

Where Do You Begin When You Need to Rebuild?

Rich Nathan
April 10 & 11, 2021
Let's Rebuild
Nehemiah 1

Let me begin today with a story. Back in 1945 as the Second World War was entering its final phase, nearly 250 bombers dropped firebombs on the German city of Dresden. 500 English and American bombers came back a few hours later to finish the job. Dresden was unable to defend itself. The German Air Force was virtually out of commission by this point in the war. This was the British and American retaliation for the German bombings of London and other English cities during the early days of the war.

The concentration and firebombs unleashed a mammoth firestorm that destroyed most of Dresden. Dresden was a very beautiful baroque city that had a lovely church in its center. Once the fires began, it was virtually impossible to put out. Dresden burned for nearly seven days and nearly 12,000 buildings in the city were destroyed. The flames could be seen 70 miles away. It's impossible to know how many people died from the firebombing since there were many refugees in Dresden at the time of the bombing. The estimates range from a low of 25,000 people to more than 100,000.

In the decades following the war, many European cities were rebuilt. Buildings were restored. But Dresden was trapped in East Germany and there was no money to restore that historic city. Ugly Soviet-style buildings were built. The church that was in the center of Dresden, the treasure of that city, remained in ruins.

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Church in ruins

The name of the church was Frauenkirch, which means "the church of Our Lady". It was a Lutheran Church and there was a statue of Martin Luther in front of the church. So this beautiful church remained in ruins for 50 years.

But in the 1990s, after German reunification, the people of Dresden led by the Lutheran Church decided they were going to try to rebuild the church as a symbol of healing, as a symbol of the miracle of reconciliation and recreation. IBM got involved and they created these computerized 3D images of all the different stones and rubble and then they numbered all of the stones. Many of the original stones and blocks were used to rebuild this gorgeous church. After a decade, Frauenkirch was completely rebuilt and

reopened for church services. Marlene and I got to visit Frauenkirch about a decade ago.

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Rebuilt Frauenkirch

I love stories of restoration. You know, it's one thing to create, but it seems to me to be a greater miracle, a greater act of grace when God chooses to recreate. To bring out of the ashes a restored marriage, a restored life, a restored church. I love the fact that God is in the business of not only creating, but of recreating, of restoring, of offering new beginnings to people whose worlds have been destroyed.

This year has been a year of devastation and destruction around the world. Here in our country, more than half a million people have died of COVID. Many times more were hospitalized and millions have lost family members and friends to this pandemic. Our workplaces were emptied. Lots of people lost their jobs and many businesses around the country closed. Kids missed a year of in-person school. Teens and young adults particularly suffered as they were forced into solitude at a time in life when people most crave connection.

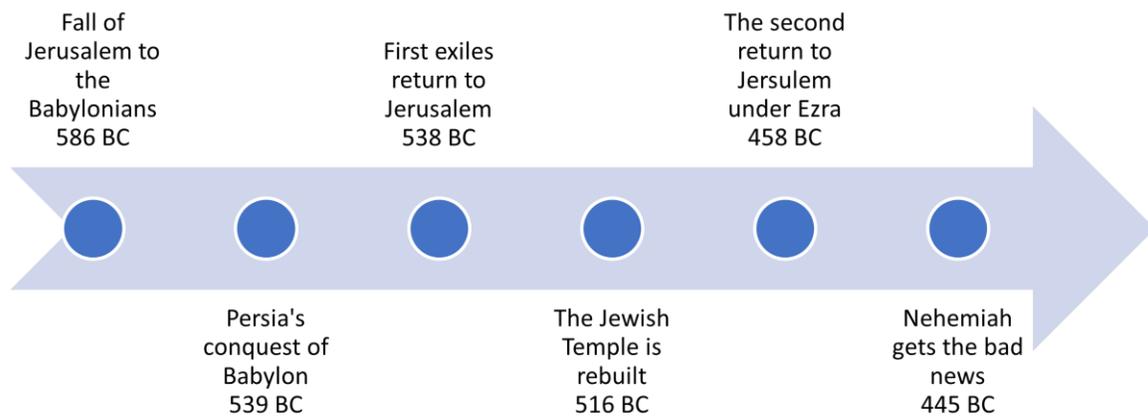
A survey of Americans taken a few months ago found that 36% of all Americans, including 51% of mothers with young children and a shocking 61% of young adults, reported "serious loneliness" – feeling lonely almost all the time. Any of you teens or young adults know what I'm talking about. Loneliness is not just something that people can easily shrug off. It's linked to a whole range of physical and emotional problems, including depression, anxiety, heart disease, substance abuse, self-harm. The isolation resulting from the pandemic caused destruction far beyond the sickness and death that we often hear about.

