

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Character Forged in Crisis

(Character sketches from Scripture)

Protecting What Is Fragile

(A look at the life of Nehemiah)

Study #3

Introduction: Fragility...

God, the Maker of everything, has made us with the capacity to make things. But there is a challenge that comes with the things we make. Everything we make - cars, nations and governments, relationships, families, businesses, churches - are fragile.

They must be protected against harm, nurtured and maintained, or they break.

Cars work better and last longer with regular oil changes. Houses need to be painted with some regularity. Businesses benefit from periodic audits to identify weaknesses.

Relationships don't thrive absent attention. The husband or wife who tells their spouse on their wedding day, "I love you" and doesn't repeat and doesn't display that love, is playing with fire.

In the same way, spiritual passion cools if it isn't fed. The fire goes out and the embers die in the absence of our pursuit of God.

The world is a fragile place. Taking a good thing for granted is to ensure that it won't last. Maintenance is critical.

This morning, we are, again, looking at a biblical character to see how God used crisis to forge their character. Today, we are looking at another Old Testament character, Nehemiah.

To be fair, Nehemiah's life was filled with crises - one on almost every page of his book. But I think the most severe test came when he was called upon to nurture the fragile spiritual health in his community of faith.

Nehemiah was an action-oriented man on a mission, and I love the story of this man. He was a man of unimpeachable character whose character was deepened AFTER he had completed his mission.

He discovered that the fragile nature of the work of God will require constant attention, that the work of nurture and maintenance must continue long after it seems that the work is finished.

If it happens that you're not all that familiar with the story of Nehemiah, not to worry.

I'm going to take a couple of minutes here at the beginning to review what this remarkable man accomplished for God and for the people of Jerusalem over the course of many years.

Overview of the life and times of Nehemiah..

So far, we have looked at the lives and ministries of the prophet, Daniel, and of Queen, Esther.

Chronologically, Nehemiah's story follows Daniel's and Esther's.¹

Last Sunday, we saw Esther's and Mordecai's work to save the Jews from Haman's wicked plot to destroy them. That came first. Then, Nehemiah came onto the scene in the next generation.²

Now, in a nutshell, here is the story of Nehemiah.

¹ True, even though we find Nehemiah before Daniel and Esther in our Bibles.

² It is likely that Esther and Nehemiah may have known each other, as Esther's husband (Ahasuerus / Xerxes) was the father of Artaxerxes, the king Nehemiah served. The action in Persia occurs in both books at the winter palace in Susa.

Like Daniel and Esther, he was a Jew whose grandparents (or great-grandparents) had been taken away from Jerusalem into captivity by the Babylonians.

We learn that Nehemiah served the Persian king, Artaxerxes, in the winter palace in Susa. We know that he was the cupbearer to the king. So, we also know that the king trusted Nehemiah, as kings must trust the man who tastes their food and wine to see if it is poisoned.

One day, Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, came to the palace at Susa to give a report to Nehemiah about how things were going back home in Jerusalem.

Now, this is about one hundred and forty years after the destruction of Jerusalem by King Nebuchadnezzar. Hanani's report was devastating.

[Nehemiah 1:3] "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and disgrace, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire."

When Nehemiah heard this news, he was undone. He had no idea that things were this bad in Jerusalem.

He would have thought that the walls had been rebuilt by now, that the city was intact, secure, and prospering.

He would have wondered how the city could be in such bad shape one hundred and forty years after it was destroyed? Why hadn't someone done something about this?

Nehemiah was appalled by this news, and he wept and mourned and prayed for months, all the while serving King Artaxerxes in his palace.

One day, the king noticed that Nehemiah was upset, and he asked Nehemiah to explain what was wrong.

Nehemiah told him. The city of his fathers was a train wreck.

Then, when the king asked him if there was anything he could offer Nehemiah to help out, Nehemiah said, "Yes!" and asked for permission to go to Jerusalem to put it the city back together again.

A clear answer to Nehemiah's prayer followed. King Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah everything he asked for, including an armed escort while traveling, supplies, and money for the rebuilding project.

He made it to the city, did his due diligence on the scope of the project of rebuilding the walls around the city, and called the people together to challenge them to the work.

After listening to him call them to this project of a lifetime, they said to him, ***[2:18] "Let's arise and build!"***

With that, the work began.

