

Three-and-a-half months after Gwen and I were married, we moved to Seoul, South Korea, about a 2-hour train ride west of PyeongChang where the Winter Olympics have been held the last 10 days. Like a lot of cities in Asia, Seoul is an interesting mix of the ancient and the modern.

(Pictures) One of the ancient elements that still exist is part of an ancient wallⁱⁱ that surrounded the city, and six of the eight gates that used to be part of it. Much of the wall of course is no longer in existence, but some sections are. The gates were all built between 1396 and 1398 – about

620 years ago. **Here is a picture** of Gwen at Namdaemun gate – the south gate (same gate as the one above, but before it got rebuilt after a few years ago).

Before the development of airplanes and missiles and other military technology, walls were an important form of protection for a city. Probably the most famous of these walls is, of course, the Great Wall of China, **(Pictures here)** usually considered to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World.

This wall was built over the course of several Chinese dynasties, spanning some 1800 years, beginning in 220 B.C. And please don't judge who has aged better: Gwen or me...or the wall. We're both all-original parts...the wall is not.



So historically, walls and their gates have played an important role in the

protection of a city from a military threat, and were a symbol of strength and power. Today, most gates and walls of this type have no military purpose and are usually nationally protected monuments that mostly serve as tourist sites – like the Great Wall of China, or the gates of Seoul. In fact, Namdaemun, the south gate of Seoul, is now connected to a ginormous market that runs 24 hours a day, where you can buy everything from pig ears to custom tailored suits.

So these things were vitally important to the protection of cities for thousands of years. And this morning we continue our chronological walk through the Bible with a look at Nehemiah and the how he led the rebuilding of the wall and the gates around Jerusalem. At this point, many of the Jewish exiles have returned, a few generations after Babylon conquered them. Babylon has since been conquered by Persia. The return of the Jews to Jerusalem started about 80 or 90 years prior to Nehemiah’s own return. And they’ve been given permission and even support from different kings to return, rebuild the temple, and now rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. And Nehemiah is the one who God raises up to lead this effort.

As we read a moment ago, when we are introduced to him, **Nehemiah is in the city of Susa, which was the winter capital of Persia, in modern day Iran, near the Iraqi border.** This is the same city that Esther was in (looked at her last week). In fact, some scholars speculate that when Nehemiah notes that “the queen was beside the king” (2:6), that that was queen Esther, which is a possible explanation for why he even notes that the queen was there. Another reason he may have noted the presence of the queen is that perhaps she had some influence with the king in this decision to send Nehemiah to rebuild the wall. If so, that influence would certainly be consistent with Esther’s character as we saw last week, when we saw her influence the king heavily in regards to the Jews who were still in Susa. The only caveat is that according to the Bible, she was married to Xerxes, the king right before Artaxerxes I in today’s passage. Adding more confusion to it is Josephus, the Jewish historian, who says that she was married to Artaxerxes I, and not Xerxes as the book of Esther says. So, it may be a case that she ruled as queen with both kings, which is certainly possible. If you love history and researching it, there’s a lot here for you to dive into on your own!

Regardless, Nehemiah gets word from Hanani, one of his fellow captives who had returned to Jerusalem and now came back to Susa to give an update on how the progress has been...Nehemiah gets word from him that the walls of Jerusalem are still broken. The city walls are broken down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire. They've been this way for 150 years or so at this point. And the people are in disgrace because of the shambles of the wall around their city. It is broken and it is burned. Much like them, we experience brokenness in our lives. And so the question I want to start with this morning is:

Where are we broken and burned like the walls of Jerusalem? There are so many things in life that can break us down. Maybe you've been broken down by a critical spirit – either your own self-criticism or that of others – that saps your joy, or a spirit of anger that you can't control. Maybe you've been broken down by fear, such as fear of failure, or fear of the future, or fear of not measuring up to the world's definition of success. Maybe materialism or greed or an addiction or something else has left you feeling broken and burned. There is much in life that can break us down, and we've all been broken by something, if not several somethings.

