

## **Rebuild: Ezra-Nehemiah**

### **Part 6: “People of Action” | Nehemiah 1-2**

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[SERMON MANUSCRIPT]

### **Introduction**

Today’s sermon is titled “People of Action” and it is from Nehemiah 1-2. In this season of “rebuilding,” our anchor sermon series has been in Ezra and Nehemiah. We recently finished Ezra, paused for the last two weeks to do a very helpful teaching series on death, and today we’re picking up with Nehemiah. As we do, I want to frame our mindset for this sermon by asking you: What is your vision that you’re working towards right now? What is a noble, meaningful cause that you want to dedicate yourself to work towards for now?

I did this exercise last year where I had to draw what I felt like God was calling me to do in this season of my life. So this is what I drew, which I can explain like this: First, we need a healthy, biblical church (HMCC of Tangerang and HMCC of Jakarta) that will be making faithful, fruitful disciples who are making more disciples- this is good for me and for everyone in my church! This is also a *need* because there are people in my community- my neighbors, university students at UPH, and in the surrounding areas- who do not yet know Jesus Christ as their Savior and King. So I want to love my neighbors well and support an “ecosystem” of churches and other supporting ministries where Jesus is bringing life to people who need this good news. I also want to send *out* and send *better* gospel workers too- to people groups who don’t yet have any churches among them. I know that these are things I can’t do on my own but that Jesus’ church can do together!

As we are “rebuilding” after a long time of being 100% online and being physically separated, we are “rebuilding” as a church specifically (among other things) into people of action: people of action *towards* God’s causes that will give glory and honor to his name! This isn’t coming out of nowhere- this is connected to what we’ve learned so far in this sermon series through Ezra and Nehemiah.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah have been traditionally taught in tandem- for centuries in Jewish traditions they were together on the same scrolls! The book of Ezra went through how God brought his people *back* to Jerusalem and then how they rebuilt the temple. It was not just a physical rebuild that they went through, but under Ezra’s leadership, they experienced a spiritual revival as well.

Now we get to the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a Jewish exile who worked directly for the king of Persia. He was appointed governor of the Province of Judah and led his people in rebuilding the city walls and- together with Ezra actually- in reforming the faith and practice of the people of Israel. As we see in this book, Nehemiah was a man of prayer, a man of action, and a man who rallied his people together.

### **Proposition**

The main idea of my sermon is this main idea from Nehemiah 1-2- what I like to call my “one thing”:

***Take steps of action as the Lord Jesus  
directs us to causes that honor his name.***

### **Organizational Statement**

There are two major parts to this passage of Scripture: first, ***praying for God-honoring causes*** (in Nehemiah 1:1-11) and second, ***seizing God-given opportunities*** (in Nehemiah 2:1-20). There will be two action steps in each of these two parts that I want us to consider taking as well.

**Transition:** So for the first main part of this Scripture, let's...

## Sermon Outline

### I. See Nehemiah 1: Praying for God-Honoring Causes.

A. In verses 1-4, Nehemiah received news in Susa about the condition of the Jews in Jerusalem and responded with praying and fasting.

1. [Here's the first action step that I want us to consider from this part...] Action Step #1: Keep your eyes and ears open to causes that honor the name of God.

a) Just to be clear, all this happened thirteen years after the events of the book of Ezra. The temple had been rebuilt; the people were *being rebuilt* through the ministry of the Word there. But for some reason, after all this time, the people of Judah had not been able to rebuild the walls of the city. Now, enter this man Nehemiah into the narrative. He was a Jewish man who was a high-ranking official for the king- a cupbearer according to verse 11. One day around November or December (this was the month of "Chislev"), his brother Hanani and some others came from the Province of Judah. Nehemiah asked about the welfare of his people there and the condition of their beloved city, Jerusalem. Let's read Hanani's answer and then Nehemiah's reaction from...

o Nehemiah 1:3-4 (ESV): *3 And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire." 4 As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. This is God's Word.*

b) What is surprising here is how Nehemiah responded so intensely and emotionally. Verse 4 says that he had to sit down because his legs got weak; he didn't just shed a tear- he *wept* in sorrow; he mourned for days, fasting and praying to the Lord. All of this was because Nehemiah knew that the welfare of God's people and the condition of God's city were causes that mattered a lot to God- so it mattered to him too. I think what is so important to consider here is *why* Nehemiah responded this way.

