

LESSON 3

DON'T DESPAIR - BEGIN TO REPAIR

BY RAY C. STEDMAN

This morning we begin studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. There are three Old Testament books, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, which belong together for they cover in general the same period of time, after the Babylonian captivity when Israel had returned to Jerusalem and had begun again the worship of Jehovah in the restored temple.

Ezra and Nehemiah are one book in the Hebrew Bible. Ezra, the priest, led an early return to Israel and restored worship in the rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah had ministered to the people before that time and had urged them to build the temple, and Ezra went back to restore the worship of that temple. Nehemiah, who was a contemporary of Ezra, led a later return. He was a layman, a butler to the Emperor, Artaxerxes I (which makes Artaxerxes an ancient predecessor of the Ayatollah Khomeini, for Persia is now the modern nation of Iran).

Nehemiah is the story of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, which took place in the fifth century before Christ. It is part of the long history of that troubled city which today is still in the news, and still in trouble, as you well know. This ancient city is still surrounded by thick walls, but they are not the same walls that Nehemiah built. Those walls have disappeared; and the walls that are there now are of a much later date. However, I was in Jerusalem in 1983, and I vividly remember standing one day in company with our Lambert Dolphin and the famous Israeli archaeologist, Avigad, on top of a section of wall which he told us, with great enthusiasm and pride, he had clearly established as part of the wall that Nehemiah built. This book, therefore, is an historic account of the rebuilding of the walls of that great city.

But Nehemiah did more than rebuild a wall, as we will learn. This book is also the story of the

restoring of a people from ruin and despair to a new walk with God. Jerusalem is not only an historic city which has for centuries been the center of the life of the nation of Israel (and, in fact, the center of the biblical record), it is also a symbolic city. Jerusalem is also used in a pictorial sense throughout the Scriptures. What it pictures is the place where God desires to dwell. When the city was first designated to King David as the place where God wanted him to build the temple, he was told that this was the place where God would dwell among his people. Jerusalem therefore, throughout the Old and New Testaments, has pictured the place where God seeks to dwell. However, it is only a picture — it is not the actual place where God dwells for, according to the New Testament, man is to be the dwelling place of God. God seeks to dwell in the human spirit. That is the great secret that humanity has largely lost today, but which New Testament Christianity seeks to restore. The Apostle Paul's great statement in the letter to the Colossians is, "Christ in you, the hope of glory," (Colossians 1:27). This is God's provision and desire for man.

Jerusalem in ruins, therefore, is a picture of a life that has lost its defenses against attack and lies open to repeated hurt and misery. If you are at all acquainted with the world in which we live today, you will know that every time you turn your television on you are exposed to the hurt and misery of people whose walls have been broken down. Jerusalem in ruins is a vivid picture of their danger and despair. The book of Nehemiah depicts the way of recovery from breakdown and ruin to a condition of peace, security, restored order, and usefulness.

What an appropriate book to begin the New Year with! It is the story of a new beginning. Traditionally, New Year's Day is the day on which we review our lives. We examine our walls and our gates, as it were, reflecting on the damage and destruction that may have occurred, and we resolve to do better in the New Year. This practice of making New Year's resolutions has largely fallen out of style, however. It used to be quite common, but it has fallen into neglect. People break their resolutions so quickly they have given up making them, or else they have gone in for rather foolish, silly things, like giving up eating ice cream in bed, or wearing overshoes, or something else easy to do or to stop. But this is the day when we traditionally resolve to do better, and so is appropriate to beginning the study of the book of Nehemiah.

This last week I read of a recent survey taken of 200 people who had made New Year's resolutions last year, sincerely resolving to do better in certain areas of their lives. But the survey revealed that by the end of January half of them had broken their resolutions entirely, and none of the 200 made it through the first year! This would probably be the same story for most of us. The reason is, when you resolve to do better you are depending upon your own will power to carry it through — and will power is what most of us lack. We find it more comfortable to go back to the old habits.

In Nehemiah we learn the reason why it is difficult to keep New Year's resolutions; why there is so much failure in this area. It is because, if I may put it very clearly right at the beginning, there is no recognition of God as a necessary part of the process! The most widespread secular illusion of our day is that we do not need God to do what we want to do. We think we can function quite adequately without him. It is amazing to me how many Christians live on that basis. I find in my own life tendencies to depend upon myself to do certain things and to ignore the need for God in this process. The book of Nehemiah is designed to teach us that only with God's help can we actually change ourselves and recover from the damage and ruin of the past. That is the central lesson of this book.