Have any of you watched the Olympics the last 10 days or so? We've watched some...not as much as I would have liked, but we've seen some, for sure. I love the bio pieces that they do on the athletes. I know I'm in the minority in that, and NBC is criticized for too many of them. But I like them. And I am continually struck by how many of the athletes are really broken by something in their life, even the ones who are most successful: Mikaela Shiffrin (gold in the GS) and the fear she had about disappointing others if she didn't win and the pressure she put on herself as a result, that became almost crippling for her and her ability to get out of the gate and on course, often vomiting into a bucket just before she skis; The physical brokenness that Lindsey Vonn and Shaun White and others had to come back from in order to compete; mistakes of previous Olympics such as Lindsey Jacob-Ellis who was within 100 yards of a gold medal in snowboarding at the Torino Olympics, only to make a poor decision that led to a crash and caused her to finish second, and in the two Olympics since has not even made the final event, even though she's now a five-time world champion in the event. Talk

about broken and burned...but there she was just a couple nights ago in her 4th Olympics looking for her first gold medal (she finished off the podium). Similarly, we've all been broken and burned at times in our lives. And it's that burned and broken place that the people of Jerusalem have been in for some time.

And in verse 4 we see how he reacts to the news. He writes, **“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.” (Nehemiah 1:4)**. Maybe you've grieved over brokenness in your life. Maybe you've wept because of the pain someone has caused you. Maybe you've shed tears over some sin in your life and the hurt that it caused you or others. God gave us tears for a reason, and sometimes we need to shed a few of them. But he turns to God in the midst of his tears. He knows that his help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. It's interesting that he says “I...prayed before the God of heaven.” Why not “heaven and earth?” God is Lord of it all...but it's a reminder that God sees things from his perspective. He sees it from his upper story perspective as we've talked about in this series, whereas we see things from our lower story perspective. And the Upper Story is the fuller narrative, the bigger picture, and it's important to remember that while God is active in our lives here and doesn't abandon us...He is the God of Creation, of earth, but he has a perspective that we don't have, because he's the God of heaven.

Now, Nehemiah is in an important position. Like Esther last week, Nehemiah was in a position “for such a time as this,” and he understood what time it was, and he also genuinely cared. He writes in 1:11, **“I was cupbearer to the king” (Nehemiah 1:11b)**. This was a very important position to have, and perhaps tells us a lot about the kind of person Nehemiah was. The cupbearer's job, in part, was to test the wine that the king drank to make sure it wasn't poisoned, and then bring the wine to the king. In that day, if you wanted to assassinate the king of a particular kingdom, one way to do that was to poison his wine or his food. This person who got hired as the tester was very brave...or very stupid, like **(Picture here)** the character from The Princess Bride who died from poisoned wine.



Some people talk about staying in a job until they die...but that was literally

what could happen in this line of work. But we see that: **God had Nehemiah in the exact place he needed to be.**

So Nehemiah is in this important, and somewhat risky position, having gained the king's trust. This level of trust from the king toward Nehemiah is crucial for the rest of this conversation. And that conversation in chapter 2 didn't happen just two or three days after the events of chapter one. Chapter one is in the month of Kislev which is roughly January, and chapter 2 is in the month of Nisan – a month that correlates roughly to our April. And during these intervening months, Nehemiah has been planning. **He begins by tuning to God in prayer, but his praying leads to planning.** The fact that he has been planning is evident in his conversation with the king.

We see the fruit of his planning right from the get-go in chapter 2. Nehemiah tells us that he had never before come into the presence of the king in a sad state. Or, at least he didn't let it show on his face. That was important in his position. You don't come into the presence the king, sad and disgruntled. If you work for the king, and if you like being upright, breathing, and having your head connected to your body, you make sure that the king thinks you're glad to be there and doing your job.

But very strategically, Nehemiah shows his sadness. The king notes it and asks him about it. So, **Because of the prayer and planning that he has done, he's prompted the king's question, and he's ready to answer it.** But first, Nehemiah gives us a window into his emotional state, when he writes, "I was very much afraid." I love this admission of being afraid. It's a much-needed reminder that courageous decisions, actions, and even plans are made in spite of the presence of fear, not because fear is absent. The fear doesn't win the day. It doesn't rule over us, or govern us, or make our decisions for us.

Fixing broken and burned parts of our lives is scary. It's not easy. But if the fear keeps winning the day, then the broken and burned parts of our lives will never get repaired. We tell ourselves, "that's not how courageous people feel." Nehemiah shows us that **Courageous people often still have fear...they just don't let it win the day.** Nehemiah knows that this plan he has in his head is very much dependent on the king's willingness to go along

with it. And that is no sure thing, by any stretch of the imagination. But after Nehemiah explains to him the situation in his ancestors' home city, the king is empathetic, grants him early retirement from his job as cup bearer and even pledges support of materials to help with the rebuilding of the wall.

