

The Work Before Us: A Study in Nehemiah

GET TO WORK

Nehemiah 1:1–2:8

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Main Idea: God's grace meets us in broken places so that we can move forward in faithful obedience.

SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO MOVE FORWARD

Most of us have probably had something around the house that needed to be fixed, but instead of fixing it, we just learned how to live around it. Maybe it's a loose step. Everybody in the house knows about it. You know exactly where to put your foot. You tell the kids, "Watch that step." When somebody comes over, you warn them about it. And after a while, something strange has happened.

We've organized everybody's behavior around something that needs to be repaired. Instead of fixing the step, we've just gotten really good at living with the broken step. We can do that with more than houses. And sometimes we become so accustomed to what is broken that we simply learn how to step around it.

There are seasons when something is clearly not the way it ought to be. Something has broken. Something has been neglected. Something has deteriorated.

Maybe you caused it. Maybe somebody else caused it. Maybe it developed slowly enough that nobody can really identify the moment when things went wrong. But eventually you look around and realize, **this isn't right.**

That can happen in a church. But it can happen just as easily in a marriage. It can happen in a family. It can happen with your finances, your health, your work, your relationships, and in your spiritual life.

But there comes a moment when somebody has to stop stepping around the broken step and say, **"It's time to do something about this."**

That's where the book of Nehemiah begins.

Jerusalem has been broken for a long time. The walls are down. The gates have been burned. And God's people have learned to live among the ruins. Then Nehemiah hears about it. And something in him says, “**We cannot just keep living around what is broken.**”

God's grace meets us in broken places so that we can move forward in faithful obedience. And Nehemiah shows us what that looks like:

Acknowledge it. Own it. Trust God. Receive grace. Get to work.

Sometimes we spend enormous amounts of energy trying to determine exactly **how the wall fell down**. Who did it? When did it happen? Whose fault was it? Who should have stopped it? And there may be a time for answering those questions. But eventually there comes another question. **What are we going to do now?**

That's where Nehemiah begins. Jerusalem is not merely experiencing a difficult season. **The wall is down**. The gates have been burned. The people are vulnerable and disgraced. And God puts that broken place in front of one man who is hundreds of miles away serving in the palace of the Persian king.

Nehemiah cannot change what happened yesterday. But by God's grace, he can faithfully respond **today**.

And that's where this book begins teaching us something enormously important. **God's grace meets us in broken places so that we can move forward in faithful obedience**. We're not to pretend the broken places don't exist. We're not to minimize the extent of the brokenness. And we're not to endlessly blame someone else. We are not to remain paralyzed.

We are supposed to move forward in faithful obedience. And Nehemiah shows us how.

I. ACKNOWLEDGE IT

Nehemiah 1:1–4

Nehemiah asks Hanani and the other men about Jerusalem. And he gets an answer he probably wishes were different. The people are in trouble and disgrace. The wall is broken down. The gates have been burned.

Nehemiah doesn't look away. He acknowledges it. There is something profoundly spiritual about being willing to tell the truth. Nehemiah doesn't say, *“Well, at least part of the wall is still standing.”*

He doesn't say, *“Considering everything Jerusalem has been through, we're actually doing pretty well.”* He doesn't put a positive spin on it. **The wall is broken. You cannot rebuild what you refuse to acknowledge is broken.** Sometimes denial can masquerade as faith.

We can convince ourselves that acknowledging a problem means we're not trusting God. But biblical faith never requires us to pretend. The Bible is remarkably honest about brokenness. David acknowledges it. Jeremiah acknowledges it. The Psalmists acknowledge it. The prophets acknowledge it. Nehemiah acknowledges it.

Maybe there is something you need to acknowledge. **This marriage isn't healthy. I haven't been the father or mother I should be. I've allowed bitterness to grow. My relationship with God has become distant. I've been avoiding something I know God wants me to address. I'm exhausted. I'm afraid. And you know something needs to change.**

You don't have to solve it yet, but it is time to stop pretending the rubble isn't there.

Notice Nehemiah's response. He sits down. He weeps. He mourns. He fasts. He prays. Before Nehemiah ever picks up a stone, **he allows the brokenness of Jerusalem to break his heart.**

That is important because otherwise the exhortation to *Get to Work* really just becomes **“Toughen up. Try harder. Fix it.”** And that's not biblical Christianity.

