

Searching the Shadows

Brian Carroll / General Adult

Work in Progress / Nehemiah 2:11–20

Renewal doesn't begin with rebuilding. It begins with honesty.

In Nehemiah 2:11–20, Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem and does something unexpected. He doesn't make a speech. He doesn't announce a plan. He quietly surveys the ruins. Before anything can be restored, God's people must be willing to face what is broken and trust Him with what comes next.

Introduction

- Several years ago, the church I served had the opportunity to partner with a sister church in Gulfport, Mississippi, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.
 - It had been a few months since the storm, but the damage was still unmistakable.
 - Gulfport sits right on the coast, and, as you can imagine, the entire community was devastated.
 - The church was only about three blocks from the water.
 - And everything between the shoreline and the street where the church stood was obliterated.
 - Reduced to piles of rubble. The city has cleared the streets, but the lots where houses stood were either piles of what remains or bare foundations if they had been fortunate enough to be cleared.
 - What had once been neighborhoods and businesses had been reduced to rubble, concrete slabs, twisted metal, and broken foundations.
- One image in particular has stayed with me.
 - There was a Waffle House along the way, or at least there used to be.
 - I've seen a lot of talk about the Waffle House Index during our winter weather.

- And I'll just say that this Waffle House was open...WIDE open.
- The building itself was completely gone. No walls. No roof. Nothing you'd recognize as a restaurant.
- The only thing left standing were the bar stools, still anchored into the concrete floor. Everything else had been swept away.
- When we finally reached the church, it was clear they hadn't been spared.
 - The building was a mess. Water damage everywhere. Furniture ruined. Walls stained, warped, and moldy.
 - Years of ministry and memory buried under debris.
 - As we worked through the building, clearing what we could, I came across something that brought everything into focus.
 - Pushed against a wall was a large wooden plaque covered in smaller brass nameplates.
 - Each one bore a name. It was the church's hymnal dedication board, a record of gifts given in honor of loved ones, milestones, and memories.
 - At one point, this would have been considered precious.
- But standing there in the wreckage, the value of it had changed.
 - The hymnals themselves were gone, ruined by the storm.
 - And what once seemed meaningful was now simply another object to be sorted, evaluated, and possibly discarded so that rebuilding could begin.
 - Holding that plaque in my hands, I realized what we were really doing.
 - We weren't just clearing debris. We were searching the shadows.
 - We were looking honestly at what remained, naming what could no longer be carried forward, and discerning what God was calling the church to rebuild.

- That moment taught me something important: renewal doesn't begin by pretending everything is fine.
 - It begins when we are willing to slow down, look carefully, and tell the truth about our condition.
 - That's exactly where Nehemiah finds himself in [Nehemiah 2](#).
- When he arrives in Jerusalem, he doesn't rush to speeches or strategy.
 - He doesn't gather the people or announce a plan.
 - He waits. He walks. He looks.
 - Under the cover of night, he searches the shadows, taking an honest assessment of walls that are broken down and gates that have been burned with fire.
 - Before anything can be rebuilt, Nehemiah is willing to see what is actually there.
- And this morning, as we look at [Nehemiah 2:11–20](#), we're going to see that moving forward spiritually requires the same kind of courage.
 - The courage to wait. The courage to be alone. The courage to be honest. And the courage to keep going, even when opposition rises.
 - Renewal begins when God's people are willing to search the shadows and trust Him with what comes next.

Scripture Reading

Nehemiah 2:11–20 ESV

¹¹ So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days.

¹² Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode.

¹³ I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire.

¹⁴ Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass.

¹⁵ Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned.

¹⁶ And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

¹⁷ Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision."

¹⁸ And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

¹⁹ But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?"

²⁰ Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem."

- One of the things that is clear about Nehemiah - he is a man of action, but he's not one to jump to action.
 - Chapter 1 - he prays and fasts for a season before taking action.
 - And here in ch. 2, he arrives on the scene and he waits three days before he even makes an initial assessment of what he's working with (or what he's up against).

