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Speaker: Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor
Scripture: Nehemiah 2:1-10

If you are on Facebook, or other social media sites like Instagram or twitter, you will know that they have something called, Throwback Thursdays. It is when some people decided to post or repost older photographs, usually of days gone by, often from their childhood. Usually accompanying the picture is a hashtag, #Throwback Thursday or #TBT.

So allow me to do a little throwback Saturday/ Sunday and wax a little nostalgic with you for a moment. Does anyone remember 1985? 32 years ago. If you are 32 or older, do you remember what you were doing in 1985? Maybe watching the Dukes of Hazzard on television or sipping New Coke, which ended up being a marketing disaster.

Or maybe you remember watching baseball player Pete Rose collect his 4,192nd hit to become baseball's all time hits leader. Or maybe you remember your first visit to Blockbuster. This chain of video rental stores opened in 1985. For the first time you were able to rent a movie and watch it in the comfort of your own home.

But, 1985 was also the year that the devastation of world hunger really hit the headlines with the drought and famine in Ethiopia.

The truth is that it shook a lot of our innocence didn't it? It seemed we no longer could we turn a blind eye to the plight of our global neighbours.

The international attention was probably helped by the celebrity power, that got behind the cause by raising funds for famine relief. Bob Geldolf from the punk music group, Boomtown Rats (I Don't like Mondays) led the charge and Band Aid was formed.

It was a collection of the who's who of the music industry in the UK in this day including Bono from U2 and together they recorded "Do They Know it's Christmas". This led to the collaboration of many of the

top American music acts in this day, including Michael Jackson and Bruce Springsteen who as USA for Africa released, We are the World on March 7, 1985. This led to Live Aid, a huge international Rock concert in July of 1985 which raised hundreds of millions of dollars for African famine relief. As you can imagine, many of the big name Canadian musicians of the time also joined forces and released a song written by David Foster and Bryan Adams under the group name, Northern Lights. The song they recorded was entitled, Tears are not Enough.

I want to show you a short clip of the video for that song. Let me just remind you that music videos were in their infancy in this day, so ignore the hairstyles and dated wardrobes but listen to the word. Believe it or not, these were the Justin Biebers and Drakes of 1985.

Did you catch the words to the song?

Tears are Not Enough
Chorus
We can bridge the distance
Only we can make the difference
Don't ya know that tears are not enough

If we can pull together
We could change the world forever
Heaven knows that tears are not enough

If you are just joining us today, we launched a new message series last weekend, entitled, Count Me In. From Rubble to Renewal. It is a series on the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. Let me take a moment to give a bit of a review. The book of Nehemiah written around 445BC, describes a bleak time in the history of God's people the Israelites.

Due to an endless cycle of sin and disobedience the kingdom of Israel had split a few hundred years before into Israel to the North and Judah to the south. Enemy

forces soon overtook both of these nations, destroying their cities and taking most of the Israelites into exile as slaves in foreign lands. The city of Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah and the Holy City of God was left in ruins.

But over time, as things settled down, those Israelites taken into exile were given their freedom and allowed to return to their homeland but many chose to stay where they were and raise their families on foreign soil. But two waves of exiles did return to Jerusalem but they were unable to restore the city to its former and rightful glory.

Nehemiah was an Israelite by heritage although he had never set foot in Jerusalem or had even seen his motherland. But, still he worshipped the Israel God, Yahweh and he knew the history and the traditions of his people. Although he was a cup bearer to the king of Persia and lived in its capital city Susa, some 900 miles away from Jerusalem. Whenever someone passed through town that had been to Jerusalem, Nehemiah always wanted to know, what is going on? How are the people, how is the city? The news he receives in chapter one is not good.

Nehemiah 1:3

“Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. “The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire.”

The lack of fortified walls around the city in this day, left the people defenseless against enemies, weather and wild animals. A city with broken walls revealed a defeated people. But probably more significantly, the condition of the city, Jerusalem, the holy city of God brought shame on them and their God, Yahweh. And that explains Nehemiah’s response when he heard this news.

Nehemiah 1:4

When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.

Nehemiah wept upon the news that the city of Jerusalem, its walls and gates were in ruins and all that it represented. The shame it brought to God and His people.

Did you weep this week? What brought you to tears?

Carolyn and I saw the movie LION last Monday. We wept. I won’t give the storyline. I will let you see it for yourself. What made you weep this week? Sadness, grief, joy, pain?

