it be good that I sent my friend to jail for a year?"

"If I had not been in jail, I would have been with you."

There are many who today only want to focus on the blessings and the favor of God. And that is not a bad thing. However, though Nehemiah experienced the blessings and favor of God, it didn't come along without challenges. But rather the blessings and favor were the result of obedience and watchfulness. It involved staying vigilant and not getting distracted as we saw last week by those situations or individuals that wanted to interrupt you, intimidate you or incriminated you.

In our study of Nehemiah we've seen how, against great odds and opposition they rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah made a difference in the lives of his people and they all became better people for facing and overcoming the challenges.

And yet, he discovered that though the wall was completed and rebuilt Nehemiah's focus must now turn to rebuilding lives. He still couldn't get distracted he had to stay focused but now of rebuilding lives

Marla Runyan gave her all to qualify for the Olympic Games in 1996, but her best time finished short of the mark to make the United States team. Undeterred by that failure, she returned in 2000 and made the team for the Sydney Olympics. Her eighth place finish in the 1,500-meter race was the best finish ever for a United States woman runner. The thing that makes Runyan's accomplishments even more remarkable is that she is legally blind. She is the first legally blind athlete to ever qualify for and compete in the Olympic Games. After her Olympic career was over she switched to running marathons and in 2002 posted the second fastest debut marathon time ever by an American woman.

Runyan can only see shapes and blurs, but she says that her lack of vision is actually an asset—she just focuses on the finish line in front of her rather than looking around to see what the other runners are doing. Not having visual distractions helps her compete and win her races. The same thing can be true in our lives. There will always be things that try to pull us away from what we should be focused on doing. Many times these will be good things, but we must be willing to set them aside and stay focused on what is most important.

The writer of Hebrews said, *"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith"* (Hebrews 12:1–2)

I

The first principle he used to build up the people and rebuild their lives was to **encouraged borders or boundaries**. *"Now when the wall was rebuilt and I had set up the doors, and the gatekeepers and the singers and the Levites were appointed..."* Nehemiah 7:1 (NASB) He saw that the homes of the people were in rough shape as were the people.

The scripture says: "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life." Proverbs 4.23

"Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward. Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God..." 2 John 1.8-9

I'm reminded of a story of some soldiers who went on "leave" "The commanding officer was furious when 5 soldiers who had been out on passes failed to show up for morning roll call. It wasn't until 7 p.m. did the first soldier straggle in.

"I'm sorry, sir," the soldier explained, "but I had a date and lost track of time, and I missed the bus back. Being determined to get in on time, I hired a cab. Halfway here, the cab broke down near a farm. I went to a farmhouse and persuaded the farmer to sell me a horse. I was riding to camp when the animal fell over dead. I walked the last ten miles, and just got here." Though skeptical, the Colonel let the young man off with a reprimand. However, after him, 3 other stragglers came in a row with the same story-had a date, missed the bus, hired a cab, bought a horse, etc. By the time the 5 man reported in, the colonel had grown weary of it.

"Okay," he growled, "now what happened to you?" "Sir, I had this date and missed the bus back, so I hired a cab." "Wait!" the colonel screeched at him. "Don't tell me the cab broke down." "No, sir," replied the soldier. "The cab didn't break down. It was just that there were so many dead horses in the road, we had trouble getting through."

G K Chesterton "Art and morality have this in common. They both know where to draw the line."

Boundaries in our lives- like borders of countries -keep some things in and other things out. They create order to our life and relationships and so Nehemiah was encouraging that in the lives of his people.

Tom Landry, former Hall of Fame Coach of the Dallas Cowboys once had this to say: "Most successful football players not only accept rules and limitations but, I believe, they need them. Players are free to perform at their best only when they know what the expectations are where the limits stand. I see this as a biblical principle that also applies to life, a principle our society as a whole has forgotten; you can't enjoy true freedom without limits."

