

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(August 10, 2008)

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Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Forward - Together!

(studies in Nehemiah)

Wreckage

(background; Nehemiah 1:1-3)

Study #1

Introduction: Rubble, rubble, everywhere...

Now that the Olympics are underway, Olympic stories may be just what you want to hear. Stories like this one may not be what you're longing for ...

In the 1988 Olympics held in Seoul, Korea, Anthony Hembrick, a boxer with the US Olympic team and the captain of the American boxing team, showed up for his opening round bout at 11:00am of the day of the fight. That was when he thought he was supposed to show up. He was wrong. He was to have been ringside by 10:45, ready to box. He arrived just in time to watch the referee raise the hand of his opponent, Jong-Ho Ha of South Korea in victory. Due to tardiness, Hembrick missed what was literally the opportunity of a lifetime. He was inconsolable in his grief, his Olympic dreams reduced to wreckage.

Have you ever missed what you considered at the time *"the opportunity of a lifetime"*? Have you ever seen your fondest hopes and dreams shattered, wrecked?

Or put yourself in the shoes of Rick Wagoner, the Chairman and CEO of General Motors. Right now, GM (GM!!!) is on the ropes. People in the financial world are speculating - actually have been speculating since 2005 - about whether the giant automaker, once the symbol of US dominance in cars, will survive.

No doubt Wagoner mourns the loss of GM's once proud position as the KING of the automobile manufacturing world and wonders if the glory will ever return.

Have you ever been party to, or witness to, a fiasco - and wondered if the glory that had departed a once noble organization would ever return again?

Or consider the city of New York. We are nearing the seven year anniversary of 9/11. It was on September 11, 2001, of course, that the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center were attacked by terrorists and destroyed, erasing fixtures of the New York skyline and killing thousands of our fellow Americans. On that day and on the days that followed, I watched television, followed Internet coverage and listened to radio reports, as you no doubt did, too, of people who tried to describe "ground zero." From Red Cross administrators to members of the Spurs basketball team, all agreed that words were inadequate to express - pictures couldn't even capture - the enormity of the devastation. Where the Twin Towers once stood, there was nothing but rubble. Rubble that says "vulnerable," "defeated." We watched as tears streaked the faces of tough New York City cops, firemen and dump truck drivers.

Have you ever found yourself, at a personal level, at "ground zero"? Devastated by how bad things are, shocked that things are not the way they should be, undone by the enormity of the devastation to your personal world, your family, your health, your friends?

Our first parents, Adam and Eve, lived for an unknown period of time in an unspoiled Garden of Eden. But you and I don't live in the Garden. One day we'll be in Heaven, but until that day, there is always going to be something wrong with everything.

GLOBALLY, crisis is everywhere.

Look at the geo-political situation as of August, 2008 and your heart will break over war, AIDS, tsunamis, pollution, the growing problem of slavery - especially of women and children, earthquakes, and poverty.

NATIONALLY, there are huge challenges.

In America, high gas prices are trivialities compared to disintegrating families, crime in the inner-city, prison overcrowding, the scourge of abortion, drug and alcohol abuse, the increasingly early sexualization of children, health crises on every front, and who is not concerned about the stewardship we need to provide to the land God has entrusted to our care.

PERSONALLY, we are confronted with rampant problems.

A little closer to home, your neighborhood is almost certainly filled with hurting people and angry people. Your school is filled with lonely and troubled people. Your home may be filled with discouraged people, aimless people, people who have lost hope and joy.

No matter where you look, things are not the way they should be.

During World War I my grandfather served in the US Army in France. He wrote letters from the front to his young bride living in Denton, Texas. I have those letters at my home. He signed every one of the, "*All is well.*"

He and my grandmother knew that all was NOT well. He was at war. It was happy nonsense, but it's the kind of thing a husband at war says to reassure an anxious wife.

All was not well in their world. All is not well in the world today, either. And our church is in the world that is not well.