During the past year we have all heard of the moral difficulties and failures of prominent television evangelists and Christian leaders. We have seen the moral collapse of outstanding and

prominent leaders. Among them was a man who was widely respected. He was not a flamboyant sensationalist, like certain of the television evangelists. He was a very widely respected, godly man, and a personal friend of mine. His name is Gordon McDonald. To everyone's horror and surprise it was learned that he had fallen into adultery. When it was made public he had to leave the work in which he was involved. He spent over a year in a state of self-imposed exile, seeking to restore his relationships with his wife and family. He has written an account of his recovery and it has been published under the title, *Rebuilding Your Broken World*. I would like to share with you a quotation from that book in which McDonald describes an incident during the time of his recovery. He writes:

In one of the darkest hours of my broken-world condition, I found myself one day in the front row of a Dallas church where I had been asked to give a talk. I had made a long-term commitment to be there, but had it not been for my hosts' hard work of preparation, I would have tried to cancel my participation. Frankly, I was in no mood to speak to anyone. But I felt constrained not to cancel, and so there I was.

When the service began, a group of young men and women took places at the front of the congregation and began to lead with instruments and voices in a chain of songs and hymns: some contemporary, others centuries old. As we moved freely from melody to melody, I became aware of a transformation in my inner world. I was being strangely lifted by the music and its content of thankfulness and celebration. If my heart had been heavy, the hearts of others about me were apparently light because, together, we seemed to rise in spirit, the music acting much like the thermal air currents that lift an eagle or a hawk high above the earth.

I not only felt myself rising out of the darkness of my spirit, but I felt as if I were being bathed, washed clean. And as the gloom melted away, a quiet joy and a sense of cleansing swept in and took its place. I felt free to express my turbulent emotions with tears. The congregation's praise was a therapy of the spirit: indescribable in its power. It was a day I shall never forget. No one in that sanctuary knew how high they had lifted one troubled man far above his broken-world anguish. Were there others there that day feeling as I did? Perhaps they would have affirmed as I did: God was there.

That is the difference that a recognition of God makes in recovering from anguish and ruin.

With that I would like to turn to Nehemiah's diary, the memoirs of a man who was used of God to lead a whole city to recovery:

The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

In the month of Kislev[that is December] in the twentieth year [i.e., of Artaxerxes], while I was in the citadel of Susa[the winter capital of Persia], 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." (Nehemiah 1:1-3 NIV)

Notice the description of Jerusalem. The people were in trouble. They were feeling a great sense of disgrace and reproach. The walls of the city were broken down (Nebuchadnezzar had started that many years earlier). The gates had been burned with fire and were no longer usable.

If we take Jerusalem as a symbol of our own lives, there are many people, perhaps many right here this morning, who fit this description.

You look back on your life this New Year's Day and you see there are places where the walls have been broken down. There is no longer any ability left to resist destructive attacks. You have fallen victim to sinful habits that you now find difficult, if not impossible, to break. That is the kind of ruin that is described here:

There may be some who feel unable to stop wrongful sexual practices. You have gone along with the ways of the world. You have fallen into practices that the Bible says are wrong. You know they are wrong. But you have difficulty stopping them. You may be indulging in pornography. I am amazed at the number of Christians who secretly indulge themselves in this area. You may be addicted to drugs. You may be hooked on tobacco or alcohol. Perhaps you have a bitter spirit. You can be an addict of a critical, censorious attitude that complains about everything as much as you can be an addict to drugs. It is so habitual that you

find yourself having difficulty stopping it. Perhaps your drift began innocently. You did not realize you were forming a habit, but now you no longer can stop it. Your defenses are gone. The walls of your city are broken down. Perhaps also your gates are burned. Gates are ways in and out. They are the way by which other people get to know you as you really are. Perhaps your gates have been destroyed, again by wrong habits:

Perhaps you were sexually abused as a child. This phenomenon seems to be surfacing more and more frequently in our day. The shame of it, and the scarring of it, has kept you a recluse. Your gates are burned and nobody has access to you. Perhaps you were a victim of divorce — or rape — or of some bitter experience — and you feel betrayed or sabotaged.

You want to run and hide. No one can reach you. You have been so badly burned you are now touchy and inaccessible. There are parts of your life you cannot talk about. You do not want anyone to know. You have a sense of great personal distress and are feeling reproach and disgrace. You have been scarred emotionally.

No one may know about it. To others you appear to be a success. They think you are doing fine, but inwardly you know you are not. As you examine the walls and the gates of your life you find much of it in ruins. How do you handle that?

That is the great question many face. But this is where the Bible comes in. That is why the Scriptures are given to us. The men and women of the past have been through these self-same difficulties and they have told us how to handle them. This great book of Nehemiah is one of the most helpful pictures we have of how to recover from broken lives — "broken-world anguish," to use Gordon McDonald's term.

