

Encouraging the Discouraged

Nehemiah 2:9–18

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Introduction

Have you ever tried to motivate someone who had already given up? Someone so weighed down by disappointment, failure, or shame that they couldn't see the point in trying again? That is the situation Nehemiah walks into in Nehemiah 2. The people of Jerusalem have lived for generations surrounded by ruins — literal and emotional. The walls of their city are broken, but so are their spirits. They have tried to rebuild and failed. They are tired, ashamed, and stuck in discouragement. And then Nehemiah shows up — with wisdom, compassion, and a faith-filled vision of what God can do.

Today's passage, Nehemiah 2:9–18, is about the wisdom of Nehemiah in encouraging the discouraged.

Setting the Stage

We are in a study of the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah, the man, is a godly man of great wisdom. The book begins in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes — 445 BC — with Nehemiah receiving news of the desperate situation in Jerusalem. His brother, who had come from Judah, tells him that those who had survived the exile are “in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire” (1:3). When Nehemiah hears this, he grieves, and in his grief he goes to the Lord in prayer. In that prayer he asks the Lord to “give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man” — the man being Artaxerxes, King of Persia.

Artaxerxes ruled Persia for forty years, from 465 BC to 425 BC, and around 458 BC he had issued a command forbidding the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its walls — you can read about this in Ezra 4. Now, in 445 BC, Nehemiah is asking the Lord to change the king's mind, and the Lord does. Last week's passage, Nehemiah 2:1–8, followed Nehemiah as he went before the king to request permission to travel to Jerusalem and facilitate the rebuilding of the walls and gates. The king granted it. Verse 8 ends with those words: “*And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.*” The king had reversed his own decree.

He changed his mind, and he is now actively supporting the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

Today's passage, Nehemiah 2:9–18, picks up from there — Nehemiah traveling to Jerusalem, inspecting the walls, and motivating a discouraged people to rebuild them. It is not an easy thing to encourage a discouraged person to attempt something they believe is impossible. But Nehemiah does it, and the way he does it reveals not just his leadership but his wisdom.

I define wisdom as the ability — the knowledge and skills — to do something very well, and that definition fits Nehemiah closely. We saw his wisdom in chapter 1 in how he handled his grief over Jerusalem's condition. Last week we looked at his wisdom in waiting well — spending four months in preparation before ever speaking a word to the king. Today, we will see his wisdom in encouraging the discouraged.

The Text: Nehemiah 2:9–18

Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned.

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

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." 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.

Nehemiah's Wisdom Before He Speaks

Before we get to those climactic verses at the end of the passage, it is worth slowing down and noticing what Nehemiah does — and does not do — before he ever opens his mouth.

A few things in these early verses deserve comment. Notice first that Nehemiah travels with a military escort provided by the king. When Ezra made this same journey, he refused the king's assistance — it was a matter of faith. When Nehemiah travels, he accepts it — it is a matter of wisdom. Both responses are right. Sometimes we are called to lean hard into faith and trust God's provision alone. Other times we are called to be wise and accept what God has already placed in our hands. The question is not which posture is always correct, but which one God is calling us to in this particular moment.

Notice also that Nehemiah passes through the region governed by Sanballat the Horonite, the governor of Samaria, and Tobiah the Ammonite. Their displeasure at Nehemiah's arrival is intense. One likely reason is that Sanballat, as governor of Samaria, had been looking to absorb Judah into his sphere of control. Nehemiah's arrival — with the king's letters and a royal military escort — would put an end to that ambition. Sanballat and Tobiah will become recurring antagonists in this story, but for now, let's stay with Nehemiah and what happens once he reaches Jerusalem.

He arrives and stays three days — saying nothing, doing nothing publicly. Then he gets up in the middle of the night. With just a few trusted men and one animal to ride, he slips out of the city and begins quietly surveying the ruined walls. He inspects the Valley Gate, the Dragon Spring, the Dung Gate, the Fountain Gate, the King's Pool — the entire southern perimeter of the city. At one point the rubble is so thick that the animal beneath him cannot even find a path through.

Why does Nehemiah do all of this at night, in secret? The wisdom here is remarkable. If he had announced his intentions publicly upon arriving — “I am here to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem!” — he would have been buried immediately in objections. Every obstacle, every past failure, every reason it could not be done would have come pouring out. He would have found himself in committee before he ever saw the walls. And if he had conducted his survey during the day, curious bystanders would have crowded around with opinions and suggestions, each person convinced the real problem was something other than the walls.