Destruction is not just at an individual level, the church across the world – including our church, Vineyard Columbus – has been scattered. We weren't able to meet together in person. We were reduced to meeting virtually. So many of the things that we value – being able to pray for one another in person, hugging one another, taking communion together, seeing friends and loved ones, worshiping together were ripped away this past year. We've lost connection with one another. For most of us, our relational muscles – the muscles we use to relate and connect – have atrophied. And now as the pandemic seems to be passing and more and more of us are getting vaccinated, it's time to rebuild. Not only our own individual lives. It's time to rebuild our beloved church, Vineyard Columbus.

But where do you begin? "Where do you begin when you need to rebuild?" That's the title of today's message. I'm beginning a series from the book of Nehemiah which is a wonderful little book in the Old Testament. It's a series that we've titled: Let's Rebuild. Let's pray.

Let me give you the historical context of what we just read in Nehemiah 1.

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Timeline



Here we are in 445 BC, 2500 years ago. After the Jewish exile, Jews were allowed to return to the Promised Land. The Temple was rebuilt. Construction was started on the city walls around Jerusalem. But the attempt to completely rebuild the walls was crushed by a coalition of hostile nations around Israel. The Israelites who returned to the Promised Land found themselves politically isolated. Jerusalem lay undefended, unprotected by walls, people were vulnerable to attack at any moment. They lived in fear. When the Jews desperately needed to rebuild, faithful God raised up a leader named Nehemiah. Nehemiah's name means "the Lord comforts". God, through this man Nehemiah, brought healing and comfort to his people.

Let's look at verses 1-3:

Slide Nehemiah 1:1-3
The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa,
² Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

³ 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."

I just want to quickly note that Hanani who was mentioned in verse 2 was a governor of the Jewish people and is also mentioned in some ancient documents that have been discovered in Egypt. It's important for us to always remind ourselves that what we read in the Bible is not just a book of religious beliefs. It's a book of God's activity in real history. Many of the people that we read about in the Bible are spoken about in other documents, inscriptions and artifacts found from the ancient world. One reason that I have confidence in the Bible's reliability is because the facts in the Bible have been confirmed by archeologists. Hanani is just one of hundreds of examples.

In verse 3, Nehemiah gets terrible news

Slide Nehemiah 1:3

³ 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."

What was Nehemiah's reaction to hearing bad news of the situation of his fellow Jews in Jerusalem? Let's read verse 4.

Slide Nehemiah 1:4

⁴ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

In many ways, Nehemiah's reaction could be considered unexpected. It's a testimony to the grace of God at work in Nehemiah's life. Nehemiah was personally doing really well! His life was flourishing. As we read into the chapter, we see this little phrase "I was cupbearer to the king". These little incidental remarks. I'm like, "Hey, by the way, I was with the Secretary of State when I heard this news." He's a major government official. He's a guy with a lot of clout.

Nehemiah is like one of those people who personally sailed through the pandemic and is able to say, "Actually, the pandemic had almost no impact on me. Yes, I couldn't go to some of my favorite restaurants. I missed watching some of my favorite sporting events. I love going to plays and we weren't able to do that. At a financial level, the pandemic didn't affect me at all. In fact, I'm better off now than I was a year ago. My retirement account grew. My business improved. No one in my family got sick. I heard of people who died – but no one close to me. My family is closer now than we ever were. Actually, I'm doing great."

Nehemiah was one of those rare people who said that "my life is not just about me". I'm doing great, but I care about people who aren't doing great. I believe that one of the clearest marks of the grace of God in your life is when you personally are doing great

but that's not enough for you! For some people, that's enough. As long as I'm well, the kids are well, I've got money. What else could I want?

But when God gets ahold of your life, one way you know that is that your personal financial situation, your personal health and personal gain is not enough for you! You actually care about people who aren't doing great. And you use your influence to make a difference.

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Using your influence

Nehemiah never had the attitude: I made it. Why can't they? Most people when they make it never look back. Most people when they climb the ladder of success, pull the ladder up so that no one else can climb up after them. Our family made it in America, why can't you?

Nehemiah followed in the footsteps of a long line of biblical heroes who were all changed by an encounter with God. Here's what we read about Moses:

Slide Hebrews 11:24-26

²⁴ By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. ²⁵ He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.

We see the same thing in the life of Father Abraham in Genesis 14. And of course, it's clearly in our Lord Jesus Christ of whom we read:

Slide 2 Corinthians 8:9

⁹ For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

I could show you dozens of examples of people in the Scripture and people in the history of the church who were so laid hold of by the grace of God, that they used their positions of influence not just for themselves. Here we have Nehemiah lifting others up who were suffering.

