

## HOW TO HAVE A FRESH START

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Good morning! However you're feeling this morning, it's still a good morning, Amen? Because God is good. The Bible says, "His mercies are new every morning, great is your faithfulness." That's the reason why we can continue. That's the reason why we can still worship and serve our God. We may be in the dumps but God is able to bring us out of them.

I know the virus is wreaking havoc once again. Especially during this winter as it has been predicted. A few of us have been affected and we're praying for them. But those who let us know what's going on with them, it's good they let us know. Thank you for your honesty, I think that's really important, for contact tracing and for covid testing. So, it seems like this is how life will be for us in the meantime. And I hope just in the short term. Just let us be up to date with our vaccine shots to lessen the impact.

Today, we're starting a new series. It's a series about building. I mean that figuratively and literally. Figuratively, because many lives have been hurt and devastated since the past two years. It's time to build our lives again. Despite a gloomy prognosis in the months ahead, we need to keep plodding on and be positive, I mean, about life and not about covid, and learn how to dream again and build again. I saw this quote and let me show it – "May the only negative thing in 2022 be your covid test". That's my prayer for you.

Now, regarding the literal part, building refers to a building, a physical structure, a concrete place like this one where we're in right now. Yes, I'm talking about building a building. We just celebrated our 25 years last November. I believe God is now putting us in a new direction.

For the past 25 years we have concentrated on building people up, now we can concentrate on building a building where we can continue to build people up. I hope it will take only a few years, not 25 years. In any case, we will give you more details about it in the weeks ahead.

So, since we're building figuratively and literally, I thought we would adopt it as our theme this year. Look in your bulletins. "Time to Build", that's from Ecclesiastes 3:3b. And it is also the title of our series for the next eight weeks. Today, I'd like to kick off this series with a message entitled "How to Have a Fresh Start".

This series is actually based on the book of Nehemiah. In this series, we'll look at the first five chapters and learn some principles about building and rebuilding. It's a book that's all about how you get going again.

Nehemiah, at the start of this book, is serving a foreign king, as his people are just beginning to get out of captivity. He's told the news that the walls of the city of Jerusalem, capital city of his home country, they're all torn down, they're dilapidated.

Now, you've got to remember that in ancient times, the walls of a city weren't a decoration, they were for the protection of the city. Tearing down the walls would be like taking all the doors out of your house, all the windows out of your house. So, anything and everything could get in and out. It made them very vulnerable. Nehemiah hears about this, and he is immediately devastated. To put things in perspective, these walls had been torn down for almost 150 years. He's not only dealing with a problem, he's dealing with a long-term problem. How do you do a fresh start?

If you're dealing with a long-term problem, you probably feel like, "How am I going to even get my head around this? How do I even get a handle on this? I've

been hurt and I don't even know how to face life again. How do I do a restart?" Nehemiah knew where to start when he was dealing with a long-term problem. Nehemiah teaches us how, when you're feeling vulnerable like that, to be able to step out with faith, even when you are struggling with, "Where do I find faith?" He does some very simple things. They're even familiar things, but they're very powerful in our lives. Look at **Nehemiah 1:3 and 4**, *"They said to me, '...The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.' When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."*

You see, to move to a place of faith in your life, it's not like just flipping a switch. It's not automatic. There're some processes involved. The process for beginning to see your problems as opportunities, includes the three things that Nehemiah did here. Notice he mourned and he fasted, and he prayed... You can't choose most of your circumstances, but you can choose your response in your circumstances. Nehemiah teaches us here how to have faith when you're doing a restart.

I don't know if you've ever had anybody say the words to you, "Just have faith." You're going through something, and they look at you and they say, "Hey, just have faith." Those words can be so frustrating sometimes. Because you think you know how to just have faith but how do you really just have faith?

Nehemiah shows us how. If you want to get started again, and trusting God in the circumstances that you're in, if you want to get started again in a new circumstance and trust God in that new circumstance, you mourn, and you fast and you pray. So, let's look at this one by one. You

### **1. Mourn.**

**You express your hurt to God**, that's where it begins.

It has been a season of grief for our world last year. Not a family has not been affected by loss this last year.

I know some dear friends who have lost loved ones, like one family, the father, the son, the mother all dying because of covid just weeks apart. In our church, some of us have experienced the pain of losing loved ones, be it because of covid or not.