I like to brag on our church when I get the chance. I rejoice over what the Lord has done and is doing in and through us - and He is doing some wonderful things here in these days. Worship is genuine and heartfelt. Ministry happens. Lives are being changed. Hurting families are being helped. Needs are being met. I never want to lose sight of all the good things that are happening.

Today, though, I'm going to be a half glass **EMPTY** pastor.

Today, I propose that we honestly look at our church and the world in which God has placed us and ask each other if we are doing all we could do to be the church God has called us to become.

Every once in a while, it is good for a church to sit back, take stock of its situation and ask, "*Are we making disciples as zealously as we could? Are we evangelizing as fervently as we might? Are we relating to each other as respectfully and honestly and lovingly as the Bible calls us to? Are we contributing to the needs of our brothers and sisters as helpfully as we should? Are we doing as much as we can to serve as many as we can in our community in Jesus' Name?*"

This morning, in the context of our study in God's Word, will be that "every once in a while" for us.

In a few minutes, I'm going to invite you all to a season of prayer and congregational conversation. This invitation comes from the Elders.

There are specific items that we - Northwest Community Church - need to be talking about and praying about together. These are significant items. I'll mention them toward the conclusion of our time together.

But to prepare us to address these weighty issues, we need to honestly face the wreckage around us and to confront how things really are.

The Bible gives us a man who shows us the way to honestly face the wreckage. In one day, in one moment, this man was confronted with the sobering truth about how things REALLY were in his world. Things were horrible in a place and among a people he desperately cared about.

This man was a Jew and he lived about 500 years before Jesus was born. This morning, we'll look at his response to those horrible things that were going on.

Before we see that response, though, we need to get acquainted with the history of his people. So, for the next few minutes, hang on to your hats, because I'm going to provide a quick overview of the history of the Jewish people.

This morning, I am traveling a path that preachers dread to tread. I am bringing you an introductory sermon! First sermons in any series are sometimes difficult for both preacher and preachee.

But none of us will “get” the real message of God’s Word today if we don’t “get” the historical setting in which the main character of our story found himself.

Setting the Scene: Israel’s History (at a glance)

Background to the nation of Israel from Abraham to Babylon

Abraham and the patriarchs

In the book of Genesis we meet a man named Abraham.¹ He lived around 2,000 BC in the land of the Chaldeans.²

There he was, minding his own pagan business and doing his own pagan thing - when God Almighty spoke to him.

God told Abraham that He was going to bless him, multiply his descendants, and use him to bring blessing to the whole world. Now THAT must have caught Abraham’s attention!

Abraham moved from the city of Ur (located about 150 miles south of the present-day city of Baghdad), to settle down in Canaan. Over the course of his life he was taught and he caught the lessons of faith. He learned to trust the God who had chosen to bless him.

In the generations following Abraham, though, there was a steady decline in the “robust faith” department. None of his descendants - neither Isaac nor Jacob nor Judah were the men of God that their father, Abraham had been.

And in order to protect Abraham’s family’s integrity and purity, God arranged for His people to be shipped down to Egypt for a few years of safekeeping.

¹ Actually, his name at first was “Abram”

² This is ancient Babylon, in present-day Iraq.

The Egyptian bondage and Exodus

Abraham’s offspring actually spent four hundred years enslaved in the land of Egypt. At times, they probably believed that God had forgotten all about them. In reality, they were being formed into a great nation in Egypt’s womb.

At the end of four centuries of captivity, God rescued them! He led them by the hand out of Egypt and through the parted Red Sea.

Protected at the rear by a pillar of fire and cloud, they walked safely through the sea to the other side and watched as God destroyed their tormenters, the Egyptians.

This event, the Exodus, is one of the highlight displays of God’s power in the Old Testament. It was the event that birthed the nation of Israel and is a milestone remembered by the Jews to this day.

However, shortly - very shortly! - after the Exodus - God’s people slipped into rebellion and faithlessness. The generation that experienced God’s salvation committed idolatry.

They engaged in the national sport of “grumbling” - by God’s estimation - once too often. And, because of their faithless grumbling, God consigned them to forty years of wandering around in the desert.