- He's teaching us such a profound lesson here that we would be wise to learn.

Searching the Shadows in Patience (v. 11)

- I don't think v. 11 is just there as an interesting, yet unimportant detail.
 - In the movement of the story, you can take out v. 11 and you lose nothing about Nehemiah's work.
 - But by including it, you're saying something important about Nehemiah.
 - He's not afraid of waiting.
 - We've seen that already in how he got to this point, and now it is reemphasized again.
 - We may not like it, but there are times when waiting is the best thing for our spiritual health.
- Hear me in this - I'm not saying there aren't urgent matters that require immediate decisions
 - Emergencies happen.
 - Deadlines are real.
 - The calendar is not just a suggestion, but an ever-present part of our existence.
 - You guys would probably be unhappy with me if I showed up on Sunday and said, "I've been waiting on the LORD this week and he just hasn't given me a message today...come back next week."
 - I wouldn't do that, nor do I believe the Lord would do that either.
 - At the same time, not everything is a spiritual 911 call or a trip to the Holy Spirit Emergency Room.
- For those things that are important, but not necessarily urgent, it is good to learn the discipline of waiting.

- I try to put myself in the shoes of biblical figures I can identify with and Nehemiah is one that I connect with.
 - I think it's because his calling is so manageable.
 - His calling is to be more than a project manager, but the project is certainly the centerpiece of his calling.
 - And I'll be honest - after 5 months of prayer and a journey of 3-4 months - I'm showing up to Jerusalem and I'm getting to work.
 - I want to know what I'm up against, I want to know who I've got to work with, and I want to know what resources are at my disposal.
 - I'm surveying the walls as soon as possible, I'm taking my architect and my engineer with me, we're making the drawings, getting the subcontractors lined up.
 - But that isn't Nehemiah's process.
 - He comes in quietly and waits patiently.
- One of the great promises of scripture applies to this idea of waiting.
 - The bible promises spiritual strength to those who practice the discipline of waiting.
 - [Isaiah 40:31](#) "31 but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."
 - [Psalm 27:14](#) "14 Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage; wait for the Lord!"
 - The bible also reminds us that waiting builds hope within us.
 - [Psalm 130:5-6](#) "5 I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; 6 my soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning, more than watchmen for the morning."
 - [Psalm 62:5](#) "5 For God alone, O my soul, wait in silence, for my hope is from him."

- We could spend a long time just unpacking the concept of waiting from the Bible, but needless to say it is for our good.
 - As we wait, we learn to trust the LORD.
 - We certainly learn to listen to the LORD.
 - Waiting isn't just a passive exercise. Waiting is an active pursuit as you actively pray, search the scriptures, and seek the LORD.
- But like all disciplines, it is one that we must practice if we are going to grow in it.
- After Nehemiah's three day waiting period, he then takes his next step which may have been the hardest.
 - It was time to confront the monumental challenge before him.
 - Under the cover of darkness, he sets out to take an honest assessment of reality.
 - But he doesn't do it in the way that I would...instead he does it in a way that really is in line with what we've seen from him already.

Searching the Shadows in Solitude (vv. 12-16)

- The text here says that Nehemiah has kept his mission under wraps.
 - He brings a few men with him.
 - It doesn't really tell us who the men are that he takes with him.
 - At this point, I'm just speculating, but back in v. 9 it says that the king sent Nehemiah with a military escort.
 - I believe the men he took with him were some of those soldiers.
 - It says in v. 16 that none of the officials knew what he was doing, so the men he took was probably just a security detail.
 - He then sets out to survey the situation.
- The solitude of this occasion stands out.