There is grief here. There are tears here. There is prayer here. There is dependence here. But grief isn't where Nehemiah stays. He first acknowledges the brokenness in his grief. And then he takes the next step.

II. OWN THE BROKENNESS

Nehemiah 1:5–7

Nehemiah begins praying. And something remarkable happens. He confesses Israel's sin. But listen to the pronouns. **We. Us. I.**

He doesn't stand outside Israel's history and say, "*Lord, look what those people did.*" Instead, he places himself among God's people. **"Both I and my father's family have sinned."**

That's extraordinary because Nehemiah didn't personally create the situation he inherited. Generations of rebellion preceded him. Jerusalem had been destroyed long before Nehemiah received this report. Jerusalem had been destroyed before Nehemiah had been born! In no way is Jerusalem's destruction and the people's exile Nehemiah's fault.

There is a difference between **fault** and **responsibility**. Something does not necessarily have to be your fault for it to become your responsibility.

I can tell my kids, "I need you to clean up the basement." And immediately I am under siege. "I didn't make that mess!" "That's not mine!" "I didn't do that!" "It isn't my fault!" And I have to explain: **I'm not assigning blame. I'm assigning responsibility.** I'm not punishing anybody for making the mess.

Now, apparently the word *punishment* is somewhat subjective. My teenagers seem to believe that cleaning the basement *is* the punishment. I tend to think cleaning the basement is simply part and parcel of living rent-free in my home. But that's beside the point.

I'm not asking whose fault it is. I'm saying, **"There's a mess downstairs, and I'm making it your responsibility to do something about it."**

And there are moments in life when we have to understand the same distinction. **Something doesn't have to be your fault for it to become your responsibility.**

Nehemiah did not knock down the walls of Jerusalem. He didn't burn the gates. He didn't lead Judah into generations of rebellion. He didn't create the situation he inherited. In fact, Nehemiah is living hundreds of miles away, generations removed from many of the decisions that brought God's people to this point.

And yet listen to the way he prays. He doesn't say, "Lord, look what *they* did." He says, "**We have sinned against you. Both I and my father's family have sinned.**" Nehemiah isn't interested in standing at a safe distance from the mess and determining who deserves the blame.

He places himself among God's people. He owns what is his to own. And ultimately he accepts responsibility for work he did not create. That's important because some of us can become so preoccupied with establishing that something **isn't our fault** that we never ask whether God has nevertheless made it **our responsibility**.

Maybe you didn't create the tension in that relationship. Maybe you didn't start the argument. Maybe you inherited some unhealthy patterns from your family. Maybe somebody else made the bad decision. Maybe you walked into a mess that was already there. And maybe you're absolutely right. **It isn't your fault.** Okay. But there is another question.

What has God made your responsibility now? Fault looks backward. **Who did this?** Responsibility looks forward. **What is mine to do?** And Nehemiah cannot change what happened yesterday. He cannot undo generations of history. But he can decide what faithfulness requires of him today.

You don't have to own all the blame to own your responsibility. Sometimes faithful obedience begins when we stop saying, "**But I didn't make this mess,**" and start asking, "**Lord, what would You have me do with the mess that's in front of me?**"

Your parents may have handed you some unhealthy patterns. **What will you do with them?** Your marriage may have wounds you didn't create alone. **What is yours to own?** Your workplace may be dysfunctional. **How can you be faithful there?** A relationship may have deteriorated because somebody genuinely wronged you. **What does obedience look like for you now?**

Nehemiah cannot change Israel's past. But he can say, "**Here I am, Lord. What is mine to do?**"

And that would be crushing if Nehemiah's confidence were ultimately in Nehemiah. I mean, look at the enormity of the job. A destroyed city. A foreign king. Political complications. Hundreds of miles to travel. Opposition waiting in Judah. Nehemiah cannot do this. But Nehemiah trusts that God can.

III. TRUST GOD

Nehemiah 1:5, 8–11

Before Nehemiah talks about his problem, notice how he talks about **God**. The Lord is: **Great. Awe-inspiring. Covenant-keeping. Faithful in love.** And then Nehemiah remembers what God has said. **Nehemiah interprets his circumstances through God's character.** That's faith.