Conquest - Judges

At the end of those forty years (and after the grumblers had all died off), God allowed His people to enter the land He had promised to Abraham hundreds of years earlier.

They entered under the leadership of Joshua, and the generation of conquest was a tremendous time of faithfulness and obedience.

But, AGAIN, from Joshua forward, Israel’s history became a roller-coaster of spiritual ups and downs, with the downs mostly winning. The Jews’ early vibrant faith was swallowed by widespread apostasy during the reign of the Judges.

The era during which Israel was ruled by (regional) judges only lasted for a couple of centuries. As the last Judge, Samuel, grew old, God began to raise up kings.

King David

The first king, Saul, was a huge disappointment (see 1 Samuel 9 through the end of the book). But Saul was followed by David. And David was NOT a disappointment!

Under David, military might, political clout and wealth came to Israel. At the end of a long reign, David died, leaving the kingdom in the able hands of his son, Solomon.

During Solomon's reign, particularly, Israel prospered in every way and became a beacon for the glory and majesty of God. This majesty was seen, more clearly than anywhere else, in the Temple Solomon built for the Lord, a Temple that took seven years to build.

Glory under Solomon

THE SOLOMONIC TEMPLE

David had prepared for the Temple's construction by collecting materials while he was alive. Knowing that his death was imminent, David charged his son Solomon with the task of actually building it.

Solomon carried out his father's instructions to the tee, utilizing the time-honored methods of heavy taxation and forced labor (the labor of 150,000 men).³

The Solomonic Temple was built on Mount Moriah, where God had appeared to David, and where, centuries earlier, Abraham had almost sacrificed his son, Isaac.⁴

³ Solomon levied taxes from the Israelites, and used foreign and domestic forced labor to get the temple construction project under way. That labor force included 70,000 men to carry loads at the job site, and 80,000 men to quarry stone.

⁴ To maintain an air of reverence, Solomon put in place a noise ordinance at the construction site. [*1 Kings 6:7*] *The house, while it was being built, was built of stone prepared at the quarry, and there was neither hammer nor axe nor any iron tool heard in the house while it was being built.*

Folks, Solomon's Temple was one amazing structure! The foundation stones for the temple were of two sizes - huge and enormous. They were cubes of either twelve or fourteen feet.

The Temple proper was about one hundred and eighty feet long, about thirty feet wide - and the inside was overlaid with gold throughout.

All the wood trim work was in cypress or cedar wood, which means that it was not only beautiful, but aromatic.⁵ All of the doors were of olive wood (a hardwood with beautiful grains). Intricate, sacred engravings graced the building throughout.

The outside of the temple was impressive, but a sense of the majesty of God was overpowering as you entered the building.⁶

The "bronze sea" located in the outer court of the Temple (in which the priests would perform all the ceremonial washings), stood on the backs of twelve oxen cast in bronze. It held over 10,000 gallons of water.

There were (literally) tons of bronze utensils, other basins, and bronzework throughout the temple precincts.

And then, in the inner sanctuary of the Temple, called the Holy of Holies, there were two carved angels (cherubim) made of olive wood with wingspans of fifteen feet apiece. These carved angels were ten feet high, and overlaid with gold, and appeared to hover over the Ark of the Covenant.

One of the greatest days in the history of the nation came at the dedication of the Temple. On that day, the people made so many sacrifices that they literally lost count! And then, after Solomon offered a prayer of dedication⁷, God appeared to Solomon (for the third and last time) and sent fire from heaven to consume the sacrifices that were being offered!

And then, of course, there was the royal palace Solomon built for himself, a structure that took thirteen years to build.

⁵ My father's home in Dallas had a cedar-lined closet. Upon opening, its fragrance just about knocked you over. The whole temple smelled like that!

⁶Cf. 1 Kings 5-10; 1 Chronicles 22,23,29; 2 Chronicles 1-9)

⁷ See 1 Kings 8 and 2 Chronicles 6.

THE SOLOMONIC PALACE

Referred to as The House of the Forest of Lebanon, because it was built with cedars from Lebanon, this, like the Temple, was an impressive building.