c) Many generations had passed since Jerusalem and the temple were first destroyed and the people of Judah were exiled- about 140 or so years (586-446BC). He was born and raised deep within the Persian empire and actually had never even seen or been to Jerusalem! But Nehemiah was a part of a small Jewish community that still clung onto the Law, their Scriptures, and the covenant relationship they had with God. For Nehemiah and this community, the words of Psalm 137 were strongly impressed in their hearts:

o Psalm 137:4-6 (ESV): *4 How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! 6 Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!*

Jerusalem (the "city of God") and Israel (the "people of God") were causes that were close to God's heart according to the Scriptures! The fact that both the city and the people were in ruins brought shame and dishonor to the name of God! *This* was why Nehemiah responded so emotionally!

d) Context: This leads us to our first action step again, to keep your eyes and ears open to causes that honor the name of God. How do we do this? We do this by keeping our eyes and ears close to the ground. This means knowing what is going on with the people that are important to you or supposed to be important to you- like your family, church, and neighbors. Even this simple step is really hard and it's been even harder during this

pandemic. Just think about some people in the church- people that you haven't seen or interacted with in a while: Do you know how they're doing? Do you know what they are celebrating, grieving, or struggling with? This takes us to the most crucial element of keeping our eyes and ears open to causes that honor the name of God: get the Word of God saturated in your minds and in how you look at the world; be a part of the church community to do this together. We'll talk about this more as we talk about the next action step...

- B. In verses 5-11, Nehemiah prayed to the Lord, confessing his sins and the sins of his people and appealing to the Lord's covenant with Israel.
1. [Here's the second action step that I want us to consider from this part...] Action Step #2: Cultivate your heart with Word-filled prayers focusing on God's holiness and steadfast love.
    - a) Now we get into Nehemiah's head here, as he recorded *what* he prayed during those times. Let's read Nehemiah 1:5-10...
      - o Nehemiah 1:5-10 (ESV): 5 And I said, "O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. 7 We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. 8 Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, 9 but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.' 10 They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand." This is God's Word.
      - b) Nehemiah was a man who had a real, dynamic relationship with God- you can see this in how he knew the Word and how he prayed. Just look at verse 5 for example, when he addressed the *great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments*. This was directly from Deuteronomy 7 and other parts of the Law. In a pagan land, he knew that YHWH (the personal name of God that the Jews used) was the one true God- great and awesome- who also made a gracious covenant with the people of Israel.
      - c) In verses 8-9, Nehemiah prayed back the Scriptures again (specifically from Leviticus and Deuteronomy) because he knew the story of Israel from the Law. Israel was enslaved in Egypt, but the Lord redeemed them out of captivity in Egypt and made a covenant with them, giving them the Law through Moses that would distinguish them as *God's people*. But throughout their history, Israel constantly disobeyed God (who is holy) and turned their backs on God (and his love for them).
      - d) The reason Nehemiah was shaken to the core was because *his generation* was squandering God's redemption *yet again!* Remember that God made it possible for Israel to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple 140 years earlier! So this was *why* Nehemiah was praying night and day and confessing the sins of his people and the sins of his own heart. He cried out to God, appealing to his covenant and steadfast love again. You see, I think that Nehemiah knew (through God's Word) that one of God's causes was the honoring of his name, that God was known and worshiped as holy and righteous and perfect. And Nehemiah knew (through God's Word) that another of God's causes was redeeming his people, because God loved them with a steadfast love.
      - e) Context: This leads us to our second action step, to cultivate your heart with Word-filled prayers focusing on God's holiness and steadfast love. Actually, what we have to ask ourselves is a more fundamental question: "Why don't I have more of this heart?" I

think a lot of us are on a similar track as Nehemiah: We've worked hard to carve out a career that's comfortable and successful; or we're *hoping* to carve out a life that's comfortable and successful. If we're honest, using the words of Augustine, the 4<sup>th</sup> century church father, we're living for the "city of man" and all its idols rather than the "city of God" and what really matters to God. But Nehemiah cared about Jerusalem because the name of God was being dishonored as it remained decimated and in ruins. Nehemiah cared about the people of God because they were squandering the covenant and steadfast love he offered to them. Are we *that* serious about God's honor and God's people?