And we noticed in the text that Nehemiah not only wept, he mourned and fasted and prayed to God. The prayer is captured in the last part of Chapter 1 and that leads us to Nehemiah Chapter 2. So if you have your bibles, turn with me there. Remember First and Second Kings, First and Second Chronicles, Ezra then Nehemiah, just before Esther, Job and Psalms.

Nehemiah 2:1,

Early the following spring, in the month of Nisan, during the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes’ reign,

Ok, let’s stop there. In the month of Nisan is important here. Remember Nehemiah first heard the news about Jerusalem’s walls in late autumn, in the month of Kislev. (Nehemiah 1:1) From the end of Nehemiah 1 to the beginning of chapter 2 we have moved from late autumn to early spring. A passage of four months. What do you think Nehemiah was doing in these four months?

From the passage we know that he was weeping, mourning, fasting and praying but there may be another reason for the passage of time. With the praying, Nehemiah was also patiently planning, waiting and determining his next move. We know that in chapter 1, Nehemiah was really stirred and contemplating taking action, to go to Jerusalem to fix the walls, so why the wait?

Have you ever been flipping through channels at home and come across one of those ads for World Vision or Compassion or even the Humane Society. You see images of malnourished children or abused animals and it touches something deep inside you and you want to do something. But often, our attention gets distracted. We have to leave the room for a moment and the feeling kind of passes. Maybe that was Nehemiah here. Maybe he was praying, God let this feeling pass. Who am I, I can’t do anything about this situation. Take this feeling from me, God. I can’t leave my home, my job, my family and go to Jerusalem. That is ridiculous, take this feeling from me. But four months later, he still couldn’t shake it. Tears are good, but Tears are not enough. Or maybe he was simply planning. Patiently organizing things so he could slip away for

what could be a lengthy journey and mission to Jerusalem. Strategizing what to say to the king, what he would need in terms of supplies and how he could rally the people of Jerusalem to rebuild the walls and the city.

Patience is a little more difficult for us to understand in our culture today though isn't it? We live in a world, where you can buy all your Christmas gifts from the comfort of your own home, on line with the press of a button and have them delivered in two days. You don't have to wait weekly for a favourite TV Series any more, you can binge watch in an afternoon on NetFlix. And Groceries. Do you know what I found out this week? At some grocery stores, you can order your groceries on line the night before. It gives you all the sales and products, you just click on to create your shopping list and then you select a time for pick up the next day and you don't even have to get out of the car. You just pull up to a designated parking spot and the groceries are brought out to you. No walking the aisles. No waiting at the check-out. All for the grand sum of \$3. And a lot of these services are convenient and time savers for sure but I think more and more we are living in a world, that doesn't know how to wait.

But isn't it in the waiting and developing patience that character is built, true relationships are nurtured and dependence on God and his direction is solidified. Many of you have watched the short video making its rounds on Facebook of Simon Sinek talking about the Millennials. He says that many in our culture today, see the mountain and then see the summit and they know they want to be at the summit but they forget there is still the mountain to climb to get there. There is a lot to be learned in the climb, the patience.

Nehemiah waited four months from the time he heard about the news of Jerusalem until he finally asked for leave of absence from his job. Look at the text continues in,

Nehemiah 2:1-2.

I was serving the king his wine. I had never before appeared sad in his presence. 2 So the king asked me, "Why are you looking so sad? You don't look sick to me. You must be deeply troubled." Then I was terrified,

Have you ever had to meet with your boss and ask him or her for something? Maybe a raise or a day off or leave of absence? Or you have to go to a teacher or prof

to ask for an extension on a paper or to question a mark on an exam. It can be a little nerve racking for sure. Palms are sweating, a little anxious.

Now imagine that you work for a king. A king in the time of Nehemiah. Remember Nehemiah was the cupbearer, a highly trusted position in the King's court. He tasted the food and wine before the king to ensure that it was safe to consume. But more than that, he was a personal assistant and trusted advisor to the King. He would have had frequent access to him. But to appear sad in the presence of the king was forbidden. The idea was that the king was such a wonderful person that merely being in his presence was supposed to make you forget all your problems. To appear sad in the presence of the King was a terrible insult to Him. It was a crime punishable by death. No wonder Nehemiah was terrified. Because the king noticed. His sadness. His next words could have been, off with his head. But in the four months of weeping, praying, mourning, fasting and planning, Nehemiah knew that if God really wanted him to go to Jerusalem, he would first have to grant him favour with the King. Presumably, Nehemiah also planned the right time, when the King was in a good mood; and the right words to say. Look at the text,

Nehemiah 2:3,

but I replied, "Long live the king! How can I not be sad? For the city where my ancestors are buried is in ruins, and the gates have been destroyed by fire."