The steps that Nehemiah took covers seven chapters of this book. They are very specific steps, very orderly — and very effective! Taken in order they will lead to a full recovery of usefulness. We are only going to examine the first step this morning. We find it in these words,

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 1:4 NIV)

Nehemiah clearly has a deep sense of personal concern. He is willing to face the facts, to weep over them, and tell God about them. That is always the place to begin. There is nothing superficial about this. A popular song today says, "Don't worry, Be happy." But that is mere salve over a deep cancer. What is needed is an honest facing of the ruin, whatever it may be, and, without blaming or attempting to involve somebody else, tell it all to God. By yourself, alone, face the facts. Take all the time you want and pour it out before God. Weep, if you feel like it. Tell him all the hurt, the fear, and the pain. That is always the place to start, according to Scripture. A broken spirit and a contrite heart God always welcomes.

I would suggest that you follow the pattern of Nehemiah's prayer. We will not spend a lot of time with this, but I will quickly point out the four specific things Nehemiah did in this marvelous prayer recorded here:

First, he recognized the character of God:

"Oh LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, 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 1:5b-6a NIV)

The ruin you are concerned with may not always be yours personally. It may be that of someone close to you whose life you see falling apart because of certain habits or attitudes they have allowed to enter their experience. You feel like Nehemiah, and you want to weep and mourn and tell God about it. That is always the place to start, for God is a responsive God. He gives attention to the prayers of his people. And he is a God of power and ability, and, above all, a God of love.

The second thing Nehemiah did was: he repented of all personal and corporate sins:

"I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses." (Nehemiah 1:6b-7 NIV)

This is an honest facing of his own guilt. Notice the absence of self-righteousness. He does

not say, "Lord, I am thinking of those terrible sinners back there in Jerusalem. Be gracious to them because they have fallen into wrong actions." No, he puts himself into this picture, saying, "I have contributed to this problem. There are things that I did or did not do that have made this ruin possible. I confess before you, Lord, the sins of myself and my father's house." There is no attempt to excuse or to blame others for this. It is a simple acknowledgment of wrong.

It has always been true of the people of God that any degree of self-justification will cancel out recovery. If you try to excuse yourself for what is wrong in your life, you block your own recovery. Just admit it, declare it. This is exactly contrary to the spirit of the age in which we live, but this is God's way and it is the first step in the process of recovery.

Then, third, Nehemiah reminded God of his gracious promises:

"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand." (Nehemiah 1:8-10 NIV)

Nehemiah reminds himself of the nature of God: He is a God of forgiveness, a God of restoration, a God of great power. When the heart is right, God can change all the external circumstances of a situation and make it entirely different. And he will do so. He promises he will!

Only once in the history of the world has there been a prediction made of the entire history of a nation. It is found in the book of Deuteronomy, Chapters 28-30. There, in a marvelous message, Moses prophetically outlines the entire history of Israel. He said they would disobey God; they would be scattered among the nations; they would go into exile. But if there they would turn again and acknowledge their evil, God would restore them and bring them back to the land. Nehemiah reminds God of that wonderfully gracious promise.

Even the prodigal son in Jesus' story in the New Testament, languishing in the far country, eating pig's food, reminds himself that his last resort is, "I will arise and go back to my father," (Luke 15:18a KJV). When he comes back, to his great surprise, he finds his father with open arms ready to receive him.

The fourth thing Nehemiah did was: he requested specific help to begin this process:

"O 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 [There were others praying with him]. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." (Nehemiah 1:10-11a NIV)

What man? He goes on to tell us:

I was the cupbearer to the king. (Nehemiah 1:11b NIV)

He had a place to start. It was not going to be easy, but he knew what he had to do. It was going to take the authority of the top power in the whole empire (in fact in the whole world of that day). That is not easy to arrange. Talk about playing politics! You really have to maneuver to get a king, an emperor over a vast domain, to do what you want to do, especially when there are elements involved that are threatening to him personally. That is what Nehemiah foresaw. But he believes that God will help him. And so he starts to pray, and ask for grace and strength to carry out the steps that are necessary to begin recovery.

No matter what the ruin of any life may be there is always a place to start. There is a place where you must begin. You need to apologize to someone. You need to go to somebody and straighten something out. You need to stop some practice that is wrong. You need to open yourself up to counsel. You need to seek advice. You need to get some guidance. There is always a first step. That is where you must begin.

And whatever you pray, pray that God will give you the grace, the strength and the determination to take that step. Then, the process of recovery has begun.

Let me close by asking this very personal question: Do you want to be a better man or woman in 1989? Do you long to be free from old habits, old attitudes, old practices, old and perhaps harmful friends? Then start here: Take stock of your life. Examine your walls and your gates. Forget the playoff games and the Rose Bowl game and do business with God. Make 1989 the year of recovery.

Prayer:

Thank you, Father, for this wonderfully practical book which sets out a safe guideline to recovery and usefulness. Thank you that when we fall and go astray to any degree, you do not leave us there; you make a way back. We pray that many today will be determined to begin where Nehemiah began: to tell the whole story in your ear and thus begin the process of recovery. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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