Let me tell you a story that's a little closer to home. A group of very generous individuals from our church put their finances together and decided to build a children's home in Cambodia. They take in orphan children who otherwise would be vulnerable to being sex trafficked in Cambodia. There are 28 children living in each home, with two house parents. It functions like a family. These children are clothed and fed at the home. The home was completed back in 2015. Some of the church members visited the home for the first time in the summer of 2016. One couple so fell in love with the

children that they have decided to completely fund the primary school that serves not only our children, but the children from five other homes.

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Asia's Hope pics

They are also covering the cost of university for children from all six homes for five years! These church members understand that God is the one who gives us whatever influence, power and wealth we have. They understand what most people in our world don't: God gives us our positions, our leadership and our wealth for a purpose and that's to lift others up! It's not enough for us to say, "I'm doing well. My family is doing well so God must be pleased with me." God blesses us so that we might bless others.

Let me ask you a question. What are you doing with the influence and money and gifts that you have? What are you doing for someone outside your own immediate family? In what way are you reaching back and giving a helping hand to someone else in need? Maybe you have extra money that you can give beyond your tithes to the church. Where else can you direct a little extra money? If you have some time now that we're reopening, why don't you volunteer an hour or two a week? Your church needs you to lend a hand. You can contact:

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Contact info for volunteering

Maybe you have some skill – you're a plumber or electrician, a carpenter. You can help out a new mom.

Now, it's important to note that Nehemiah doesn't start with his own analysis and plans when he hears the news of Jerusalem's plight.

Slide Nehemiah 1:4

⁴ 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 began the rebuilding project with prayer.

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Beginning with prayer

I love the fact that we don't read that Nehemiah sat down and plotted out a plan for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. I love the fact that we don't read in verse 4 that builders and engineers and researching best practices for wall building. For many of us, our first response when hearing bad news – the first thing I did was go online and researched this disease from top to bottom. The next thing I did was got on the phone

and contacted the very best doctor. Or the first thing I did when I lost my job was to put a financial plan together. I made the cold hard calculations. We needed to cut back. We needed to sell some things. We needed to move investments around. Many of us take pride in the fact that we are problem solvers.

There is a time for problem-solving. There is a time for getting counsel. There is a time for planning. But not at the beginning of the rebuilding process. The world's first response is not the Christian's first response. Notice Nehemiah doesn't begin with strategy. He doesn't begin with analysis. He doesn't begin with obsessing over the problem. Instead, he mourns and fasts and prays to the God in Heaven.

There's no greater lesson that we can learn about rebuilding our own lives, rebuilding the church after something like a pandemic than to begin by praying to the God of Heaven! We begin the rebuilding process by seeking God's face. By listening to God's voice. By asking for God's intervention. You have a problem – big, small, overwhelming, hardly worth mentioning – it doesn't matter the size of the problem. Bring it to God! You have a problem. Bring it to God. Your small group has a problem. Bring it to God. If Columbus has a problem, bring it to God. Our city, our country have huge problems – bring them to God!

Do you get it? You must go, together as a church, we must go to God! One thing we're going to find out about Nehemiah as we study this book is that Nehemiah's always going to God. He lives by the advice:

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Pray when troubles trouble you

The book begins with a prayer in Persia in chapter 1 and it closes with a prayer in Jerusalem in chapter 13.

Nehemiah prays in almost every chapter of this book. But how do we pray? Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1 is a tutorial on how to pray.

And let me mention - Eric and Julia are doing a new podcast on prayer that will be posted this Friday, 4/16. You can find this episode and all episodes of the InBetween podcast on our app

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App slide

just click "Media", then "InBetween Podcasts".

As we wrap up today, let me give you a simple pattern to follow from Nehemiah's prayer. All you need to do is remember the word "ACTS".

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A.C.T.S.

ACTS is an acronym.

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Adoration

Confession

Thanksgiving

Supplication

Nehemiah starts with adoration.

Slide Nehemiah 1:5-6a

⁵ Then I said:

“LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.

Nehemiah shows us in his tutorial on prayer that we start with ADORING God. When you pray, start with God! The disciples said to Jesus, “Lord, teach us to pray.” Jesus gave us a model for prayer that begins with “Our Father in Heaven, hallowed be your name”. Jesus didn’t deal with his problem the way we do. We begin by reciting a laundry list of problems, but often we don’t feel better after our recitation. How should you begin our prayer? When you suddenly realize that things are really bad and you need to rebuild. How do you start? By turning your eyes away from the problem, away from the rubble and looking at God.

Nehemiah says, “Lord, the God of Heaven, the great and awesome God”. It’s God we’re coming to in prayer. God in Heaven. He’s not just a little God that we put on the dashboard of the car to protect the car. God is the God of heaven and earth, not just the God of my life. He’s the God who rules over the Vineyard, the God who rules over all the churches in our community, the God who rules over your family and your workplace and our country. He’s the God of heaven and earth.