One of the rooms in his palace was a great banquet hall as long as the Temple! The throne in the house was made of ivory and overlaid with gold, and on either side of the six steps leading up to the throne were 12 life-sized carved lions!

The age of Solomon was the golden age of Israel. The grandeur of his palace, his almost incalculable wealth and military might, along with the wisdom of Solomon all elevated the nation in the eyes of the other nations. Under Solomon, Israel enjoyed a privileged position as one of the world's superpowers.

Post-Solomon decline

However, toward the latter end of Solomon's reign, the king known for his wisdom abandoned that wisdom. He followed other gods. And from Solomon forward, to trace the path of Israel is to trace a path to national self-destruction.

During the reign of the next king after Solomon (Rehoboam), the unified people of God split into two factions, dividing into northern (Israel) and southern kingdoms (Judah).

After nearly two centuries of unrelenting apostasy, the ten tribes that made up the Northern Kingdom fell to the Assyrian empire in 722 BC.

And, not too long after that, the Southern Kingdom of Judah (including the great city of Jerusalem) fell to Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians.

At this point - in 586 B.C. - the glorious Temple was destroyed, the populace was impoverished, many of the wealthiest and most influential citizens were deported to Babylon, and the walls that protected the city of Jerusalem were flattened.

The destruction of Jerusalem, for the Jews, was for more devastating than missing a once in a lifetime shot at Olympic gold, and makes the potential collapse of General Motors look silly.

The carnage of a 9/11 begins to approximate the horror of the destruction of Jerusalem. But Jerusalem was more than a city. It was God's city. And God's city had been laid waste.

But, that is not the end of the story of the nation of Israel. The Jews remained a people, even following the Babylonian invasion. Those who had been left behind in Palestine clung to the old Jewish ways. Those in captivity never forgot that they were God's people and many of them longed for a chance to return to Israel.

Seventy years after Jerusalem's collapse, they got that chance.

Secular and sacred world history

Babylon's end; Persia's rise

After destroying Jerusalem in 586 BC, Babylon itself was destroyed by the Persians fifty years later, in 539 B.C.⁸ That meant that Jews who had been living in lands ruled by Babylon were now living in lands ruled by Persia.⁹

The vast Persian empire covered some two million square miles (of which Judah was a very small part), including the present day countries of Egypt, Israel, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and Turkey.

It was during the time of the Persians' world dominance that God began to provide opportunities for the Jews to return to the land of Palestine so that they could again take their place among the nations of the world.

⁸The Persian Empire lasted another couple of centuries until they were defeated by Alexander the Great's armies in about 333 BC

⁹More specifically, the Medo-Persian Empire.

Persia's policies

The first Persian king was Cyrus. And Cyrus is a genuine hero. After he defeated the Babylonians, he not only allowed, he *encouraged* the Jews to return to their homeland of Palestine. Some 50,000 Jews returned to Palestine during the days of King Cyrus of Persia.

Cyrus further encouraged the Jews to rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem, which they did under the leadership of a Jew named Zerubbabel in 516 B.C., seventy years after its destruction.

Three other Kings followed Cyrus - Cambyses, Darius, and Xerxes - before Artaxerxes, the king who reigned in the days of Nehemiah, came to the throne.¹⁰

In the seventh year of Artaxerxes' reign, and about 60 years after the temple had been rebuilt, Ezra (a Jewish scribe), returned to Jerusalem from Babylon with another group of some 5,000 Jews to re-establish right worship in Jerusalem (that would make it somewhere around 458 B.C.).¹¹

To review, destruction came in 586 B.C. After seventy years of captivity, many Jews returned and rebuilt the Temple. Ezra came back sixty years after that to put the nation back on track, spiritually.

So, things are looking up for the people of God!

Then, around 448 B.C., we are introduced to a man we will come to love over the next several weeks: Nehemiah.

Drama in Susa, Persia! (1:1-3)

Meet Nehemiah! (v. 1)

[1:1] The words of Nehemiah¹² the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol...