- This is his calling - he needs to put eyes on the problem without any outside influence.
- The Jews who have been in charge have proven a certain degree of incompetence in restoring Jerusalem.
 - They've allowed outside pressure to influence them.
 - They've drug their feet.
 - They've lost sight of the goal as they've pursued their own interests.
- He will eventually need these people to accomplish his mission, but here he just needs to be alone so he can be attentive to God's plan.
- What are we to do with that?
 - We need to be careful who we allow into our hearts and minds.
 - There's nothing wrong with godly friends and counselors.
 - [Proverbs 15:22](#) even speaks to the virtues of having wise counsel...
 "22 Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed."
 - But again, I think it is implied in this verse that this is good counsel and righteous advisers.
 - There are plenty of evil rulers and dictators throughout history who counsel and advisers.
 - Our problem is that we can substitute friends, family and other counselors for the hard work of honest self-assessment.
- I just finished reading Job and I think that the story of Job really helps to illustrate this principle.
 - As you know, Job experienced an unimaginably difficult season of suffering - both emotional and physical.
 - It left him in a bad place as he tried to sort through the situation.
 - Job had three friends who, when we first meet them, are phenomenal friends...they just sit with Job for an entire week.

- We call that the ministry of presence and if that's all they did, then they get a Gold Star for friendship.
- But then they start to speak...and everything they say is wrong and they end up pushing Job to a bad place.
- These are his FRIENDS.
- Job didn't need them to influence him as he sorted out what was going on in his life...he was far better off before they ever spoke.
- We have a responsibility for our own spiritual health, and that means honest self-assessment without the influence of others.
 - [Romans 12:3](#) “3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.”
 - We should always think with sober judgment, but here the thinking that is going on is about one's self.
 - You should apply sober judgment to your own spiritual health and wellbeing.
 - [2 Corinthians 13:5](#) “5 Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test!”
 - Here, Paul is specifically speaking in terms of salvation...
 - You're the only one who can guide that exam.
 - I don't know your soul and can't judge the legitimacy of your faith.
 - And you need to know that your salvation is grounded first and foremost in Christ's completed work.
 - Paul's challenge here is to make sure your salvation is grounded in the right place.
 - That's a work that happens between you and the Holy Spirit.

- There's nothing wrong with seeking Godly counsel, but honest, genuine evaluation of one's spiritual situation begins in the quiet place, without the influence of others.
 - I think the place where we see this happen the most
 - And I suspect that this is part of the testimony of many in the room.
 - How many children want to get baptized - not because they experience genuine conviction for sin and a desire to follow Christ - but because their friend got baptized.
- Children will ultimately need godly counsel to help them unpack what it means to follow Christ.
 - But it is important that mom and dad and others are pushing them into the water either.
 - If you're a parent, I hope you're praying for spiritual discernment as you shepherd your children's hearts.
- So after Nehemiah's private tour, what does he find?
 - Well, it's kind of what we've been expecting.
 - It's bad.
 - He doesn't sugar coat it at all.
 - And he is honest about it when he finally tells the leaders.

Searching the Shadows in Honesty (vv. 17-18)

- He begins with the most honest statement he could make, "You see the trouble we are in!"
 - This place is a disaster.
 - He doesn't pose this as a question - it's a subtle rebuke.
 - It isn't, "Do you see the trouble we are in?"
 - It is, "You see the trouble we are in..."

- You're not blind to the problem. But you are blind to the solution.
- Platitudes and courtesies are not going to get things moving here.
- Only honest.
- When we do the hard spiritual work and see all that's wrong, I think it is really important that we are honest about it.
 - I don't think there are very many sin issues or spiritual deficiencies in our lives that we are ignorant to.
 - There may be things that we don't yet know and as we learn, we are responsible for putting those truths to work in our lives.
 - I just think that's one of the works of the Holy Spirit in our lives.
 - But even though we are aware of issues, we do a really good job of reasoning those issues into the background.
 - I call this the "Yes, but..." response.
- It's not hard to see that response in the real world.
 - One of my driving vices is that I'm not the best at coming to complete stops at stop signs when nobody is coming.
 - I'm having internal communications at stop signs.
 - One of the worst is my neighborhood turning onto Highway 2.
 - I can see for a mile in both directions...
 - I know it's a stop sign. That's the YES.
 - I can see nobody is coming. That's the BUT.
- When it comes to God's commands (which are far more weighty than a stop sign), we do the same thing.
 - I know I should (or shouldn't), but there's some excuse, some reason, something that I've qualified as a legitimate exception to the rule.
 - And if we're not willing to be brutally honest with ourselves, we're not going to grow beyond it.