The people of Jerusalem joined hands to rebuild the wall. The workers included priests and Levites, craftsmen and artisans, perfumers and jewelers, politicians, and merchants. Whole families worked on the wall together.

There was strong opposition all the way through the project from enemies who hated the Jews. But Nehemiah encouraged the workers to keep working despite the attacks - and they did.

Along the way, there were a couple of work stoppages due to infighting among the Jews and attacks from enemies.³

But, in the end, after a century and a half of living with broken-down walls, at the end of fifty-two days of construction, the wall was done. The city was secure.

Following this milestone, Nehemiah gave leadership to Phase 2, which involved putting the city back on track, spiritually.

The people listened as Ezra the priest read from the Mosaic Law. They celebrated the feast of Tabernacles, as the Law required.

³ In chapter 6, we watch as the enemies used different means to stop the work on the wall - diversion (vv. 1-9), deception (vv. 10-14), and slander (vv. 15-19) - but Nehemiah met all these tactics with courage and tenacity.

They confessed the sins that they and their forefathers had committed that led to the city's demise. They, they celebrated God's gracious provision with an over-the-top time of worship.

Then, they agreed to make changes to the way the city ran, changes that would bring glory to God.

With the wall in place, and priests in place to lead in worship, the Jews promised that they would obey the Law of Moses.

In a couple of minutes, we'll see the specific promises they made. But, first, let's note the move that Nehemiah made after the promises were made.

Back to Persia, and back...

With things moving in an extremely positive direction, Governor Nehemiah sensed that now was the time to make a return trip to Persia to see and to serve his king, Artaxerxes.

He tells us, ***[13:6a]...in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had gone to the king.***

So, when King Artaxerxes first gave Nehemiah the green light to travel to Jerusalem to rebuild the wall around the city, he had asked, *"When are you coming back?"* (2:6). Artaxerxes wanted Nehemiah back.

After having been gone from Persia for twelve years (from year twenty through year thirty-two of the king's reign), the time for returning had come.

We watch him leave Jerusalem for the thousand-mile journey to Persia to return to the king, just like he promised.

He served there in Susa for an undefined period of time. Then, at some point, he asked leave from the king to go back to Jerusalem. Again, miraculously, the king said, *"Yes."*

By the time he got to Jerusalem, he had no doubt been gone for some years. The travel alone would have taken months. But finally, he has come back to the people and to the city he loved.

Now, we come to chapter 13, which may well make you wish the book had ended at chapter 12.

This last chapter is ugly. It's messy. It's very discouraging. But I believe that when we're finished, you'll be glad we have seen it, because in this last chapter, we see the character of Nehemiah strengthened and deepened. We get a roadmap to character development, too.

Remember I told you that before Nehemiah had left to go back to Persia, the Jews had made promises to obey and to honor God.

They made five promises.

The Jews of Nehemiah's day promised...

First, they promised that they would not marry people who didn't trust the Lord. To maintain faith-filled homes, they will marry only within the family of faith. (10:30)

Second, they promised to remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. For a very long time, as important as the Sabbath was to the Jews, they had not been observing the Sabbath. Now they will. (10:31)

Third, they promised that they would pay the 1/3-shekel tax to support the ministry of the temple (10:32-33) and that they would supply the on-going need for wood for the sacrifices (10:34-34)

Fourth, they promised that they would pay all of the tithes and offerings required in the Law for the sacrifices and for the support of the priests and the Levites (10:35-39)

Fifth, and finally, they promised that they would not allow Ammonites or Moabites to enter the temple. (13:1-3)

Prior to Ezra's reading of the Law, the people didn't know about how cruelly these people had treated the Jews. It was so bad that God commanded that they not be allowed in the temple.

The Jews of Nehemiah's day had not been keeping the Ammonites and Moabites out of the temple. Now they promise that they will.

What Nehemiah found as he rolled into town after his time in Persia proved that sadly, promises made can easily be un-made.

Nehemiah walked into an unholy, broken-promise mess.

Broken Promises

Regarding the Promise about Hostile Enemies (vv. 4-5, 7)

Right off the bat, he learned that one of the Jews' fiercest enemies, Tobiah, had been given space in the temple precincts to set up an apartment.