II

The principles he used to build up the people were that he encouraged boundaries and secondly, he **examined the belief system**. "*...then I put Hanani my brother, and Hananiah the commander of the fortress, in charge of Jerusalem, for he was a **faithful man and feared God more than many.***" Nehemiah 7:2 (NASB)

Nehemiah didn't put just anyone in charge of the city he risked his life to rebuild. He chose people who were faithful and people who were believers in God. Along with boundaries is having a strong belief system

The story is told of a monastery in Portugal, perched high on a 3,000-foot cliff and accessible only by a terrifying ride in a swaying basket. The basket is pulled with a single rope by several strong men, perspiring under the strain of the fully loaded basket. One American tourist who visited the site got nervous halfway up the cliff when he noticed that the rope was old and frayed. Hoping to relieve his fear he asked, "How often do you change the rope?" The monk in charge replied, "Whenever it breaks."

Nehemiah didn't wait to see if things would break. He examined the lives of the people and those in leadership. He understands that a good foundation, built on faith in God is paramount when rebuilding your life.

III

The principles he used to build up the people were that he encouraged boundaries, and examined the belief system and finally, he **eliminated negative influences**. "*These were they who came up from Tel-melah, Tel-harsha, Cherub, Addon and Immer; but they could not show their fathers' houses or their descendants, whether they were of Israel...*" Nehemiah. 7:61 (NASB) At verse 61 we are shown the list of those *without valid claim* to be there. And they were removed. Why?

Nehemiah was removing those that might undermine the others. It was a matter of making sure that what they were starting had the best chance of succeeding.

Now that seems harsh.

However, we have all heard it said, “a few bad apple spoils the bunch” This phrase goes back to Shakespeare’s time and also appeared in the published work by Benjamin Franklin in 1736.

It’s meaning has been to remind us that it only takes a few people, or actions or negative influences to ruin a good thing or create problems. So what do you do with those bad influences? You remove them; just as Nehemiah did.

If you are going to rebuild your life, one important step is to remove negative or unhealthy influences from your life and replace them with positive and beneficial ones.

Eleanor Roosevelt said, “Great minds discuss ideas; average minds discuss events; small minds discuss people.” And the smallest minds of all criticize people.

Criticisms like, “you’ll never get well, never accomplish your dreams, never rebuild the wall, never break this addiction, never reclaim what you lost or rebuild your life? When we accept those thoughts into our minds – whether they came from someone or just our own thoughts as we struggle - we claim them as our own and they immobilize us.

If Nehemiah had allowed people – who may have been planted there by Sandblatt or Tobiah – to remain all the good work would be lost. Or if he had believed what Sandblatt and Tobiah has been saying, the wall wouldn’t have been completed.

Now the harder work of rebuilding a defeated people begins. Physical walls are easier to rebuild than broken people.

The work begins by restricting access to us from the people, places, things or thoughts that have caused the walls of your life to collapse. And then you have to remove not only the negative that is around us; but also, within us.

It’s easy to go through life holding on to things that weigh us down—guilt, resentment, doubt, worry, then getting rid of it. The problem is, when we allow these negative emotions in, they take up space we need for the good things that should be there. Imagine your life is like a container. You were created to be filled with joy, peace, confidence, and creativity. But if you allow worry in, it pushes out the peace. There’s not space for both.

This past week my son did a 30km Ruck for a cure for cancer in honour of our son his brother Sean. A ruck is a backpack. In the military it is a common thing to carry a ruck for 10-15km. But eventually you put it down and clean it out — the problem is that in life we carry this emotional or personal baggage on our backs and never put it down

There was a monk with a young novice who were walking in a forest and came across a river. There was a beautiful young woman who wanted to cross but was afraid. The old monk offered to carry her. The novice protested saying it would be wrong to do so, and breaking of vows. The older monk dismissed him and with her permission carried her across the river, put her down and went on his way in silence with the novice. About an hour later, the novice was ‘Son, I put her down, and hour ago. Why are you still carrying her?’

Often we carry burdens that we should have put down or gotten rid of years ago.
To quote Dr Sues

“Life is too short to wake up in the morning with regrets, so love the people who treat you right, forget about the ones who don't, and believe that everything happens for a reason. If you get a chance, take it. If it changes your life, let it. Nobody said life would be easy, they just promised it would be worth it.” You think about that.