Did you notice that Nehemiah left out one very important detail here? He didn't mention the name of the city. Remember, he was in Persia. Persia was one of the enemies of Judah that was a part of destroying Jerusalem in the first place. Nehemiah is grieving the demise of city that his boss, this king's nation was directly responsible for pillaging. AWKWARD! But look at,

Nehemiah 2:4,

The king asked, "Well, how can I help you?"

Place yourself in Nehemiah's shoes here? Four months of weeping, praying, mourning, fasting and planning for just the right time, just the right opportunity to take action and here with these words from the King, how can I help you? Nehemiah knew, God had answered his prayers.

Have you ever been on the receiving end of this phrase, how can I help you? I don't mean in the line at McDonalds or customer service kiosk. I mean sincere words of care and concern when you faced a difficult time. How have you responded?

You know how a majority of us respond to a question like that, how can I help you? No, it's okay. Thanks for the offer, but I'm okay. I can do it. And we grin and bear it and put our head down and barrel through on our own, denying those around us, the opportunity to help, of truly doing life together in the good times and the more difficult.

We have this unique phenomena in our home. Every once in a while, the main bathroom's electricity will simply shut off. No other room in the house is affected except the bathroom. Of course, I checked the bulbs and the fuse box. But that is the extent of my expertise. I have a couple of guys in my small group who are very handy and knowledgeable and when they heard about the problem, they asked, how can I (we) help you? They offered to have a look. And I was appreciative but I didn't want to put them out, so I put it off. But after a week of showering in the dark, Carolyn had had enough. Paul, let those guys help, they offered to help. So finally, I gave into my pride. And they were a great. They fixed the problem.

In Nehemiah 2:4, after trusting God to share his sadness with the King, he responds, "Well, how can I help you?" And I love Nehemiah's reaction. The text says, With a prayer to the God of heaven, Can you imagine what Nehemiah is thinking? Thank you God for answering my prayers. This is even better than I could have imagined. The King is asking how he can help me. O Lord, give me the courage to ask for what I need. Lord, help me.

Have you ever prayed one of those short, concise "in the moment" prayers? Lord, help me, now! Have you ever considered that those who are boldest for God, have the greatest need to be in prayer? Listen to the boldness of Nehemiah, a man whose life was rooted in prayer as begins to answer the King's question, how can I help you?

Nehemiah 2:5

I replied, "If it please the king, and if you are pleased with me, your servant, send me to Judah to rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried."

That is a pretty bold request. Can you see the great irony here? Nehemiah is inviting the king to partner with him in getting the city of Jerusalem and its people back where they should be.

Our God is such a redeeming God, isn't He? Time after time, God uses the unexpected to advance His plan and mission in the world. Have you found that to be true? That is what he is doing through this king of Persia in this situation. Using the unexpected, the former enemy to join His plan to restore His great city. Never stop looking for God even in those dark and unexpected times and places in your life. He is at work, redeeming. Back to the text, look at the king's response.

Nehemiah 2:6,

The king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked, "How long will you be gone? When will you return?" After I told him how long I would be gone, the king agreed to my request.

Maybe that was the wisdom of Nehemiah. He was leveraging a time when the queen was sitting with the King. Perhaps hoping that she could influence his decision. Sure, enough the king agrees to let him go. Amazing answer to prayer isn't it?! The king releases Nehemiah from his palace duties to tend to a personal matter. Praise God!

OOOHHH, he's not done yet. Nehemiah has been praying and planning for four months. Can you picture him? Kind of turning away slightly, and then turning back? Oh, maybe one more thing.

Nehemiah 2:7

"If it please the king, let me have letters addressed to the governors of the province west of the Euphrates River, instructing them to let me travel safely through their territories on my way to Judah.

For Nehemiah to travel the 900 miles from Susa to Jerusalem would take up to three months and would require him to pass through some lands that were opposed to him rebuilding Jerusalem. It was a potentially dangerous journey. The roads through these places had various stations, think of it as a more primitive border patrol crossings. Letters, sort of like our passports today, would be required and inspected for the traveler to continue on.

If you drop your eyes down to Nehemiah 2:9, you will see that the danger associated with the journey led the king to not only give Nehemiah letters, but to also send a security entourage with him for protection. The letters and the security detail around him would declare that Nehemiah had not run away, but had been sent by the king. This would allow him safe passage all the way to Jerusalem.