We come in prayer to the great and awesome God! One thing you need to know when you approach God in prayer is that God can do anything! He said to Abraham, “Is anything too hard for God?” The answer is no. Nothing is too hard for you, Lord.

We begin our prayer with adoration, with a recognition of who God is. If we want to find God, his address is praise and adoration. Psalm 100:4 says this:

Slide Psalm 100:4

⁴ Enter his gates with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise;
give thanks to him and praise his name.

Adoration and thanksgiving are gateways into God's presence. You say, "I don't know how to praise God outside of singing in church. How do I worship when I'm at home by myself?" Well, if you're musical like my wife, Marlene, you sit at the piano and play worship songs. If you're not musical like me – I tried to take piano lessons some years ago and Marlene begged me to stop. She said I was giving her a headache. It sounded like I was playing the piano with oven mitts on. If you're not musical like me, you know what I do? I go on YouTube and type in my favorite hymns or contemporary worship songs or type in the kind of worship music that speaks to your soul, put in some ear buds and worship along with the video. Or read a psalm out loud. Speak it to God. Psalm 95-100 are great! So are Psalm 110-118. You don't have to be brilliantly creative to worship God with adoration. Worship along with YouTube or one of the psalms or our service online!

Let's move to confession. Being in God's presence causes Nehemiah to reflect on his sin.

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Confession

Slide Nehemiah 1:6b-7

I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

When you confess your sins to God, it's important not to just confess your sins in general. I'm going to take the whole heap of my sins and say, "God, I've messed up and I'm really sorry. Please forgive me." That's a blanket confession. You need to get specific. Confession sounds like me telling God, "When we were driving back from vacation, I yelled at my wife because I was irritated because she was correcting my driving over and over."

You say: I don't know how to confess. Again, you don't have to be brilliantly creative. For years, I have used a prayer called "The Great Litany" from the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. You can find it online.

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Link to the Great Litany

Once or twice a week, I read through and pray “The Great Litany”. I’ve done this for years. I get specific in my confession.

A – Adoration. C – Confession. And T – Thanksgiving.

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Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is really simple. It’s cultivating a good memory. It’s what Nehemiah does in verse 10. He remembers God’s promises. He remembers what God has said and what God has done. And it fills his heart with thanksgiving.

Slide Nehemiah 1:10

¹⁰ “They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.

We must remind ourselves over and over again that the good things in our lives do not have to be. It doesn’t have to be the case that we feel good. Feeling good is the grace of God. Be thankful! It doesn’t have to be that we get to eat. Eating is the grace of God. Be thankful! It’s doesn’t have to be that someone in the world cares about us. Having friends and loved ones is the grace of God. Be thankful!

You say: How do I give God thanks? Again, friend, you don’t have to be brilliantly creative. I journal. I just take a notebook or a pad and I write down specifically all the things that I’m thankful for. I write them down. For the grace of God. For a wife who I love and loves me. Thank you for my children and my grandchildren. I call to mind all the gifts of God. I count my blessings in writing. It takes time. The Bible talks about offering a sacrifice of thanksgiving. When I take time to write down my thanks, that’s my sacrifice of thanksgiving. Lord, I’m going to take the time to return thanks to you.

A – adoration. C – Confession. T – Thanksgiving. And S – Supplication. It’s time to make my requests now.

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Supplication

Slide Nehemiah 1:11

¹¹ Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

I was cupbearer to the king.

If you adore God and confess your sins and thank him for his good gifts, you’re ready to tell God what you need. Nothing is too big for God to handle or too small for him to be

interested in. Sometimes I wonder if it's ok for me to pray about that? Then I'm honest with God – Lord, I don't know if I should be asking for this or not. But I leave this up to you and I'm relying on you to tell me how to pray.

Brothers and sisters, this is a season of rebuilding. We need to rebuild our individual lives. We need to rebuild our relationships. We need to rebuild our church. Friends, pray for wisdom and anointing and leadership gifts for our new senior pastors, Eric and Julia Pickerill. Pray for people to regather in person. And especially, pray for those who have been scattered by the pandemic, who have gotten disconnected from the church, to reconnect and regather in person. Pray that the Vineyard can be rebuilt like that beautiful medieval church in Dresden, Frauenkirch. Pray that we would be rebuilt and be more beautiful than we were before the pandemic.

As I said in my introduction, what God creates is a miracle. When God recreates, I believe that's an even greater miracle. Let's pray.

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- I. Using your influence
- II. Beginning with prayer
 - Adoration
 - Confession
 - Thanksgiving
 - Supplication