



ROCKS THAT BLOCK

*Jeff Peabody
New Day Church
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If you thought the spider in Charlotte's Web was talented, check this out: the American Museum of Natural History unveiled a new exhibit this week of an incredibly rare golden tapestry. In fact it is the only one of its kind, because it is made entirely of spider silk. That's right – spider silk. Each individual strand of thread in the tapestry is made up of at least 96 lines of silk.

The project took 4 years, over 70 workers, \$500,000 and get this -- over one million spiders to complete. So as soft as the fabric is, you probably won't be seeing new spider silk snuggies coming out anytime soon.

I read about this online, and at the end of the article there was a quick little reader survey that asked, "Do you think this is: A) An impressive work of art or B) An incredible waste of time?" And I thought, that's really the question, isn't it? How do you know when something is worth that kind of intense effort? If you're going to invest that much of your life and money into something, you want to feel confident that it deserves your time and energy.

God has called us to be part of the great tapestry he is weaving, and it's the one thing in life we can be sure will always be worth the investment. Jesus told his followers that no one who has made sacrifices for him will fail to get it back a hundredfold. We can pour our heart and soul into his work and it is never a waste of time.

God is on the move, restoring lives, rebuilding what's broken, wrapping up history. And we're invited to participate. We've been tracking Nehemiah's personal discovery of this truth. We said last week that he was willing to jump in and do what was required to get the job done. I misspoke at one point when I was talking about Nehemiah being willing to take the time to do the work. I said something to the effect of the wall taking him 12 years to build, and that wasn't correct. It did take him 12 years in Jerusalem before he returned to give an update to the king, but the actual building of the wall itself was a much shorter piece of the work. My point still stands, but I like to keep my facts straight, so I apologize for misrepresenting that particular point.

In any case, Nehemiah was granted his leave of absence by the king of Persia to go and lead the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The king offered more than Nehemiah could have

hoped for, with supplies, protection and his blessing, and we said that's how God equips us to pursue our calling as well. He always has our back and gives us everything we need.. So Nehemiah is off and running, and we catch up with him again after he has taken the long trek out of Persia and back to Judah to get started.

Nehemiah 2:11-20

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days I set out during the night with a few men. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.

By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.

They say the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step, but have you noticed they never say how it ends? I would think it would call for jumping up and down, maybe a little victory dance, some sort of celebration.

Nehemiah would have none of that. His big journey was roughly 1,000 miles, but he kept his arrival in Jerusalem very quiet. In fact for three days, he did nothing at all. To me that shows a tremendous amount of discipline and humility. If I had all that backing from the king and I had made it safely there, I think I would want people to know immediately. I'd be feeling pretty good about myself and probably a little overconfident in my own abilities. I'd want to jump in and take charge.

When I went to Junior High church camp, one of my favorite activities was the Bible quizzing. I may not have been very much help in the capture the flag matches, but when it came to quizzing I was an animal.

The goal in Bible quizzing is to be the first one up out of your chair with the answer to a question about a Bible story. You would get the list of questions and answers ahead of time and try to memorize what you could. Then as soon as you recognized the question you jumped up and gave an answer. One of my secret weapons was my bright yellow John Deer T-shirt that was so loud and obnoxious I was always seen first.

But I got to the point where I could jump up just a couple words into the question. The judge would get as far as saying something like, "Who was the fir—" and I'd be shooting out of my chair like I had been shocked.

Sometimes I apply that same technique in life. I jump in with an answer before I fully understand the question. I try to fix situations or think I have the solution so I rush in, only to discover that I didn't know the whole story.

Nehemiah took his time. He adopted the posture of a learner. Before he even gave a clue as to why he was in town, he went out to inspect the damage for himself. To me, that shows so much humility and teachability. Rather than just announce his plan (which he would have had full authority to do), he took it upon himself to learn more. And I believe the experience of that night ride was crucial to how he approached the project.

I love it that he went to such lengths to keep it secret. He has no interest in drawing attention to himself or how great it is that he's doing his homework. He just grabs a handful of men he trusts and sneaks out into the night.

You know, it's one thing to hear reports of work that needs to be done and to make plans to help from a distance. It's much different to look at it up close for yourself. I know many people here found that out when they went down to help out after Katrina. Words and pictures don't capture what you feel when you're on the ground.

Even in the dark of night, the sight must have been discouraging. Huge piles of boulders that had toppled and rolled away from the wall. Countless chunks of debris. Gaping holes in the wall. Posts sticking up from the ground that were blackened and charred, with no gates left hanging from them.

At one point the rubble is so immense and daunting that Nehemiah's mule or donkey can't even climb over it. He has to press in close on foot, climbing over and around one rock at a time. That makes the experience even more personal as he struggles for footholds and touches the scarred surface of the wall. No detailed report could ever give him the same kind of understanding.

Nehemiah doesn't even go completely around the wall. He doesn't need to. He has seen enough. He turns back the way he came and heads home through the same gate. It's through the same gate, but he's a different person. Because he has come face to face with the scope of the devastation. He now knows with complete clarity how extensive the problem really is.