Instead, Nehemiah goes alone, at night, and sees the situation with his own eyes. He does his own research. He forms his own assessment. He develops his own plan. And he keeps his own counsel until he is ready.

There is a note of quiet humor in verse 16: *“The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.”* Nehemiah already knows who is going to do the work. They just don't know it yet.

The People Nehemiah Must Encourage

But it is more than logistical wisdom. The people Nehemiah names in that verse — the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest — are a deeply discouraged people. It is worth pausing to feel the weight of what life in Jerusalem was like on the day Nehemiah came to town.

For over 140 years, the city had remained in ruins. Broken walls, burned gates, daily reminders of defeat, shame, and vulnerability. Their ancestors had returned from Babylon seventy years

earlier with great hopes under Zerubbabel and Jeshua, but those hopes had withered under political opposition, economic hardship, and spiritual apathy. Multiple generations had grown up literally surrounded by rubble. They had actually attempted to rebuild the walls and had been stopped. The temple had been restored, but not to its former glory. Jerusalem felt forgotten, overlooked, and beaten down. And you can be certain that the condition of their city had shaped the condition of their souls — making them feel overlooked and forgotten too.

Imagine, then, the reaction when some elite politician arrives with a military escort and announces that it is time to rebuild the walls. Eyes would roll. Every objection would surface at once. *We've tried that. The people of the land won't allow it. The king himself issued a decree against it. We don't have the resources, the manpower, or the expertise.* They would have seen Nehemiah as just one more wealthy, powerful outsider who had no real understanding of their lives or their limitations.

This is exactly why what Nehemiah does next is so important and so wise.

Six Movements of Nehemiah's Encouragement

Verses 17 and 18 are the heart of this passage. God has called Nehemiah to something great, but he cannot do it alone. He is called to do it *with* the people of Jerusalem — a people who are discouraged. These two verses show us six movements in how Nehemiah encourages the discouraged.

1. He Practices Compassion

| *"You see the trouble we are in..."*

Notice that pronoun. Not *your* trouble. Not *my* concern. *Our* trouble. Nehemiah joins them in their condition. He enters their plight and makes it his own.

This is extraordinarily rare. Most people who seek to help others do so from one of two positions: either "What can I do for you?" or "How can I get you to do what I want?" Both of those postures keep the helper at a comfortable distance from the pain. People have agendas, and most agendas — even well-intentioned ones — are organized around getting their own needs met. Sometimes the desire to help is camouflaged in benevolence, where helping others becomes a way to feel good or important about oneself.

Nehemiah had lived a comfortable life near the king. He did not have to be here. But he enters their plight anyway, and he makes it his own. That is compassion. He shares not just their problem but their passion.

2. He Names the Problem Clearly

| “...*how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned.*”

Nehemiah does not speak in hypotheticals or generalities. He does not soften the edges. He identifies the specific, concrete reality they are facing: the walls are down, the gates are burned, and Jerusalem — the city where God has placed His name — lies in ruin.

One of the temptations I often face when encouraging a discouraged person is the urge to avoid painful truths. I want to help, I want to fix things, I want that person to feel better — and so I move very quickly to softening the edges, glossing over the real issues, saying things like, “It’s going to be okay,” or “Things aren’t that bad,” when I know deep down that things are not okay and they really are that bad. But sometimes what a person needs most is simply to have their condition acknowledged honestly — whether it is a mistake, a sin, a loss, or a grief that has gone unnamed too long.

Naming the problem honestly is what creates the foundation for real solutions. We cannot fix what we will not acknowledge. *Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned.* There it is.

3. He Issues a Contagious Invitation

| “*Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem...*”

After entering their suffering and naming their reality, Nehemiah does not leave them sitting in despair. He issues a clear, concrete invitation: *Come, let us build.* Notice the progression — first compassion (*we are in trouble*), then truth (*Jerusalem lies in ruins*), now calling (*let us build*).

Most people who are discouraged feel powerless. They have concluded that they have no capacity to change their situation. Nehemiah refuses to leave them there. He invites them back to their calling and purpose. And though they may not yet believe that rebuilding the walls is possible, he believes — and that is enough to get them moving.