He also learned that this arrangement had been green lighted by Eliashib, who was a priest.⁴

At various points, Tobiah, had tried to demoralize the Jews (chapter 2), ridiculed them (chapter 4), tried to get others to join him in attacking the Jews (chapter 4), and tried to discredit Nehemiah's leadership by a deceitful plot. (chapter 6)

After all that Tobiah had done to try and stop the Jews from building the wall, it was nutty to allow him to live in the temple area.

And here's the kicker. Tobiah was an Ammonite. He was a member of the group of people that they had expressly promised they wouldn't let in to the temple - and they've allowed him to live there.

⁴ Eliashib had set Tobiah up to live in a place in the temple that was reserved for storing the supplies necessary for the nation's worship. With Tobiah living in that place, there was less room to store those supplies. The ongoing ministry of the temple is diminished because of broken promises.

So, while the cat had been away in Persia, the mice had been playing. And now, everybody is in shock.

Nehemiah was shocked at the promise-breaking. And Eliashib was no doubt shocked that Nehemiah was back.

And we've only just scratched the surface.

Regarding the Promise to Support Levites (v. 10)

Remember how they had promised to support the priesthood with the tithe? (10:35-39)

Well, at some point, they had stopped paying their tithes. That left the priesthood penniless and required that they support themselves, causing them to neglect their sacred duties.

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he found no active priesthood, no active religious ritual, and no active worship system.

So, two promises broken. There is more to come.

Regarding the Promise to Keep the Sabbath (vv. 15-16)

The people had previously promised to not buy or sell on the Sabbath. In obedience to the Mosaic Law, they promised that they wouldn't work on the Sabbath.

But, now, Nehemiah sees them making and selling wine on the Sabbath. They are selling and buying all kinds of stuff. The Sabbath is not just like every other day.

We keep reading and come to yet another crisis caused by the people's promise-breaking.

Regarding the Promise to Marry Within the Faith (vv. 23-24)

When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, he immersed himself in the life of the city. He noticed things.

Among the things he noticed was that Jewish men had taken as wives women from the city of Ashdod,⁵ and from the tribes of the Ammonites⁶ and Moabites.

The upshot of these marriages was a diluted faith in the marriages' offspring. The children didn't speak the Hebrew language. More to the point, they didn't believe the Hebrew faith.

And there is yet one more broken promise.

Regarding the Promises About the Priests' Duties (vv. 30-31a)

They had promised that they would assign to the priests and the Levites the duties of service in the temple AND that they would assign from the population people who would supply wood for the burnt offerings and sacrifices in the temple.

This promise was also broken (as is clear from the final two verses of the book).

Now, let's take stock of where the story of Nehemiah is, at this point.

Broken Dreams

His dream would have been to return to Jerusalem from his time away in Persia to find his people fixed and focused on God.

Ever since he had first left Susa, all those long years ago, Nehemiah had envisioned a revitalized and re-populated Jerusalem, living within secure walls, shining as a bright light for God in the 5th century BC world.

⁵ These were Philistines, or at least, descendants of the ancient race of the Philistines. By Nehemiah's time, there might not have been any pure-blooded Philistines left, as the culture had been wiped out by the Jews and by other invading forces, most notably Assyria. At the very least, though, these women from Ashdod were not God-fearing Jewish women.

⁶ In their defense, we might argue that they were simply imitating their spiritual leaders. Eliashib, the priest, had allowed intermarriage with the Ammonite, Tobiah's, family. See verses 4ff, above.

In what we've just seen, his every dream was crushed. The recently revived people of God had quickly reverted to rebellion.

To use a popular term, this was Nehemiah's existential crisis.

We read through the first twelve chapters of his book and watch his energy and enthusiasm, his zeal and passion for the work of God. It's inspiring.

This is quite the disappointment. And if Nehemiah was tempted to throw in the towel, we would understand.

Some of you can identify to this kind of a major life setback. You've had a gut punch. You have some sense as to what Nehemiah is feeling as he has seen what is going on in Jerusalem.

And you know that this is the kind of thing that could derail the best of us. He's given his life to this work.

So, if Nehemiah was tempted to throw in the towel, we would understand. We'd get it if he was considering joining the next caravan back to Persia. If I heard him say, "Good riddance, Jerusalem!" I don't think I'd judge him much.

Thankfully, Nehemiah didn't respond in any of these ways.

He recognized that this was the crisis that would test and that could build his character. He heard God's invitation to stay the course and owned the need to do some maintenance work, to nurture the fragile spiritual health of the people of God.