If we apply this on a personal level, I think sometimes I'd rather not come face to face with how ruined I am by sin. I want to think it's a small chink in my overall armor, that I'm basically intact with only some surface damage. Nehemiah's relationship to the wall is like our relationship with sin – we have to see it up close to get the scope of the damage. If I'm just talking about in theoretical terms, I don't feel the weight of it. But if I reflect for very long on the condition of my own heart, I will quickly come to those places that are so filled with rubble that I can't get through them on my own.

Paul saw that for himself in his famous quote from Romans:

Romans 7:18, 24-25

I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out...

What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God-through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Sin is so massive and pervasive in our lives that in order to deal with it, we come to the point where we realize It is too big for us. Only Jesus can repair what sin has destroyed.

As Nehemiah stood there, staring at everything, I'm sure the magnitude of what he was facing gave him pause. There was a lot of heavy lifting to do. But it wasn't just the physical rocks that made it so heavy. There were some mental, emotional and spiritual rocks that were also blocking his path.

As we discussed a few weeks ago, the original walls of Jerusalem had been destroyed about 140 years prior to Nehemiah. The city had been ransacked when the Israelites were taken into captivity, so that destruction was old news.

But then some exiles were allowed to return. They had started to rebuild, but ran into opposition from the neighboring people groups. Listen to how far it went:

Ezra 4:4

Then the peoples around them set out to discourage the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans...

That had to be discouraging. Then King Artaxerxes issued his decree that all building in Jerusalem had to cease and desist, so nothing got completed. And then Nehemiah's brother came to Susa and informed him that the work that had been completed had been knocked down and set on fire.

Nehemiah is not just looking at rocks. He's staring at a much bigger barrier, and that is the memory of failure. This group of people he hopes to motivate to join his cause live every day looking at this pile of rocks that shouts at them, "Guess what? You're a failure. You couldn't finish the job and all your work went up in smoke anyway."

Failures are rocks that pile up and block our ability to go forward. On the TV show House, Dr. Gregory House checked himself into a psychiatric hospital because he was addicted to painkillers and was just leading a miserable, unhappy life. In one episode, the head psychiatrist of this mental institution sits down with him and asks him why he can't get let go of past mistakes and move on to happiness, and Dr. House says this, "Successes only last until someone screws them up. Failures are forever."

Maybe you feel like that this morning, like your failures are forever. Your mistakes in the past are defining you and what you see as possible. Your bad choices haunt you all

the time. Maybe you've tripped up so many times that you're feeling jaded toward the whole idea of trying again.

How do you know if that's your outlook? When failures dominate:

1. **You feel hopeless.** Why bother believing anything can change when the track record is all that matters, and it only shows regrets?
2. **New opportunities are dismissed.** There's no incentive to be interested, and no confidence that you could possibly succeed at it.

I heard the story this week of an artist named Lily Yeh. She had a vision for transforming an abandoned lot in a poor, inner city neighborhood. She wanted to make it into a park with a garden and sculptures.

This was a community that knew about failure, and because that was the dominant mindset, nobody thought she could do this. For one thing, she was Chinese, and they said as an outsider, she wouldn't be accepted in the predominantly African-American community. They told her the street kids would just destroy anything she made, so why bother? They told her she didn't have enough money, she didn't know anything about building.

But she felt compelled to try, and today, some 20 years later, that one lot has grown into an entire village. And the character of the entire neighborhood has changed for the better. Interestingly, Lily credits the success of the project to the way the children of the neighborhood embraced it – the only people who didn't have enough of a track record of failure to think it couldn't be done.

3. **Your sense of self is shrouded by guilt and shame.** There's no forgiveness. You can't let yourself off the hook and you're pretty sure God won't either.

You can see why feelings of failure could pose a bigger obstacle for Nehemiah than the job itself. If he can't instill some renewed hope and confidence in the hearts of the people, it won't matter how many resources he has – the wall won't get built.

Failures from our past can pin us down too. We can talk all day about how God has a calling for each of us, but if we're trapped under the weight of our own history, if our failures are truly forever like Dr. House says, we'll never be able to do the works God has in store for us. We'll be too paralyzed to move on.

How do we get past that? I believe Nehemiah gives us some guidance through his own actions. After he surveyed the wall during his secret mission, he went back to the people of the city and revealed his mission.

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.

They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.

But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"

I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

Most of you have probably seen the classic basketball movie, Hoosiers. Gene Hackman plays a coach who takes a tiny team all the way to the state championship. The boys are used to playing in their crackerbox size gym in Hickory, Indiana. So when they travel to the playoffs and walk into the huge Butler fieldhouse, they are overwhelmed by the sheer size of it. The lights are brighter, the ceiling is higher, there are enough seats for hundreds if not thousands of fans. And they start to think, "What are we doing here?"