He is not just inviting them to a construction project. He is inviting them to lean on his faith until their own faith comes alive. We cannot believe for another person, but our faith can be contagious. I think that is what we are seeing here. They cannot take those first steps because they do not think it is possible. But Nehemiah thinks it is possible, and for now, that is enough.

4. He Explains the Purpose

| “...*that we may no longer suffer derision.*”

Nehemiah doesn't just invite them to build — he tells them *why* they must build. This is not about architecture. This is not a cosmetic project. The word *derision* means scorn, mockery, shame. Nehemiah is naming not just their physical ruin but their social and spiritual ruin. The world sees the broken walls and sees a broken people. Their city has become a joke. Their God is mocked. Their faith looks futile. And it is this burden of shame — this wound to their identity — that Nehemiah is addressing.

Why does it matter if the walls are rebuilt? Because it matters who God says they are. It matters that they are His people. It matters that their lives and their city are a testimony before a watching world. This is about their identity in God's story of redemption, and their witness to His glory.

5. He Offers Real, Grounded Hope

“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.”

This is my favorite part of what Nehemiah does. Notice what he does *not* do. He does not tell them how remarkable he is. He does not offer hollow encouragements like “I believe in you” or “You can do anything you set your mind to.” Instead, he gives them concrete evidence of God's provision and favor. He shows them what has already happened — the divine intervention, the king's reversal, the resources and permissions already secured.

The foundation of hope Nehemiah is offering is not their ability, and it is not his leadership. It is God's demonstrated faithfulness. Here is why this will work: God has already been moving. The king has already provided. The resources are already in place. *Let's do this.*

6. He Steps Back and Lets Them Respond

“And they said, ‘Let us rise up and build.’ So they strengthened their hands for the good work.”

This final movement is subtle but profound. Nehemiah has entered into their pain, spoken the truth, invited them to action, explained the purpose, and given them reason to hope. Now he stops talking. He gives the people space to respond and gives God room to work.

This is so important. If you want to encourage someone who is discouraged, there is much you can do — extend compassion, speak truth, offer vision, share your testimony of God's faithfulness. But ultimately, we have no power to change a person's heart. Sometimes the wisest thing to do is to step back and let God work. Nehemiah does exactly that, and the people respond: “*Let us rise up and build.*”

The Greater Nehemiah

Perhaps you see your own life somewhere in the people of Jerusalem — discouraged, weary, surrounded by ruins. Maybe you have tried before to rebuild what was broken, only to be met with disappointment and shame. And now you have grown used to the rubble. You have accepted it. You have told yourself, *This is just how it is now.*

But the good news is this: God has not left you in that place. Nehemiah, as wise and faithful as he was, is only a foreshadow of the One who came to deal not just with broken walls, but with broken hearts and lost souls. The gospel tells us that Jesus is the Greater Nehemiah, and He still comes to encourage the discouraged today.

His compassion is revealed in His leaving heaven and entering our world — taking on our flesh, walking our roads, weeping our tears, carrying our burdens. Isaiah 53:4 says,

| *“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows.”*

He came speaking truth, revealing the kingdom of heaven and our need for forgiveness. He said plainly:

| *“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” (John 8:34)*

Our lives are in rubble. And yet He offers an invitation:

| *“Believe in me.” (John 11:25–26)*

| *“Follow me.” (Luke 9:23)*

And He tells us *why* — to become children of God, defined by His love, inheritors of the eternal kingdom, and enjoyers of the everlasting God. He points to real, grounded hope — not wishful thinking, but historically demonstrated hope. The cross is the place where our sin meets God’s love, where God’s justice upon sin is executed not upon us but upon the Son. Because of God’s love, we are given the provisions of His favor and His Spirit.

And then He invites us to respond. He does not force. He does not manipulate. He invites. And like the father of the prodigal son, He stands ready to welcome you home.

Closing

So where are the ruins in your life? What part of your heart lies in rubble? What shame or sorrow have you been carrying for too long? If I am describing you, don't settle for the rubble. Jesus, the Greater Nehemiah, has come. He took on your grief, spoke truth into your darkness, and offered you Himself. The King has given His word. The cross has made a way. The Spirit stands ready to strengthen your hands.

Now He invites you — *Come, follow Me.*

Will you rise and build with Him?