He didn't throw in the towel at all, but is a model of stick-to-it-iveness and perseverance.

Of course, he was still shocked at all of the promise-breaking. And the priest, Eliashib, was still shocked that Nehemiah was back in Jerusalem. And we can be sure that Tobiah the Ammonite was shocked at what Nehemiah did.

Fragility Requires Persevering Maintenance

Nehemiah Evicted Tobiah (vv. 7b-9)

[8] It was very displeasing to me, so I threw all of Tobiah's household articles out of the room. [9] Then I gave an order, and they cleansed the rooms;⁷ and I returned the utensils of the house of God there with the grain offering and the frankincense.

Nehemiah labeled Tobiah's living situation "*evil*." He simply threw him out.

The governor isn't going to win any awards for subtlety or for diplomacy here. But I find something compelling about this man who doesn't calculate. He acts.

He's in the grip of a passion for God, sees a wrong, and boldly rights it.⁸

And he's not at all finished. They had broken their promise to set things right, tithewise. He dealt with them about that, too.

Nehemiah Enforced Support for God's Servants (vv. 11-13)

[11] So I reprimanded the officials and said, "Why has the house of God been neglected?" Then I gathered them together and stationed them at their posts. [12] All Judah then brought the tithe of the grain, wine, and oil into the storehouses.

Notice. He brought the Levites and the singers back to their posts BEFORE the tithes were brought in, even before it was certain that those tithes would be paid. (Talk about a step of faith for the Levites and singers!)

But, with the worship leaders in place, the people did step up to the plate. All Judah brought in the tithes.

Next, he tackled the problem of Sabbath-breaking.

Nehemiah Enforced Sabbath Observance (vv. 17-22a)

As we keep on reading, we learn that the Sabbath-breakers didn't immediately roll over and play dead. They tried to keep their foot in the door. Nehemiah slammed the door shut on their toes. (v. 20)

And when they tried spending the night on the ground outside the gate, he told them, "*Camp at your own risk!*" (v. 21)

I now want you to watch what Nehemiah did when he found out that the Jews were marrying outside the faith. But first, a contrast.

Regarding the Promises About Mixed Marriages (vv. 25-29)

Ezra (Ezra 9:3)

About a dozen years before Nehemiah FIRST arrived in Jerusalem, Ezra the scribe had discovered that the Jews were doing this same thing. Here's what Ezra did when he found out.

[Ezra 9:3] When I heard about this matter, I tore my garment and my robe, and pulled out some of the hair from my head and my beard, and sat down appalled.

That is not *exactly* how Nehemiah responded...

Nehemiah (Nehemiah 13:25-28)

[25] So I quarreled with them and cursed them and struck some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them swear by God, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, nor take any of their daughters for your sons or for yourselves."⁹

Evidently, Nehemiah had graduated from his counseling school with an MMA degree. Not long on tenderness - but effective.

⁷ So, this was not just a single room. Eliashib set Tobiah up in a suite of rooms.

⁸ There was another Man who did something similar, in the temple, a few centuries later. See John, chapter 2.

⁹ The Living Bible puts it even more colorfully, "*So I argued with these parents and cursed them and punched a few of them and knocked them around and pulled out their hair!*"

Then Nehemiah caught his breath and reminded them the wisest king in all of Israel's history (Solomon) succumbed to the pitfalls of marriage outside the faith. It shipwrecked Solomon's faith. Why did they think marrying outside the faith wouldn't do the same to them? (13:26-27)¹⁰

And one final wrong righted.

Regarding the Promises About the Priests' Duties (vv. 30-31a)

The people had promised to have the priests and the Levites gainfully employed in the work of worship and that the people would ensure sufficient wood for the sacrifices on the altar.

Neither of those promises were kept, so Nehemiah gave assignments and made it so.

Conclusion:

I have long loved Nehemiah and have long been inspired by his life. So, I knew that in putting this series of messages together, I would be turning to Nehemiah.

In each of these messages, I'm looking for the critical moment in a person's story that God used to deepen his or her character.

When I thought about what part of Nehemiah's story I was going to zero in on, I initially knew right where I was going to go.

I would focus on that moment when he caught the vision to go back to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls after getting that bad report from his brother, Hanani.