Faith isn't looking at a collapsed wall and saying, “**There is no wall.**” Faith says, “**The wall is broken, but God is faithful.**” That distinction matters. **We don't measure God by the size of the rubble. We measure the rubble by the greatness of God.**

Nehemiah has acknowledged reality. He has confessed sin. But he refuses to let either failure or circumstances have the final word.

“**Remember...**” Nehemiah rehearses God's promises. That's not because God has forgotten them. **Nehemiah needs to remember them.** Sometimes prayer is how we preach God's faithfulness back to our own hearts.

God, You said...God, You promised...God, this is who You are...God, I don't know how this works out, but I know who You are. And this is where we need to be careful about our understanding of trust.

Trust doesn't mean certainty about outcomes. Nehemiah does not know what Artaxerxes will say. He doesn't know how Jerusalem will respond. He doesn't know how the wall will be rebuilt. He doesn't know about men named Sanballat and Tobiah and all the opposition coming.

He knows enough to take **the next faithful step.**

IV. RECEIVE GRACE

Nehemiah 2:1–8

Months pass between the opening report in Kislev and the scene before Artaxerxes in Nisan. And then suddenly, **“The opportunity arrives.”** The king notices Nehemiah's sadness. And Scripture gives us this wonderfully human sentence. **“Nehemiah was afraid.”** That is significant.

Because sometimes we imagine faithful people as people who finally reached the point where they weren't scared anymore. That's not what happens. **Nehemiah is afraid—and speaks anyway.** The king asks why he's sad. Nehemiah answers. Then the king asks the question that changes everything. **“What is your request?”**

There's the door. Nehemiah has prayed. He has mourned. He has fasted. He has waited. And suddenly the door opens. **Notice Nehemiah 2:4.** The king asks. Nehemiah prays. **Then he answers.** This isn't another four months of prayer. This is probably one of those instantaneous prayers, *God, help me.*

And then, Nehemiah speaks. There is a time to pray. There is a time to wait. And there is a time when the opportunity God has placed in front of you requires you to **open your mouth. And Nehemiah asks specifically.** Send me. Give me letters. Give me safe passage. Give me timber.

He's been praying, but apparently he's also been thinking. He knows what he'll need. And the king grants it. Why? Nehemiah tells us exactly how he interprets the moment. **“Because the gracious hand of my God was on me.”**

THE GRACIOUS HAND OF GOD

Nehemiah doesn't say, *“The king agreed because I presented a fantastic strategic plan.”* He doesn't say, *“I finally caught Artaxerxes on a good day.”* He doesn't say, *“I'm a pretty persuasive guy.”* **God did this.**

The permission was grace. The letters were grace. The timber was grace. The opportunity was grace. The favor was grace. The open door was grace.

The Christian message isn't, **“Fix yourself. Try harder. Work harder. Get your act together.”** It's something much better.

Grace does for us what we cannot do, then frees us to do what God has given us to do. God opens a door Nehemiah could never have forced open. But once God opens it, **Nehemiah has to walk through it.**

LEVERTOV — GRACE AND THE NEXT DOOR

In the poem *St. Peter and the Angel*, poet Denise Levertov meditates on Peter's miraculous deliverance from prison in Acts 12. Think about Peter's experience. Peter doesn't break his chains. God does. Peter doesn't overpower the guards. God handles them. Peter doesn't unlock the prison. The doors open. Peter is simply led outward.

Grace is doing for Peter what Peter cannot possibly do for himself. And then something changes. The angel leaves. Peter is standing outside, a freed man. And Levertov pictures him moving into that strange new freedom until she arrives at this thought: **“He himself must be / the key, now, to the next door.”** That's a remarkable image.

Because eventually grace brings Peter to a door **he has to walk through. Freedom carries responsibility.** God has done what Peter could never do. But God doesn't live Peter's life for him. And that gives us deeper insight for understanding Nehemiah. **Grace opens the door. Obedience walks through it.**

Nehemiah couldn't make the king say yes. But when the king asks, **“What do you want?”** Nehemiah has to answer. And maybe that is where some of us are. We're waiting for God to do something **He has already done.**

We're asking Him to open a door that is already standing open. We're waiting until we're not afraid. We're waiting until every question has been answered. We're waiting until we understand the entire plan. We're waiting until we're certain how everything will turn out. But biblical faith doesn't always work that way. Nehemiah was afraid. Peter was bewildered. **And they moved anyway.**

V. GET TO WORK

Nehemiah 2:8

God's gracious hand is upon Nehemiah. The king has granted the request.