- f) Context: Let me give a very tangible example of this. In John 13:34-35, Jesus said this:
- o John 13:34-35 (ESV): *34 A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. 35 By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.*

This is a simple enough command, isn't it? Simple to say but so hard to do! There are some people in church that are easy for us to love; there are *many* people in church that are hard to love. Especially these days it's harder to really extend out to others in church; it's easier to be critical and complain about church people; it's harder to make time to connect and build real relationships; it's easier to just get what we want out of church instead of investing into the church. But sadly, the world sees this, doesn't it? They see our *lack* of love for one another- fighting, gossip, back-biting, judging, not caring- and the one who gets dishonored is the Lord Jesus! That *should* bother us and *should* lead us to confession and repentance!

- g) Context: Thankfully, as Nehemiah knew, God's salvation for the world is a cause that God himself is fully invested in. The fulfillment of the covenant and the story of the Scriptures is Jesus Christ himself. He obeyed the Law perfectly, fulfilling God's holy requirements, and was the worthy sacrifice for our sins to redeem us. Look at what Romans 3:23-25 says about the redeeming work of Jesus Christ:
- o Romans 3:23-25 (NLT): *23 For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. 24 Yet God, in his grace, freely makes us right in his sight. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. 25 For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood.*

God takes care of his own cause to save his people by sending his Son, Jesus Christ, on the cross to do what we could not do on our own (because of our sinfulness). We are made right with God because Jesus was sacrificed to pay the penalty for our sins.

- h) Context: The more we cultivate our hearts with Word-filled prayers focusing on God's holiness and steadfast love, the more the gospel will be truly good news because we know in greater depths that Jesus Christ is the redeemer that God sent to save us. When we first realize this and put our faith in Jesus, this is that "conversion" point in our journey with Jesus. And as we go along in our journeys with Jesus, growing in *real, authentic* relationship based in his Word, then we *will* have a growing awareness of God's holiness and a growing awareness of our flesh and sinfulness. The mark of a truly *mature* Christian is that the cross gets bigger and bigger in our lives! *This is a worthy, God-honoring cause to cultivate into our hearts!* It is a lifestyle and lifelong habit for those who have relationship with Christ. This is so important because then we will be *in the right place* to seize those God-given opportunities that he convicts us about!