¹⁰ Perhaps especially painful for Nehemiah would be the realization that the intermarriage practices had infected the priesthood. The branches of the family trees of Tobiah and Sanballat and Eliashib the priest were hopelessly intertwined. One of the grandsons of the High Priest (like the priest of verse 4, named Eliashib) had married the daughter of Sanballat (a foreigner from the nation of the Horonites), another one of the serious enemies of the Jews throughout this book.

I was going to go to the first chapter. However, the more I pondered the whole arc of Nehemiah's story, I became convinced that I needed to go deeper into his story.

Nehemiah started something new for God. From scratch, he began the task of rebuilding the city of Jerusalem's walls and its God-honoring infrastructure.

Starting something new is exciting. It's fresh. It's invigorating to innovate and to create. It's demanding, sure.

Lots of you here today know what it is to start something new. You pour your heart and soul into this new initiative. It's exhausting. It's hard. We could have learned a lot from looking at the start of Nehemiah's project.

But starting something new isn't as hard as getting to the halfway point in a project and crashing through quitting points.

Once the project started, Nehemiah faced unceasing assaults from the opposition. He was ridiculed. Enemies lied about him. Plus, he dealt with internal squabbles and with plots intended to derail him.

That stuff comes with any project and that's harder than starting something. We could have benefitted from focusing on the challenges Nehemiah faced to "*keep on keeping on*" when doing what was on his heart to do for God.

But persevering through challenges isn't as hard as re-starting something that was already done, fixing something that had been fixed, and getting back in the race after having already crossed the finish line.

Rudyard Kipling had this in mind when he wrote his poem, "If" to tell his son how to know that he had become a man:

*"If you can watch the things you gave your life to broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with wornout tools."*

It was when Nehemiah came back from Persia and saw his life's work for God UNdone that he faced his greatest challenge.

It was when he stooped down to rebuild what had been destroyed with wornout tools that God did his greatest work of building a man of character.

- It's when you think that you have established a foundation of faith for someone you love. It could be your son or your daughter, a good friend, someone you've poured your life into. And you watch as that foundation crumbles...and then re-engage to rebuild.
- It's when you think that your service for Jesus to children or to youth or to adults is on a healthy track. The ministry you've helped to put in place is in great shape. And then covid or something equally catastrophic hits. You watch as the wheels fall off that ministry. You watch health and passion for Jesus disappear...and then re-engage and rebuild.
- It's when you have worked hard to establish Christ-centered love and respect in a group. And for no apparent reason (or maybe for very apparent reasons), you see that group breaking apart...and you go back to square one to fight to re-establish that unity.

I see in Nehemiah's story two tools that enabled him to not throw in the towel when his life's work for God had been destroyed and his dreams crushed.

One tool is the willingness to accept the reality of life's fragility.

Wreckage is to be expected. Don't be surprised when entropy rears its ugly head and things tend toward disorder.

Nehemiah 13 is not an anomaly. It is a true and tragic picture of our world. One step forward followed by two steps back.

The realism we find in the Bible's stories confirms that. Many of the best of God's people have done shockingly bad things.

There is no question that a study of church history will give you some glimpses of beauty and grace. But if you study church history, you will learn things that your family in Christ has done that will seriously disappoint you.

There will be things that happen in our church that will disappoint you. When it happens, be sad. But don't be surprised.

Nehemiah 13 has warned you that messiness is always just around the corner. Life is fragile. Enter in to the messiness and look for ways to be Jesus' instrument of peace and healing. Help the cracked pot among us take our next step with Jesus.

The other essential tool I find in Nehemiah 13 is a fixed and steady focus on God.

The most frequently repeated phrase in this book is not, "Let's build!" It is "**Remember me, O God!**" Nehemiah's character deepened as he focused on a transcendent God while facing crisis after crisis.

He prayed repeatedly. Just from this last chapter we read:

[13:14] "Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out my loyal deeds which I have performed for the house of my God and its services."

[13:22b]... "For this also remember me, my God, and have compassion on me according to the greatness of Your lovingkindness."

[13:29] "Remember them, O my God, because they have defiled the priesthood and the covenant of the priesthood and the Levites."

[13:31b]...Remember me, my God, for good."

He lived to hear God's, "Well done!"

He cared more for the applause of heaven than he did for the results of his labors. It was his relationship with God that enabled him to keep on keeping on.

You and I, who long to take our own next steps with Jesus as we help others do the same, must hear God's invitation to pray, pray, pray, and respond by seeking, asking, knocking.