- How different would your life look a month from now if you took the month of February to honestly wait on the Lord, to earnestly pray, perhaps even fast, search the scriptures, and deal honestly with what he shows you?
 - This is not easy work.
 - It doesn't happen through social media posts and group chats.
 - It happens in the quiet place.
 - You're not searching for new revelation, new profound truth.
 - You're searching what God has already said and truth that has been known for generations.
 - You're simply applying it to your own spiritual health.

Searching the Shadows Despite Opposition (vv. 19-20)

- Be warned...this will not be easy work, nor will it be popular work.
- Nehemiah's plans are immediately chewed up and spit out by the opposition.
 - Tobiah, Sanballat, Geshem - these guys are the mockers and the scoffers.
 - They remind me of the two old men in the muppets that hate everything and mock everything, Statler and Waldorf.
 - These guys are the worst...And by the time they're finished, you wouldn't hate it if somebody dropped a rock off the wall onto their heads.
- But they're a powerful reminder of an ongoing truth.
- We have an enemy that isn't interested in you being obedient to the LORD.
 - He is quite content for you to carry about in mediocrity and half-hearted obedience.

- He wants us to continue in our “yes...but” pattern of discipleship.
- C.S. Lewis wrote in The Screwtape Letters, “The safest road to hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts.”
- If you’ll continue in spiritual mediocrity, then you’ll never make an impact in the Kingdom of God.
- In Nehemiah, you’ve got the temple, the wall is so extra.
 - You don’t need the whole city restored.
 - Just be content with what you’ve got.
 - That’s not what God’s desire was, and Nehemiah would have nothing of it.
- What does the enemy want from you?
 - As you honestly take a look in your own soul, what areas are there where the enemy has a hold?
 - If you could pray those areas out of his hands, what impact would it have on your relationship with Christ?

Conclusion

- As we come to the end of this passage, what Nehemiah shows us is that moving forward with God rarely begins with noise or urgency. It begins with honesty.
 - With the willingness to slow down long enough to see what is actually there.
 - I think we can all connect with a little bit of frustration when things move slowly.
 - We want progress. We want resolution. We want things to look better than they feel.
 - But God does not heal what we refuse to examine, and He does not rebuild what we are unwilling to acknowledge.

- Before there is a plan, before there is movement, before there is opposition, Nehemiah walks the walls in the dark and tells the truth about the condition of the city.
- And God meets him there.
 - So the invitation this morning is not to fix everything.
 - It's not to rush into action. It's not even to have answers.
 - The invitation is simply this: **are you willing to search the shadows with God?**
 - Are you willing to bring Him the honest condition of your heart, your faith, your obedience, your weariness, your drift?
- For some of us, that means admitting that there are places we've avoided because we're afraid of what we'll find.
 - For others, it means acknowledging that we've been busy with activity while ignoring damage beneath the surface.
 - And for some, it means recognizing that opposition has kept us from moving forward, not because God isn't faithful, but because honesty feels costly.
- But the good news of this passage is that God does not turn away from ruined walls.
 - He does not shame His people for broken gates.
 - He responds to truth with faithfulness.
- So as we close, I want to invite you to do what Nehemiah did before anything else happened.
 - To pause. To listen. To let God show you what is real.
 - And to trust that the same God who brings clarity in the dark is the God who will give strength to rebuild in the light.
 - If God is stirring something in you this morning, don't ignore it. Don't rush past it. Stay with it. Let Him meet you there.

- Renewal begins when we are willing to search the shadows and trust Him with what comes next.