**Transition:** The first main part was *praying for God-honoring causes*. Now for the second part of this Scripture...

## II. See Nehemiah 2: Seizing God-Given Opportunities.

- A. In verses 1-8, Nehemiah had the opportunity to ask King Artaxerxes for permission to rebuild Jerusalem and he did it- with a lot of fear and trembling.
1. [Here's the third action step that I want us to consider from this part...] Action Step #3: Be decisive when God gives you opportunities to progress towards causes that honor him.
    - a) Let's continue in the narrative by reading Nehemiah 2:1-5.
      - o Nehemiah 2:1-5 (ESV): *1 In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. 2 And the king said to me, "Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart." Then I was very much afraid. 3 I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" 4 Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. 5 And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it." This is God's Word.*
    - b) So fast forward now 3-4 months- this is the month of Nisan, which is around March or April in the Jewish calendar. Nehemiah was working at this moment and he looked noticeably sad that day. The king noticed Nehemiah's sadness, which could have been big trouble. Not only was it not "professional" in the king's presence, what Nehemiah had in his mind to do (to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem) could have been regarded as an act of rebellion against Persia! This was especially the case if you remember that in Ezra 5 Artaxerxes was the one who put an end to an earlier rebuilding effort in Jerusalem!
    - c) But think about this. Nehemiah had been fasting and praying for the sake of his people living in Judah and for the sake of the city of Jerusalem. This was eating away at his heart for months now! It was affecting him emotionally and physically. Nehemiah had been waiting and praying for an opportunity like this! So in verses 3-8, he "risked it for the biscuit"! It is apparent that he had thought about it a lot and had somewhat of a plan whenever the door opened. Nehemiah wisely explained the situation in Jerusalem and that set up the king's next question in verse 4: "So what are you requesting, Nehemiah?" For a brief moment before he answered the million-dollar question, he mentioned this tidbit: "So I prayed to the God of heaven." Nehemiah's months of prayer- safe to say his *lifestyle* of prayer- led him to this reflex reaction of dependence and alignment with God!
    - d) Nehemiah finally made the bold ask in verse 5: He asked the king to send him to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. He went even further than that, specifically asking for two letters: one granting him safe passage through the Persian Empire all the way to Jerusalem and the other granting him the king's timber and other supplies for the rebuilding project. In the end, Nehemiah said this in verse 8: *The king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.* He rightly gave credit to God's divine providence in opening this door- and Nehemiah was decisive when God gave him the opportunity to progress towards this cause that would honor his name.
    - e) Context: This leads us to our third action step, to be decisive when God gives you opportunities to progress towards causes that honor him. This leads us to a very important and relevant question for all of us: "How do we know and decide God's will in our lives?" The insights I'm going to share now are from a book called *Just Do Something* by Kevin DeYoung. I would recommend this book if you want to read a more thorough treatment of the subject. The "conventional approach" to finding out God's will is mysterious and confusing, isn't it? We tend to obsess about the future and get anxious about not knowing or control what will happen. If we're honest, we kind of treat God as sneaky- like he wants to confuse us or hide the truth from us. Overall, this "conventional approach" reveals our lack of trust in God's will of *decree* (that is, God is

sovereign and therefore *everything* happens according to his will) and our ignorance to obey God's will of *desire* (that is, God's commands he gives us to obey).

- f) Context: So for God's will of *direction* (that is, "How do I decide God's will for something specific in my life?"), the Bible provides us the way of wisdom. Look at what Scripture says in Proverbs 2:1-6.
- o Proverbs 2:1-6 (NIV): *1 My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, 2 turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding— 3 indeed, if you call out for insight and cry aloud for understanding, 4 and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, 5 then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. 6 For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding.*

We are never told in the Scriptures to ask God to reveal the future or to show us his plan for our lives. God says here, "Don't ask for all that. Ask me for wisdom so you'll know how to live according to my Book."

- g) Context: *Show the-way-of-wisdom.jpg*. So how do we get this wisdom to discern God's will? This passage in Proverbs mentions three ways. The first way to get wisdom is to "store up God's commands," or search the Scriptures and saturate yourself in it so that our hearts and minds are transformed to love what God loves and hate what God hates. The second way to get wisdom is to "turn your ear to wisdom," or get wise counsel from others in the church community. The third way to get wisdom is to "call out for insight," or simply asking God to tell us what to do. We pray for illumination of the Scriptures; we pray for wisdom that doesn't come naturally to us; we pray for the things that you already know are God's will- like good motives, willingness to trust and obey, and for the gospel to spread. Then lastly- as you've prayed and studied and sought advice, make a decision! As you follow the way of wisdom, you will probably make God-honoring decisions!
- h) Context: Looking back at Nehemiah, this was what he did, wasn't it? He was a man of God's Word and really loved what God loved and hated what God hated. He prayed and asked for insight from God. He probably had his "brothers" from the covenant community who gave him godly counsel. And when God gave him the opportunity to progress towards this cause to rebuild God's city and people, he acted decisively. What about for you? It could be a so-called "big" decision, like changing your career path, pursuing a serious dating relationship, or relocating your family. Or it could be a so-called "small" decision like bringing up that sticky issue at work, taking up that opportunity to serve in that ministry for the church, or allocating time in your schedule for some personal time. To become people of action, may we be decisive when God gives you opportunities to progress towards causes that honor him!
- B. In verses 9-20, Nehemiah got to Jerusalem and moved carefully and deliberately, inspecting the walls of the city and inviting the people of Judah to rebuild.
1. [Here's the fourth action step that I want us to consider from this part...] Action Step #4: *Invite church family members to join you in causes that honor God's name.*
    - a) In verses 9-10, Nehemiah finally arrived in the Province of Judah. He visited with the current officials who were already established there. He probably met with some resistance or resentment, so those letters from King Artaxerxes probably came in handy. Nehemiah, coming with an official royal military escort, was obviously there to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. Then in verses 11-16, Nehemiah finally went to Jerusalem and stayed there for three days. He did something interesting while he was there. He scouted out the city walls with a small group of his own men- in the secrecy of the night. The important thing was that he needed to see with his own eyes the current condition of the walls and the gates in Jerusalem. Then he gathered some of the

priests, nobles, officials, and others in the covenant community. I'll read Nehemiah 2:17-18...