As a church, we express our sympathies to those whose loved ones have passed on. As a church, that's what the Bible tells us to do, "Mourn with those who mourn". (Romans 12:15b) As a church, we want to learn together and encourage each other to look to God for hope and comfort when we're grieving. One of the keys to that is simply expressing your hurt to God.

Now, when we look at the Bible, we see people of faith, men and women of faith who've gone before, and see how they did it. Because we can learn from their example. We can learn from what they did. That doesn't take you very long starting to look through the Bible to see people who had to face grief and loss like we are today. Even just in the book of Genesis, in the first book, you come by Abraham, and you read about how he wept at the death of his wife Sarah, and then, few more pages later, you read about Jacob tearing his clothes and putting on sackcloth and weeping and crying over his son for many days. Later in the book of Genesis, Joseph has a seven-day period of mourning when his father dies. Then in the book of Numbers one of their great leaders, Aaron dies, and they actually mourn for 30 days. Book of Deuteronomy, Moses dies, that great leader, and the whole people of Israel mourned and wept for 30 days.

You take a look at these examples and a couple of things stand out pretty quickly. First of all, they took a lot longer to mourn, to grieve than many of us take. It does take time to grieve. Now, I don't always recognize that I want to

mourn too fast and too clean. I want to get back to work as a way to calm the pain instead of taking the time to mourn, to grieve, to begin to heal the pain.

There is a question in that for all of us, myself included, is there a hurt or pain you haven't taken the time to grieve? A loss that you haven't taken the time to grieve? Maybe one from way in the past, you never took the time to grieve that loss, or maybe one from this last year. And the confusion and the craziness of this last year, for a lot of us, we didn't get to take the time to grieve that loss.

Or maybe it's one that you're going through right now. It might be one of the day-to-day hurts of life, or might be one of the biggest hurts of life, but it's a loss. One of the things that we do when we mourn is we tend to compare our hurts, and we say, "Well, this little thing I'm going through is nothing compared to what they're going through. So, what do I have to even think about?" God doesn't think that way, he cares about every one of our hurts. So, while you're recognizing how deeply they're hurt, you can also recognize that you also are hurt by what you're going through, and express that hurt to God. It's one of the keys to healing, it's one of the keys to faith, it's one of the keys to starting to rebuild.

They took time, and one of the keys to this is, if you don't take the time to mourn, you're not going to be able to see how you can have faith in that circumstance. Because you're going to be looking at the past. If you don't deal with the past, you get stuck in the past, you're going to be looking at the past instead of looking towards the faith that God wants you to have in your life right now. What is it that you need to take the time to mourn, to express your hurt to God? So, they took time more than we do, that's pretty obvious when you look at these examples. When you look at the examples, they also openly expressed their emotion much more than many of us do.

The word for mourning in Hebrew is *abal*. It literally has the meaning of openly expressing your hurt, audibly expressing your hurt. It's not just inside that

I'm dealing with. I'm expressing it outwardly to God and to others. I know when we talk about mourning, you might think, "I don't want to be sad."

I don't want to be sad either. But the truth is, sadness is not always a bad thing.

There are some things in life that are worth being sad over. In fact, the sadness of mourning opens the door to one of God's greatest gifts in your life. That's what Jesus promised us. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was talking about our grief, our mourning, and he said in **Matthew 5:4, "God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted."** Through expressing my hurt to God, He is able to comfort me. If I skip the mourning, if I settle for escape instead of grieving, then I miss out on the experience and the blessing of God's comfort in my life, and I need that comfort.

This thing of comfort and grieve, it is so important. Let's just take a step deeper, to understand what's going on with us. Truth about us as human beings is this, you become deeply tied to whatever you trust to comfort you when you're going through a grief. That's just the way that we work. Now, you see this from when we were in preschool. A preschooler has a little blankie, and they get pretty emotionally tied to that blanket. Parents, you know what I'm talking about, right? They get pretty tied to that. We think we totally outgrow that, but we don't.

If we tie ourselves to the wrong thing when we're grieving, we become deeply tied to that thing, and we get trapped by this. You trust alcohol to get you through, and that drink -- you've heard people say this, "That drink starts to feel like your best friend." Something's wrong, because it's not your best friend, it's your worst enemy. It might feel like an escape, but you're actually running, you're running headlong into an addiction. That's why it is so important to take your deepest hurts to God. Because nothing else can meet the deepest needs of your life. Only he can do that. When I express my hurt to God, I'm expressing my hurt to the only one who can heal that hurt. Express your hurts to God.