Are you just shaking your head at the way that this is going for Nehemiah? He dared approach the King in a gloomy mood and ask for a leave of absence from his job, to go and rebuild an enemy city. The king says, Yes! Then he asked the king to give him letters for safe passage and the king not only does that, but he frees up some members of his own army for several months to ride with Nehemiah for safe passage. This is incredible. Nehemiah must be overwhelmed with gratitude and praise to God for providing beyond his dreams. Right?

Ah, he's not done yet. Again, picture it. Nehemiah asking for the letters for safe passage and then kind of turning away and having this brief little internal battle. Okay, you got what you asked for, don't push it. Keep moving while the king is still in a good mood. But I need supplies, I can't afford to buy them on my own. Don't push your luck. Until finally Nehemiah blurts out,

Nehemiah 2:8.

And please give me a letter addressed to Asaph, the manager of the king's forest, instructing him to give me timber. I will need it to make beams for the gates of the Temple fortress, for the city walls, and for a house for myself."

Now you done it, Nehemiah. You weren't satisfied with what you had, now you have just gone and pushed it too far. Have you ever pushed it too far? Maybe things were going so well and you thought, just one more thing, just one more time, just one more step, just one more.....What was it for you?

I was talking about this with Trish, our Care Pastor this week and she brought to mind the game Jenga. Has anyone played Jenga? Players take turns removing one block at a time from a tower constructed of 54 blocks. Each block removed is then placed on top of the tower, and it gets taller and taller. But you have to be careful, one more pull of a block from the wrong spot and the whole thing comes tumbling down.

Nehemiah was in danger of pulling one more "block" from potentially the wrong spot. He was treading on thin ice here. But remember, he has bathed this whole situation in prayer. Four months, prayer. Even as he is asking the king for these things, he is firing up prayers to God and he knows, it's wonderful that the king has given me permission to go to Jerusalem, it's wonderful that he has provided safe passage. That is all great. But if I don't have any supplies for the rebuilding project it would all be in vain.

Lumber was a precious commodity in this day. Forests were carefully guarded, and written permission from the king would assure Nehemiah of the lumber he would need. Look at,

Nehemiah 2:8,

And the king granted these requests, because the gracious hand of God was on me.

And you can imagine the King finally saying, okay, enough. I have given you enough. Be on your way before I take it all away! And Nehemiah, holding back a big grin as he departs the King's presence, thank you my king, thank you my king, as he's lifting his eyes to heaven. Thank you my King, thank you my King. This section of the text finishes with Nehemiah on his way.

Nehemiah 2:9-10,

When I came to the governors of the province west of the Euphrates River, I delivered the king's letters to them. The king, I should add, had sent along army officers and horsemen to protect me. 10 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard of my arrival, they were very displeased that someone had come to help the people of Israel.

As Nehemiah is headed towards Jerusalem to complete His God given mission, there is some opposition to what he is going to do. See the enemy doesn't mind when we weep. Our spiritual enemy or opposition doesn't even mind when we mourn or fast or plan. It is when God's people start to do something, to take action. That is when the enemy perks up and begins to take notice. And that is what we are going to talk about in the weeks ahead.

So where does this message find you today? What makes you weep? What has God laid on your heart or opened your eyes to that you can't shake?

You have prayed about it, maybe mourned and fasted and instead of going away, it just becomes more of a burden on your heart. Tears are good, but tears are not always enough.

Two thousand years ago. Jesus was moved to tears when he looked over the condition of the people in the city of Jerusalem.

In *Luke 19:41* it says,
As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it.

Their hearts far from God. They were like sheep without a shepherd but tears were not enough. Jesus went to the cross for the salvation of humanity. He took action. He gave the ultimate sacrifice for us. And those that choose to follow him, Christians, he calls us to do the same.

In *Luke 9:23*, Jesus says to the crowd gathered around him,
If any of you wants to be my follower, you must give up your own way, take up your cross daily, and follow me.

The first challenge for us today through this text is,

1. Tears are good, but they are not always enough. Jesus calls us to take action on the things that he has placed on our heart.

But we can only do that when we are open to him in prayer and reading the bible and inviting him to give us eyes to see the world as he does, breaking our hearts for what breaks his heart. And then empowered by his living Holy Spirit, he will give us all we need when we trust in him.

The second challenge coming out of this text is,

2. How big is our ask?

And that might very well be a faith issue isn't it? God placed a pretty big task on the heart of Nehemiah. But with his heart set on God. He had the faith and boldness to approach the king, and ask for everything, everything he needed. And the king granted these requests, because the gracious hand of God was on Nehemiah.