- o Nehemiah 2:17-18 (ESV): 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. This is God's Word.*
- b) Nehemiah gave an invitation to them: *Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem.* He stated the brutal- yet obvious- facts about their "trouble," that Jerusalem lied in ruins and its gates were burned. The condition of the people of God reflected the condition of those walls: still fragmented, lacking key infrastructure, and vulnerable to attacks. Even worse, they were *suffering derision*, which meant that they were being mocked and shamed because of their condition and the name of God was also being mocked and shamed. These were worthy causes: the people of God, the city of God, and ultimately the name of God!
- c) Nehemiah took a risk here, didn't he? The people in the Province of Judah didn't know him at all, he was inviting them into a daunting endeavor, it would require *all* of their blood and sweat. But Nehemiah also shared how God's hand had been upon him for good. He probably retold the story of how he'd heard the report from Hanani when he was in Susa; how his heart was so burdened as he prayed and fasted for months about it; how when God opened the door for him to ask the king of Persia to send him to Jerusalem- this all was the hand of the Lord! After all this, they were convinced and replied: *Let us rise up and build.* The whole covenant community was onboard!
- d) This leads us to our fourth and final action step to *invite church family members to join you in causes that honor God's name.* Building up the people of God involves *all* of us! I talk to people often how the church has disappointed them in one way or another. The specific situations may be complicated, but what is important is that we *all* need to see these failures, shortcomings, mistakes, and even sins that we have in *our church* as something that we all care about and own. How are *you* trying to reach out to your brother or sister? How are *you* making your LIFE group and church a stronger community? How are *you* taking up the burdens of your spiritual family? These are worthy causes: the people of Christ, the church of Christ, and ultimately the name of Christ! Therefore, invite one another to join you in these God-honoring causes. Start with action steps #1-3: keep your eyes and ears open to the specific causes, cultivate your heart by focusing on the cross of Christ, and be decisive when God gives you opportunities to make progress in those specific causes. Then take initiative to open up, to meet up, to pray together, and to take steps of action *together* with the church family.

**Transition:** The first main part was "praying for kingdom causes" and the second main part was "seizing God's opportunities." Now let's conclude with the...

## Conclusion

### III. Life Application

A. Here are the next steps we can take in light of the one thing from Nehemiah 1-2 to *take steps of action as the Lord Jesus directs us to causes that honor his name.*

1. Cultivate your heart for God-honoring causes by taking in and praying through the Word (personally and with others).

- a) Let's keep first things first: it starts in here, in our hearts! We need to ask ourselves, "Why don't I have more of this heart?" What ways are our lives filled with pursuing causes for our own name rather than for honoring the name of God? May we have real, living relationships with God in Christ, confronted by his holiness (and our sinfulness) but also comforted by his steadfast love as demonstrated for us on the cross. Let's not squander our lives for anything less that causes that honor God's name! May our prayers reflect constant confession and consecration to the cause of Christ.
2. Exercise the "way of wisdom" (from Proverbs 2:1-6) regarding a specific decision that you have to make now.
    - a) Like I said, it could be for a "big" decision or a "small" decision. First, search and saturate yourself in the Scriptures to transform our minds and hearts. Second, get wise counsel from others in the church community. Third, pray and ask God for wisdom and guidance. And fourth, make a decision by faith! May the Lord Jesus rebuild us into people of action like this- a healthy church- so that he can guide us to all the other God-honoring causes in our city and world like "faith and work," "justice and mercy," and "missions." Let's have this vision for our church to be people of action!

**Transition:** Let's take a few moments to collect our thoughts and pray on our own at this time, before we observe the Lord's Supper today.

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