When we express our hurt to God, we are expressing our hurt to the one who can meet our needs. Here's what happens. **Psalm 94:19, "When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy."** The hope that we need can only be given by the God who gives us hope. He is the God of hope. Some of us when we talk about grief, we don't want to grieve because we don't want to feel sad. I know other people, they don't want to grieve because they don't want to feel weak. I just want to say to you, don't be afraid of your weakness, because it actually leads you to God's strength. **Joni Eareckson-Tada said it this way, "The weaker we feel, the harder we lean on God, and the harder we lean, the stronger we grow."** Of course, that's God's promise, **"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."** (2 Cor. 12:9a)

So, you do what Nehemiah did. First you mourn, you express your hurt to God. Then secondly, you

## **2. Fast. You focus your heart on God.**

Nehemiah mourned and fasted and prayed. Fasting is a way of focusing your heart on God. In **Joel 2:12 (CSB), God says, "Turn to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and mourning."** He says fasting is not turning away from food, it's turning towards God, with all your heart. He says fasting is prioritizing your relationship with God. That's what's happening when you fast. Fasting is not a change in diet, it's a change in activity that promotes this change of heart. The value of fasting is not what you aren't doing, eating. It's what you are doing. You're focusing on God. **Daniel says (9:3), "So I turned to the Lord God and pleaded with him in prayer and petition, in fasting, and in sackcloth and ashes."**

Turning to God is giving your attention to God. That's what's happening when we fast. Here's why this is so important. Just wanting to give more attention to God, to focus on God more is not enough. A lot of us have desire to think about God more, to focus on God more, but we go day after day, maybe week after week,

month after month, and we don't focus in like we want to. So, what's happening? Desire is not enough.

What I'm saying is this, people are not like cameras, we don't have auto focus. We're actually like older cameras, where there's the manual focus, you have to intentionally do something to change the focus, and fasting does that, and intentionally changes the focus of your heart, so you're giving attention to God.

So, I want to encourage you, just to start real simple, try a one meal fast. Now, if you never eat breakfast, that doesn't count, that's not your fast. Choose lunch, choose dinner, choose some meal that you usually eat, and take the 30 minutes or the hour that you would have taken to eat that meal, and instead just sit down and focus on God. Do your quiet time with God. Tune in to God. If you've got dietary issues, if you can't skip meals, there's other ways to fast, you can skip social media for a day. That's another way that you could do this. Or you could actually turn your phone off for a day. Take a fast from your phone.

Some of you are thinking right now, "Nope, I'm starving. I am not turning my phone off. I mean, if it's a choice between those two." Turn it off for an hour. I mean, actually turn it off. Did you know there's an off button on your phone? There's actually an off button. You turn it off and you set it aside for just an hour. And you use that hour to focus on God. There's a lot of ways that you can fast. You think of this fast, this focus on God as a kind of a spiritual reset. It's like changing the channel on a radio or on a TV, you're resetting your thoughts.

The Bible says this in **1 Chronicles 22:19, "Now devote your heart and soul to seeking the Lord your God."** That's what you're doing. So, you mourn, you fast, and then you

**3 Pray. You ask for help from God.**

The Bible is absolutely filled with prayers of people asking for help from God. One of the many, many prayers is in **Psalm 28:1 (NCV), "Lord, my Rock, I**



*call out to you for help.*" Now, not many of us feel like we're great at prayer, great at asking God for help. There is hesitancy, there is anxiety, there is doubt.

So, what do you do? Let me give you something practical to do. When you feel like you're not very great at prayer, instead of trying to become a great prayer person, find some great prayers and pray them. That's a place to start. Because if you find a great prayer and pray it great, guess what? You're a great prayer in that moment. Nehemiah prays a great prayer here, he gives us a great model for how to ask God for help. It really is a great prayer. You might want to memorize this prayer.

So, what does Nehemiah teach us to do? How do you ask God for help? I mean, you can just say, "God help." And he will hear you. But if you really want to focus your heart on this, there're some things that we can learn from Nehemiah here, four ways to focus your heart on God as you're asking him for help. I encourage you, as we walk through these four things in your mind right now, you might want to just talk to God, pray, as we're talking about this. You don't have to wait till later. But I also encourage you, sometime this week, to set aside some time to pray these four things to God.

When you're asking God for help, number one, you want to *recognize who God is.*

Instead of starting always with the problem, you start with the one that you're looking to to solve the problem. Nehemiah prays in *Nehemiah 1:5 and 6, "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, 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."* So, he starts by taking some time to recognize who God is.

