

## Out of the Ashes

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(NEHEMIAH 6:15-16 NIV) *So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. <sup>16</sup>When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.*

Although the names vary, the legend of the Phoenix Bird appears in many ancient cultures. It appears first in ancient Arabia, as a bird that consumes itself by fire every 500 years; and then a new, young bird rises "Out of its Own Ashes". The legendary Persian bird called, "Roc", may have been a variation.

In Ancient Egypt the sun was a bird that consumed itself daily; then rose each morning "Out of its Own Ashes."

Early Christians used the Phoenix to symbolize immortality and resurrection.

Igor Stravinski set the legend to music in his "Firebird Suite" ballet.

In every expression of the legend, two common elements are seen: (1) the self-destruction of the bird as it consumes itself with fire, and (2) the rising of a new bird "Out of its Own Ashes."

In a very real sense, the story of Israel has the same two elements.

I. **They self-destructed—and not just once.** The prophets consistently warned the nation: Zephaniah warned that judgment would come to a "shameless nation" (2:1). Jeremiah, speaking for God, said, "*From the time your forefathers left Egypt until now, day after day, again and again I sent you my servants the prophets. <sup>26</sup>But they did not listen to me or pay attention.*" (JEREMIAH 7:25-26 NIV)

Toward the end, Habakkuk addressed a people who denied guilt. They didn't deny their sin; but they didn't believe they should be held accountable for it. "Sure we sin. But doesn't everybody? And we're not as bad as others—especially these Babylonians God has sent to punish us."

But the prophets were right: Israel didn't listen, even though the way was clear and the evidence all around was overwhelming! They were declining in every area of community life. They were not faithful in worship; they were not faithful in their offerings; they were not faithful to God's call to justice; they continued to live lives of ingratitude toward God, to ignore God's commands and to discount God's authority. They said, "We'll do it *our way*." They sinned, and in their arrogance they didn't even deny it. Their attitude was, "So what? We're not as bad as others."

Their destruction was inevitable. They could have changed their ways at any point, and by refocusing on their true identity as God's people—by falling back on the true source of their strength and rediscovering their calling as a people—they could have "renewed their strength; they could have "mounted up on wings as eagles;" they could have "run and not grown weary;" they could have "walked and not fainted." But without acknowledgement of guilt, or a willingness to change, they self-destructed. And they went down, crying, "It's not our fault! We're a victim! It's not fair!"

Popular radio Pop Psychologist, Dr. Laura Schlessinger writes that most of the cases that come to her begin with a similar pattern: "I've messed up. I knew better; but I did it anyway, and now I've been caught. How can I avoid the consequences?"

But Nebuchadnezzar surrounded Jerusalem, sacked the city and destroyed Solomon's temple. And the leaders of the people, the artisans and skilled craftsmen, the scholars and the youth were led away into exile. Nebuchadnezzar conquered them; but they already had self-destructed.

**II. They Rose out of Their Own Ashes.** 70 years later Babylon had been defeated by Persia, and the Jewish people were allowed to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple and the city and eventually the walls around the city. Israel was restored, rising, as it were, "Out of the Ashes" of their own self-destruction.

The story of the Phoenix Bird, in a real sense, is Israel's story.

Is it ours?

Well, it doesn't appear that we're standing in our own ashes, does it? We have a good track record: 146 years of witness in this community. We've got a beautiful sanctuary, and a very fine, functional facility. We are known for our outreach into the community and for sharing our facility with many service-oriented organizations. We're not standing in our own ashes.

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 you've held on long enough so God can do a new thing through you.

But we don't stand in the midst of our own ashes. There are no crumbled walls or charred remains of doors and gates. There is no enemy sniping at our outposts; and the problems we encounter often are of our own making. Our situation is more like a cluttered house that has been neglected for a time.

Israel rose "Out of the Ashes" of their own self-destruction. When Nehemiah went to the ruins of Jerusalem, he instituted a program of recovery and rebuilding, and the walls of the city were rebuilt in 52 days.

We have the same God and the same spiritual resources available. And I believe our people love the church as much as the people of Israel loved their "City of David!" So, if they did it, we can do it! And we can do it the same way they did it. In the last 49 days we have looked at Rebuilding the Walls of Faith and Ministry here at First Christian Church.

For one thing, we're rebuilding our sense of hearing and recognizing and understanding God's voice. We have said we believe God speaks to us; and I'm seeing a recommitment to spiritual disciplines. I'm hearing people say, "I experienced this while I was praying. Was that God speaking to me?"

And we're rebuilding our sense of hope. North American churches have been in decline for more than fifty years. But our hope is being rebuilt by recognizing that no matter how much success or disappointment is in our past, our God is Lord of the Future, and God calls us into that future.

We're also rebuilding our strength. Some of us have begun the process of rediscovering, affirming and using our spiritual gifts of ministry. We are recognizing that when we grow weary and discouraged God gives us all we need to complete

the "good work begun among us" (Philippians 1:6).

And we're rebuilding *our testimony* by recommitting to live so no one can find fault. We're remembering that it makes little difference what we say if it remains inside the church building.

We're rebuilding *our focus* by remembering that it's not about us. It's not about convenient schedules or preferred worship styles; it's all about God!

And we're rebuilding *our endurance*. Voices of discouragement are constant, from within and without; but we know God blesses, not the powerful, but the obedient—those who endure to the end.

We're rebuilding *our hunger for the Word* by drinking deeply. Disciples are known as a "People of the Book." One of our earliest slogans was, "Where the scriptures speak we speak. Where the scriptures are silent we are silent."

And through all of the above, we're rebuilding *our sense of identity*.

Alex Haley, the author of "Roots," had an unusual picture hanging on his office wall. It was a picture of a turtle on top of a fence post. When asked, "Why is that there?" Alex Haley answered, "Every time I write something significant, every time I read my words and think that they are wonderful, and begin to feel proud of myself, I look at the turtle on top of the fence post & remember that he didn't get there on his own. He had help."

That's always a solid basis of identity—to remember that we didn't get here completely on our own. God is the source of every ability and blessing we have.

And let's look again at the second verse in our text this morning: "*When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God.*"

When God is with a people, word gets around!

I pray that in this season ahead you find yourself high upon some fence post AND that you remember to thank your God and those who loved you enough to help lift you up to that place.

By remembering who we are and whose we are; by discovering what God is calling us to do and to be—here and now—and by acknowledging the abilities God gives us to live out our calling—we keep on rebuilding our walls of faith and witness and service. It's an ongoing process called faith in the one who said, "Behold! I am always making all things new!" (Rev. 21:5)

That's why Paul writes that "the whole creation stands on tiptoe to see what new thing God will do through God's people today!"

Israel rose from its own ashes. God used Nehemiah to lead Israel in rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. They finished in 52 days, and we can accomplish this phase of our own rebuilding process if we remember who we are. And if we sometimes forget, the words of Nehemiah will remind us:

*"We are servants of the God who rules from heaven, and he will make our work succeed"* (NEHEMIAH 2:20).