The letters are written. The timber is made available. The door is open. **Now what? Go.** And that's what Nehemiah does. The narrative immediately says, "So I went..." Three wonderfully simple words. **So, I went.**

Not, "*So I formed another committee to determine whether going was advisable.*" Not, "*So, I spent six more months wondering whether God was really leading me.*" Not, "*So I waited until I wasn't nervous anymore.*"

So, I went. This is faithful obedience. Faithful obedience doesn't mean you know how the whole story ends. It means you know what the **next faithful thing** is. That's important.

Because somebody may hear *Get to Work* and immediately become overwhelmed. *I can't fix my marriage.* Maybe not today. **What's the next faithful step?**

I can't fix everything with my children. Okay. **What's the next faithful step?**

My spiritual life is a mess. Then don't begin by imagining where you need to be a year from now. **What's the next faithful step?**

Open your Bible tomorrow morning. Pray. Confess. Call somebody. Apologize. Forgive. Ask for help. Show up. Serve. Have the conversation. Make the appointment. Tell the truth. Take the step. **You don't have to know how the whole wall gets built to pick up the first stone.**

ACKNOWLEDGE IT. Tell the truth about what is broken. You cannot rebuild what you refuse to acknowledge.

OWN IT. Stop living entirely in the question of whose fault it is. You don't have to own all the blame to own your responsibility.

TRUST GOD. The rubble is real, but so is God. Don't measure God by the size of the rubble. Measure the rubble by the greatness of God.

RECEIVE GRACE. Recognize what God has already provided. You aren't rebuilding alone. His gracious hand is upon His people. Grace does for us what we cannot do, then frees us to do what He has given us to do.

GET TO WORK. Take the next faithful step. Not every step. Not the whole journey. Not the whole wall. **The next stone.**

And remember, our hope isn't in our becoming better Nehemiahs. Our hope is Christ. The deepest brokenness in our lives isn't something we could rebuild ourselves.

Sin separated us from God. And God didn't stand at a distance shouting instructions about how we could repair our way back to Him. **He came to us.** Jesus entered our brokenness. He took our sin. He died our death. He rose victorious. The door we could never open, **He opened.**

So Christian obedience never begins with “**Do enough so God will give you grace.**” It begins with, “**God has given grace. Therefore, walk in it.**” We don't work **for** grace. We work **from** grace.

That is Nehemiah's testimony: “**The gracious hand of my God was on me.**” And only then: “**So I went.**” That's the order. **Grace.** Then obedience. Always.

There may be something broken in front of you. Maybe you've been looking at it for a long time. Maybe you've cried about it. Maybe you've prayed about it. Maybe you've spent a lot of time asking why it happened. Maybe you're still afraid. Maybe you don't know how it all turns out. **Nehemiah didn't either.** But the gracious hand of God was upon him.

And eventually there came a moment when prayer had to become movement. There came a moment when grief had to become obedience. There came a moment when the open door had to be walked through. And perhaps that is the invitation this morning.

Acknowledge it. Yes. **The wall is broken.**

Own it. Ask, “**What belongs to me?**”

Trust God. The rubble isn't bigger than Him.

Receive grace. You are not being asked to manufacture what only God can provide. And then—

Get to work. Take the step. Make the call. Have the conversation. Offer the apology. Extend forgiveness. Open the Bible. Begin again. Show up. Serve somebody. Do the thing God has already made clear.

You don't need a blueprint for the entire wall today. You don't need every question answered. You don't need to know how every chapter ends. And you don't even have to be unafraid. You simply need enough faith to take **the next faithful step.**

Because **God's grace meets us in broken places so that we can move forward in faithful obedience.**

The gracious hand of God was upon Nehemiah. The door opened. **So, he went.** And perhaps there comes a moment when you have prayed enough about the rubble and you've seen the stone lying at your feet. **Pick it up. Get to work.**