Nehemiah prays to God as the great and awesome God. So, you recognize that God is all powerful when you pray. There are many things in this world that confuse me, that I don't understand why this happens and why this didn't happen. But the truth is, even though I may be confused, I may not understand it all, God is all powerful, and I will see that in the end. Then he prays "who keeps his covenant of love". Recognize that God loves you more than you can imagine. Part of God's character is His love for you. As you pray, as you ask for help, you're talking to the one who loves you the most.

Then as Nehemiah prays, he goes on and he says, "Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open." God is aware of your need. You remind yourself of that as you pray. God's eyes are wide open to what you're going through right now. God's ears hear everything that you're facing right now. He knows, he understands. He knows exactly what you're going through. When you remind yourself of this in prayer, you're reminding yourself of the truth of who God really is. There's something about this, when you start prayer this way, when you start prayer by focusing on the character on the greatness of God, rather than just reciting your worries as you start your prayer. As you begin to recite the greatness of God, you're going to often find new strength in that kind of prayer.

Second, you **confess who you are**. Nehemiah is just dead honest about his own failings as he trusts God and asks God for help. He doesn't hide from him. **Nehemiah 1:6 and 7, "I confess the sins that we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed the commands and decrees and laws that you gave to your servant Moses."** We all have sinful selfishness in our life. Sometimes we see it, sometimes we don't.

But as you're confessing who you are, confess everything about who you are. The word confess in the Bible doesn't just mean to say what's wrong about

you. Actually, the word literally means to agree with God. 1 John 1:9 tells you something else you need to be able to agree with God about: *"But if we confess our sins to Him, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

As you look through this example of Nehemiah, there's a third thing he does as he's praying. He teaches us to **call on God's promises**. When you're asking God for help, you call on God's promises. Nehemiah found a specific promise for his situation in the Old Testament in the Bible, and he spoke it out, he reminded God of this promise. It's here in **Nehemiah 1:8-9**. *"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.'" So instead of looking for hope and circumstances, Nehemiah was looking for hope and the promises of God.*

You know, there's this great opportunity that comes anytime I have a problem. It's the opportunity to depend on God's promise as I'm facing that problem. So, Nehemiah found a specific promise that fit the circumstances he was facing. The more specific the promise, the more powerful the hope and help that you're going to have. So how do you do that? Well, to find that promise, you look in the Bible. You've got to be familiar with your Bible.

There's a fourth thing Nehemiah teaches us to do as we're asking God for help. And that is, you **ask for specific help**. Nehemiah specifically asked for success as he prepares to go and make a request to the King. If the King didn't let him go and rebuild the wall, he wasn't going to get to go and rebuild the wall. He had to do what the King said. So, **Nehemiah 1:11**, he prays, *"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."*

Nehemiah wants to help rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, but he can't do it without the permission of the King. So, he specifically asked God, "Let that King give me permission." If you look at this, notice, it's a prayer with a schedule. He says, "Today". So, he needs the request answered today. Let this happen. It's a prayer with a plan. Let him say yes to this, let him open the door to this rebuilding. Nehemiah asked specifically for what he needs, and specifically from when he needs it.

Now, a lot of times when we pray, honestly, it's like we're trying to do God a favor. And so, we ask these real general prayers. God's not on the hook, if it doesn't happen just like we asked. So, we pray prayers like, "God, if you want to give success someday, I pray that one day you might give whatever success you want to give to me or to whoever else you might want to give it to, unless you really don't want to give it and then I'd be cool with that, too." That's our prayer. There's nothing specific about it at all. Listen, God wants to, through His Holy Spirit, motivate in your heart specific prayers, for the circumstance that you're facing.

And you think, "What if I ask for the wrong thing?" Well, good. That's how you're going to learn what the right thing is. Some of the best prayers I've ever prayed have been asking for the wrong thing. Because when you ask God for the wrong thing, and you have an open and attentive heart, you don't ask God for the wrong thing and say, "God, you got to do this. This is the only answer." You say, "God, this is what I think is the answer." If you're wrong, he's going to nudge you in the right direction. But if you never ask him, you're never going to get nudged. So don't be afraid of asking for the wrong thing. Be excited about asking for the specific right thing that God wants to motivate in your heart. Because when God

does it, when he answers your specific prayer, your faith is going to be built like never before.

As we start the new year, I know many of us want to have a fresh start. I hope the example of Nehemiah will encourage us and be a guiding rule for us in the coming weeks and months.