

Ruined Walls and Burned Gates

NEHEMIAH 1:1-4 *This is the account of what Nehemiah son of Hacaliah accomplished. In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year that Artaxerxes was emperor of Persia, I, Nehemiah, was in Susa, the capital city. ²Hanani, one of my brothers, arrived from Judah with another group, and I asked them about Jerusalem and about the other Jews who had returned from exile in Babylonia. ³They told me that those* *who had survived and were back in the homeland were in great difficulty and that the foreigners who lived nearby looked down on them. They also told me that the walls of Jerusalem were still broken down and that the gates had not been restored since the time they were burned. ⁴When I heard all this, I sat down and wept. For several days I mourned and did not eat.*

Most of us remember exactly where we were on September 11, 2001. Those televised images and photos haunt me still today. What must it have been like for those who were there September 12: searching for survivors?

Bible scholars believe the final chapter of Jeremiah is an eye-witness account of something that, for those people, in that time, was comparable to what happened to our nation on September 11, 2001—only worse!

Babylonian forces under the command of Nebuchadnezzar breached the walls, of Jerusalem, sacked the city and destroyed the Temple of Solomon. Jeremiah describes what he saw in language so vivid and imagery so clear you can almost hear the screams of the dying—and smell the smoke—and feel the grit between your teeth.

Thousands of Jews were slain. The center of their national identity was destroyed. Hundreds were led away in chains. Babylonian Captivity, is summed up in Jewish lore by these words from the psalmist:

PSALM 137:1-4 (KJV) *By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. ²We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. ³For there they that carried us* *away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. ⁴How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land?*

Fifty years later the Persian Empire overthrew the Babylonians and released the Jews to return to their homeland. I suspect that first small wave of returnees to Jerusalem encountered something akin to what confronted those workers and rescuers in lower Manhattan on September 12, 2001.

Seventy years later, another wave—about 1500 strong—led by Ezra, the high priest, returned. The first thing they did was to rebuild the altar of sacrifice—to rededicate the center of their worship (as we have done this morning). And, while our experience more than likely will be one of rediscovery rather than rebuilding, for the next several weeks our work together will focus on their story.

Today, I'm most interested in how they ended up in exile in the first place. The teachings of the prophets and, later, the rabbis are clear and simple: exile was

God's punishment for the sin of Israel. Let's talk about sin.

JEREMIAH 12:7-8 (MSG) "I will abandon the House of Israel, walk away from my beloved people. I will turn over those I most love to those who are her enemies. *She's been, this one I held dear, like a snarling lion in the jungle, growling and baring her teeth at me—and I can't take it anymore.*"

In the translation from the original language that word, 'abandon', is probably not the best choice (although it's not exactly wrong). A more accurate translation would require a phrase instead of one word. It's more like, "I will allow the House of Israel to experience the natural consequences of their own choices."

Such is the nature of what many call God's "punishment." God doesn't have to punish us overtly. The natural consequences of our behavior take care of that.

The radio pop psychologist Laura Schlesinger says most issues brought to her go something like this: "I've messed up. I knew I was messing up when I was doing it; but I went ahead and did it, anyway. Now I've been caught; how do I avoid the consequences?"

Sometimes we act on the basis, not of what is right; but what we can get away with. For example: how fast do you drive in a 55 mph zone? It's common knowledge that there is a posted speed limit, and the enforced speed limit—and they're 5-10 mph apart, depending upon traffic and weather conditions, road conditions and the mood of the enforcing officer. So, I usually set my cruise about 5 mph over the posted speed limit, because I know I can get away with it.

There was a man whose hobby was restoring old cars. He was ready to find another project, so he watched the classifieds until he found one that sounded like a good candidate, so he called and made an appointment to go see it. It was in pretty good condition. Paint was faded, but there was no body damage; tires were weathered—but were still inflated. The owner said he had parked it under that tree five years ago, and it hadn't been moved.

The price was in the budget; so the buyer said that if it would run—just well enough to get it home—he'd buy it.

The buyer said he'd put the charger on the battery when they had talked on the phone; and he was confident it would start. But it didn't. "Probably old gas," he said. "We just need to prime the carburetor." So they opened the hood and took off the air filter.

When they started to pour a little squirt of gas into the carburetor, they saw the problem. Dirt daubers had built nests in the carburetor.

For most of us, most of the time, sin is—like that. That car did nothing wrong. For five years it did nothing but sit under a tree. But that's not what a car is made to do. In most cases sin is not those big, dramatic acts of cruelty or violence

or immorality. Sin clogs the carburetor by the cumulative effect of those little one-at-a-time-no-big-deal acts that, by themselves really are "no big deal".

Do you remember watching those manned moon landings? In order to land on the moon, the spacecraft first had to enter orbit around it. To do so required a trajectory that left no room for error. One or two degrees off-course one way would bring the spacecraft too steeply into the gravitational pull of the moon, and it would will crash onto the surface at an unbelievable speed.

One or two degrees off-course in the other direction and the spacecraft would approach at too shallow an angle, and instead of achieving orbit would "sling-shot" around the moon and careen out of control into infinity.

The slightest deviation from the course would totally destroy the mission; and so from time-to-time the astronauts had to execute short bursts from the engines on one side or the other to make a "mid-course correction".

Yes, there are those monstrous sinners whose turn needs to be 180 degrees: a complete turnaround in the opposite direction.

But for most of us, most of the time, the required turn may be only a few degrees—a relatively minor mid-course adjustment. But it is as necessary as that 180 degree turn. Don't miss the point: *Degree doesn't matter. The slightest deviation off course can spell disaster as surely as 180 degrees off-line!*

That was Israel's situation. They'd had good years and bad years. Some years they kept the faith; some years they fooled around with pagan gods—you know: it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere; we're all trying to get to the same place. Live and let live. Who are we to judge?

Ruined Walls and Burned Gates were more a matter of neglect than of overtly destructive behavior. In most cases it's more a case of simply not doing what we've been created to do—not being what we've been created to be.

The sin of this place is not great; neither have been the consequences. The walls are not piles of rubble; the gates are not charred remains. There still is life and strength and energy here. Given the way human culture has gone, and given the serious decline in church participation in our lifetimes, I think you who remain have done wonders, worked miracles and have been more than faithful. I am grateful that you've held on long enough so that God can do a new thing through you.

Nehemiah's story begins with his response to those Ruined Walls and Burned Gates: ***"When I heard all this, I sat down and wept. For several days I mourned and did not eat."*** And out of his passion grew the vision that led to the rebuilding of those Ruined Walls and Burned Gates. It's that same kind of passion—"What does God want to accomplish through us?"—that will motivate us to make that

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slight mid-course correction that will align our wills to the will of God.