Nehemiah was a descendant of one of the Jews who had been exiled from Jerusalem when it had been sacked by Babylon. He might have been a sixth or seventh generation exile. He was still a Jew, but he was a Jew living in Susa, Persia.

From elsewhere in the book, we discover that Nehemiah had an important role in the service of King Artaxerxes - and that explains why he was in Susa, the well-fortified winter palace.¹³

For a point of reference, Susa was located very near the present-day Iran/Iraq border, near the Tigris River. Like Solomon's royal palace, Susa's was built of cedar and finished in gold, silver, and ivory. Artistically colored glazed bricks and relief designs of winged bulls decorated the place. This was where Nehemiah was living. Even though he was a servant, he was living in splendor.

Now, the reference to the twentieth year means that Nehemiah is writing about events that began at the twenty year point of the reign of Artaxerxes, around 445 BC, again, about thirteen years after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem.¹⁴

¹² From elsewhere in the book, we discover that Nehemiah came from the tribe of Judah, and (from chapter 2) that he had a prestigious role in the palace as the cupbearer to the king. His name means "*the consolation of YHWH.*"

¹³ In the late 19th century, French archaeologists uncovered magnificent ruins of the royal residence at Susa. From these discoveries, we can be sure that Nehemiah, even though a foreigner, lived in splendor.

¹⁴ Cyrus: a tolerant, good, enlightened King who allowed conquered peoples to return to their countries. He also allowed freedom of worship in conquered lands. His descendant, on the other hand, Artaxerxes, was a fickle, arrogant, unreliable spendthrift!! (And this Artaxerxes was the King Nehemiah would have to deal with!)

¹⁰ Taxation was heavy in the Persian Empire, and getting worse, especially for the Jews. Taxes paid by the people supported the King, the satraps (the Persian name for *bureaucrat*), the governor, and paid the Temple tax.

¹¹ The Hebrew Bible doesn't separate Ezra and Nehemiah, but treats them as one book.

While Nehemiah was living in Susa, performing royal service, he received visitors. They came from the land of Palestine.

“How's it Going, Hanani?” (v. 2)

Meet Hanani

Hanani, Nehemiah's flesh and blood brother, was one of the visitors.¹⁵ Hanani came with others from Judah, with news from “home.”

Even for those Jews who had been in captivity for generations and had never set foot on Promised Land soil, Palestine was always “home.”

Nehemiah asked Hanani the question that was most on his heart, and at the forefront of his mind.

Nehemiah poses "The Question"

[1:2]... I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.

Like every Jew, Nehemiah knew Israel's ancient and recent history. He knew about Abraham and Moses and the Exodus and Joshua's conquest and the glory days of David and Solomon and Solomon's Temple.

He, knew, too, about Nebuchadnezzar's invasion.

But he also knew about the return of the Jews at the order of Cyrus. He knew about the rebuilding of the Temple under Zerubbabel. He knew about the return of thousands more with Ezra just a few years before Hanani's arrival.¹⁶

Nehemiah had every reason to believe that things were going GREAT in Israel, that God's people were prospering, that Solomonic days were returning, that God was being glorified by His people's righteous lives.

It's easy to understand Nehemiah's ignorance, in those days before modern communication. He was separated from Jerusalem by some 800 miles. He asked his question - and Hanani answered.

“Nehemiah, You Wouldn't Believe It!” (v. 3)

[1:3] They said to me, “The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.”

One hundred and forty years have passed - and the walls are still down.

Can you imagine having seen the devastation of the 9/11 attacks in 2001, and returning to New York City twenty five years later - or fifty years later! - and finding the rubble of the Twin Towers still lying on the ground?

What would that say about New York? What would be the thoughts of every New Yorker as she or he walked past “ground zero” if in 2051 there is not a beautiful memorial park, two large pools with waterfalls, and a stunning museum?

It would mean humiliation. Defeat. The terrorists won.

Unbelievably to Nehemiah, the conditions in which the people of God were living were deplorable. And the message of Nehemiah's brother, ***“The walls are still broken down”*** was humiliation. Defeat.

You can imagine the scene...