The first thing Nehemiah did when he got to Jerusalem is that he went and scoped out the lay of the land, to see what he had to work with. It's an important and foundational piece to any rebuilding and restoration effort, because: **Where you are *now* impacts how you then proceed.** Building a city that lies in ruins is a lot different than building one that's going strong and is looking to expand. Building a church from scratch is different than building one up with 60 or 70 years of history. Building a relationship between two people who just met for the first time is a lot different than rebuilding a relationship that has 20 or 40 years of history. Building back whatever is broken and burned in your life is different than building it up the first time. So understanding the current situation is important, and that's what he does.

And then after that research is done, he takes things to the people, when he records for us in verses 17 and 18, **"Then I said to them, 'You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.' I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me"** (Nehemiah 2:17-18).

These verses are the crux of the events here. This is the point where either they say "yes...let's go for it..." or they go a different direction. It doesn't mean it's a complete "no" if they don't say yes...but it may just take longer and be a little more of a circuitous route that they take. And in this little speech of Nehemiah's, there are three key things for us to take away. **First, he identifies the problem: Jerusalem lies in ruins.** He didn't need to do much on that front, because the people already recognize the problem – He says that they see the trouble. They're living in it. It would have been hard to say, "Gee, I like the city the way it is. This is the way God intends us to live." No...they recognized that this is NOT how God intended the city to be and for them to live. Sometimes people don't recognize the problem, and eyes

need to be opened...but here it was pretty obvious. **Second, he offers a solution: to rebuild the wall.** Now for them, there weren't a lot of other options – other than to do nothing. We'll talk about that in a moment. But in their day, if you wanted to protect a city, you built a wall around it. A lot of the debate for us (like in our nation, or in our cities) in landing on a solution to the problems we face is that there are multiple possible solutions to the problem. And everyone has an opinion on what the best solution is, and so there's dialogue and analysis and compromise and so forth...and eventually a solution is landed on, and announced. So Nehemiah is able to kind of jump into the announcement phase, though he'd probably heard from a number of people who were concerned about the state of the wall and wanted to see it rebuilt. **And then third, he gives them a reason why they should do this now: because then they will no longer be in disgrace.** They won't be the laughing stock of the region. They'll have protection. It will bring status. It will be an opportunity to live out their faith and shine the light of the Lord into the world around them with confidence and courage. And in this, he assures them that they can turn things around, because God is clearly on their side. Things are already happening that indicate God is on the move, doing a new thing in their midst, and the disgrace is already beginning to be left behind.

And the response is given to us in 2:18 **“They replied, ‘Let us start rebuilding.’ So they began this good work” (Nehemiah 2:18).** And in chapter 3 Nehemiah talks about who did what parts of the rebuilding...and it was a massive undertaking. All kinds of family names are listed. But they came together and they rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem, and ultimately the city, no longer in disgrace, but shining brightly for God.

I don't know all the rebuilding God has in store for you in your life. I do know that we've had some around our church and we've got more to do. But: **In your life, where is God leading you to rebuild something that's been broken and burned?** Were you once strong in your devotional life, but you've gotten away from setting time aside to be with God? Did you once read your Bible every morning but now haven't cracked it open in a few weeks? Has your love for your spouse taken a back seat to a love for something or someone else? Are there emotions that are broken?

Confidence? Nehemiah shows us that when we turn to the God of heaven and let him set our plans...and when we step into those plans even when fear seeks to stop us, that God can rebuild, restore, and repair all that broken stuff. It doesn't usually happen instantaneously...the wall took a lot of time and effort by a lot of people to be rebuilt. But God is with us in the midst of those efforts: he leads us, inspires, us and strengthens us for them with the power of his Holy Spirit. And the fact is, God specializes in repairing what's broken. It's in His nature. We see it all the time throughout Scripture. How often does Jesus heal people physically, emotionally, spiritually? Countless. Many of us know the verse from Isaiah 53:5, "By his wounds we are _____ (healed)." God is in the business of healing...of rebuilding...of repairing. That's what the cross is all about: rebuilding the vertical relationship with our Heavenly Father, and the horizontal relationships we have with the people in our lives...or even our own very selves. Some of us need God to lead a rebuilding of our own selves. So whatever it is that's broken and burned in your life, God can put it back together. This is what God does, and he can do it in your life and mine, too. Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Today's sermon correlates to Chapter 21 in "The Story." We took orders for copies of the book, "The Story" at church, but now you can get a copy of the book on your own online through many websites (Amazon.com, cbd.com, etc.). In fact, cbd.com (Christian Book Distributors) has them for \$5, hardback. Just search for "NIV The Story Bible" at their website.

ⁱⁱ Night time shot Photo credit: By 서울특별시 소방재난본부 (Seoul Metropolitan Fire & Disaster Headquarters), <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=45011888>); Day time shot By DoulosCore at English Wikipedia, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=39905526>