What is God stirring in you that you just can't shake? You have been praying about it, weeping about it,

mourning and fasting and it won't go away. Is it a relationship? Maybe God has just been laying a name of someone on your heart these days. Maybe it's a spouse or a family member. Perhaps a neighbor, a co-worker or classmate. It has become a burden to carry. Or maybe it is a situation and you are praying about it and it won't go away. Or maybe it is an opportunity. Whatever it is. It may seem too big and too impossible. Think of Nehemiah. How big is your ask? What are you asking God for in that situation? To just free up your time to do something about it or are you asking him for more, much more?

How big is your faith?
Edward Kimball, have you heard of him? No? Don't worry, you are not alone.

Kimball was a Sunday school teacher of a class of hyper teenage boys. Each Sunday, he would prepare a lesson that attempted to keep their attention and then wonder if anything was getting through. Many times he thought about throwing in the towel and quitting. But that's when God placed a burden on his heart that each one of these boys would come to know Jesus in a personal way. But that meant Kimball needed to take action and be more intentional. To step up his game. So, he began to visit the boys in their homes, at their schools and he built relationships with them. He did life with them and in one particular case, he even went to the shoe store where one of his students worked part time. It was in the stock room of this shoe store, that Kimball shared with this student how much God loved him. The young man's name was Dwight.

In his lifetime, Dwight L. Moody went on to be a preacher and evangelist who's ministry touched two continents and hundreds of thousands of people. But the story doesn't end there. Actually that's where it begins. Through Moody's preaching, another man's heart was touched for God, Wilbur Chapman. Chapman became a Christian evangelist who preached to thousands. One day, a professional baseball player had a day off and attended one of Chapman's meetings, and thus, Billy Sunday became a follower of Jesus. Sunday quit baseball and began to hold his own evangelistic crusades. Through Sunday's preaching another young man was converted. His name was Mordecai Ham. He too began to preach and hold evangelistic rallies. When Ham came to Charlotte, North Carolina in 1934, a sandy-haired, lanky young man, then in high school, vowed that he wouldn't go to hear Ham preach. But Billy Frank, as he was called by his family, did eventually

go and was intrigued by what he heard. So he returned the next night and he responded to the gospel and became a follower of Jesus. Billy Frank. Have you ever heard of him? Maybe you know him better as Billy Graham.

Billy Graham has preached the gospel of Jesus Christ to more people in live audiences than anyone else in history; nearly 215 million people in more than 185 countries. And hundreds of millions more have been reached through his television, video, film and webcasts. And if we continued following this trail to see whose life God touched by Billy Graham's ministry the list would be endless but I can give you one name. Paul McIlwraith. Me. I surrendered my life to Jesus after watching a movie produced by Billy Graham. And I am certain, many of your lives have been changed through his ministry as well.

Just think about how far-reaching the message of Jesus has gone. This fascinating chain of events that was triggered because an average, ordinary, everyday Sunday school teacher's heart was touched by God for the spiritual condition of each student in his class of teenage boys. He prayed big prayers and took action and God moved in incredible ways.

As we ponder the story of Nehemiah today, as we think of Edward Kimball, what is God stirring in you? What is the burden He has placed on you? What makes you weep and where is He calling you to action? And how big and bold is your ask? What are you praying to God about these days? Will you pray today, Count me in, Lord? And do you have the faith to believe that He can use you and me to change the world, one person at a time, one day at a time, one step at a time? Will you pray, here I am Lord, use me, send me for your glory?

Amen? Amen.

Let's Pray

Ephesians 3:20-21

Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think. Glory to him in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen.

Points to Ponder Nehemiah 2 Count Me In. From Rubble to Renewal

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. In your group, discuss what made you weep this week. If you are not really a "crier" then what was it that touched your heart deeply over the last seven days? Where and how do you think God might be at work in those moments of your life?
2. What do you think of this statement, tears are not enough? Does this mean that every time we are moved to tears we need to take some sort of action? What is the importance of keeping our heart soft towards the things of God?
3. Reflect on and discuss your prayer life. When you think of the way that you pray, is it with boldness and faith? How big is your ask of God? In the things that He is using to touch your heart, are open and believing in the "impossible"?

Prayer and Action Item

Take some time to pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. As prayer requests are shared, take some time to ask each other, what are we really believing God can do in this situation? Challenge each other to pray bold and faith filled prayers into each situation and then expect that God can work in amazing ways.