- People walked over the wreckage of the gates to enter the city.
- Traders laughed as they walked over the broken down walls.
- Children played with rusty hinges they found on the ground.
- Enemies mocked the defenseless city and nobody took Jerusalem seriously.

Without locked gates and lofty walls a city was nothing more than a village waiting to be sacked. But this is not just any city. This is Jerusalem, God's city!

¹⁵ We will meet Hanani again in chapter 7.

¹⁶ Maybe he hadn't heard that Ezra's (illegal) attempt to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem had failed, a dozen years earlier.

It was to be glorious and majestic and God-honoring and a beacon to the surrounding nations, a light to the world advertising the greatness of God!

Nehemiah was shell-shocked. This was not the way it was supposed to be. The walls of Jerusalem were supposed to be up by now, the city protected and commanding respect among the nations.

So what did he do? What is his initial and immediate response? Listen.

Conclusion: Responding to the wreckage...

[1:4] When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

For Nehemiah

Initially, Nehemiah took no action. He didn't move to remedy the situation. He didn't go to the nearest bookstore to buy resources on urban renewal and wall-rebuilding.

He simply entered into the reality of how bad things were, expressed his grief and broken-heartedness, and mourned, as he says, ***“for days.”***

We will see next Sunday that this period of mourning actually lasted for months, and was accompanied by intense prayer and desperate fasting while God was preparing his soul for a great work.

That's what Nehemiah did.

What about us? How should we, the people of God today, respond to the wreckage all around us?

For us

There is wreckage. In fact, if we look closely, there is always going to be something wrong with everything.

For completely understandable reasons, though, we may not very often look at the wreckage. It is unpleasant. It robs us of joy. We allow ourselves to look at the problems around us and are drawn to the kind of response Nehemiah models. Who wants to enter into that kind of grief?

We grieve situations of abuse and stories of injustice and glimpses of poverty. We mourn biblical illiteracy, the decreasing numbers of children and young people who know the Lord, the cafeteria approach to spirituality in our day and the increasing secularization of our society. We want to sit down and cry when we see the weakening of families, the incredibly high divorce rate, financial decisions that doom so many to unrelenting pressure and lifestyle choices that lead to such poor health.

Wreckage is everywhere. And to look at it honestly is to be tempted to just sit down and ***“weep and mourn for days.”***

But what if we were to face it? What if a church were to look at the wreckage? What if a church honestly faced the wreckage in the culture and asked God, ***“Could You possibly use us to redeem the mess and to help people whose lives are wrecked?”***

I think if a church was willing to be that honest, God would meet them and use them beyond their wildest dreams.

If this were to be OUR CHURCH, the Lord might shine light on wreckage inside as well as outside.

He might force us to face the fact that we have become comfortable and cozy. We might need to reckon with the reality that we have not risked life and limb to do everything we could do to serve as many people as possible in Jesus' Name. He might confront us with the idea that we have not given ourselves to disciple-making and to evangelism and to meeting needs to the degree that we could have.

And focusing on all of THAT might drive us to ***“weep and mourn for days”*** every bit as much as looking at the wreckage around us!

Brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ has planted His church in San Antonio. One of the manifestations of that church meets at 8900 Guilbeau Road and calls itself Northwest Community Church.

He has called us to a work. **And in response to that call, the Elders are calling our church to a time of congregational prayer and conversation about the unique path the Lord of the church has for OUR church.**

Keeping in mind the pressing needs (wreckage!) all around us, over the course of the next several weeks, we are going to be considering with each other and in the presence of the Lord how we can respond to the wreckage with:

MINISTRY - Concerns initiatives involving Local Outreach, Foreign Missions, and internally focused ministries.

STAFF - Concerns initiatives involving the search for a full-time Pastor of Family Ministries and a part-time Youth Pastor

FACILITIES - Concerns initiatives involving the congregationally approved Master Plan and the timing of the pursuit of the Master Plan, considering both finances and stewardship issue.

Brothers and sisters, let us **PRAY** and let us lovingly, honestly **TALK**.