It's at that point that Gene Hackman takes out a tape measure and stretches it along the length of the court. He raises it to the height of the hoop. The dimensions of the court are exactly what the boys have always played on. It was a brilliant and concrete way to take the task out of the realm of the impossible and make it manageable.

Nehemiah does the same thing for the Israelites. They're looking around and are overwhelmed by the thought of rebuilding, given where they've come from. But in very concrete ways, Nehemiah takes the project and makes it seem possible. He moves them to a place where failure is no longer the dominating factor on the scene.

How does he do that? If you've ever seen young kids talking to their parents when their parents aren't paying attention, what do they do? They put their hands on their mom or dad's cheeks and literally turn their heads until they're looking eye to eye and say, "Look this way." They instinctively know that eyes and attention go together. Nehemiah is placing his hands on the faces of the people of Jerusalem and saying, "Look this way. Give me your full attention." He redirects their eyes. Nehemiah gives us four ways to shift our focus.

From regrets to the real world – "*Come, let us rebuild...*" he says. There is work to be done. Nehemiah is very straightforward with the people. For him, motivation doesn't mean sugar coating the situation or making it look easier than it will be. He lays it out plainly.

You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire.

It's pretty bleak. That's some serious damage. But it's also all in the realm of specific, tangible facts. He could have said, "Boy, you guys really messed up. Why do you think this happened? Whose fault was it? Let's go back and review how you got here."

But he doesn't. He zooms in on the need at hand, rather than getting stuck in regret. Regret is a foggy soup of unreality. Your mind spins around and around reliving the past with absolutely no path for action. It is unproductive and it removes us from living in the moment.

George MacDonald wrote about working through a struggle. He said this:

Fold the arms of your faith and wait in quietness until a light goes up in your darkness. Fold the arms of your faith I say, but not of your action. Think of something you ought to do and go and do it, if it be but the sweeping of a room or the preparing of a meal, or a visit to a friend. Heed not your feelings: Do your work.

What good does it do to focus on something as simple as sweeping a floor? It helps take our attention away from ourselves and return it to the here and now. Regardless of what we did or didn't do yesterday, there are walls that need mending today, lives that need restoration, work that can and must be done.

God encourages us to live in the present because he IS present. He doesn't want us spending our time reliving our mistakes.

Isaiah 43:18-19

*"Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the desert
and streams in the wasteland.*

God makes a way where there is no way and provides water where there is no water, but the only way for us to see what he is doing is to take our eyes off the past and instead direct them to what he has for us today.

Nehemiah encourages the Israelites to move from regret to the real world. Then he makes a very interesting comment:

Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace.

From Disgrace to a Defender

I say it's interesting because it isn't what you would expect. You'd think he would say, "Come, let us rebuild the wall and we will be safe." "Come, let us rebuild the wall and

we won't have to worry about attacks." Instead he says, "We will no longer be in disgrace."

Why was disgrace so important to him? Disgrace is really a relationship word. It's a sense of myself that I get from those around me. What's my reputation? If I am a disgrace to my family, it means they think I'm an embarrassment. Disgrace makes us the target of ridicule and mocking and attacks by others.

Have you ever had that classic dream of showing up to school in just your underwear and not realizing it? You're so happy to wake up because it was so embarrassing. A city without walls was the equivalent of being undressed. Its people felt exposed and humiliated.

When we live in that place of disgrace, we pull back to hide like a turtle in its shell. We don't let other people get too close. We don't show emotion. We avoid eye contact. Our energy goes into self-preservation and self-protection. We sound the retreat. In other words, when there's no wall out there to protect me and I'm being attacked by other people around me so I'm feeling disgraced, I'm going to pretend I can be my own little wall. That's an exhausting way to live.

Nehemiah says to the people, "As we rebuild the wall, we will be freed up from our disgrace." The end of their disgrace is tied to getting their wall back. With every rock I stack, what I'm really doing is transferring the job of protecting me off my own shoulders and placing it on that wall. I'm trusting something other than me to defend me.

That's what will help lift us out of our own disgrace – transferring the burden of defending ourselves onto God's shoulders. What is the wall he surrounds us with? It is his grace -- the opposite of DISgrace . That is the shield that deflects all the attackers. We can rest secure in knowing that God accepts us unconditionally. We are safe inside his love. I was stressed out over something this week and talking to my buddy Scott about it. He said to me, "You're still going to heaven. Jesus still took care of that. This doesn't really matter in the end." He was only being halfway serious, but it was so right that it calmed me down.

Isaiah 25:8-9

*The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces;
he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth.
The LORD has spoken.*

*In that day they will say, "Surely this is our God;
we trusted in him, and he saved us.
This is the LORD, we trusted in him;
let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation."*

We've all lived in that place of DISgrace, a place of shame. Maybe we've brought it on ourselves. Praise God we don't have to stay there. As we transfer our trust to him as our defender, he takes away our disgrace and replaces it with grace.

Nehemiah is so optimistic about how things will turn out. His enthusiasm is contagious. He tells the people,

The God of heaven will give us success.

Here we have another point where Nehemiah helped the Israelites shift their focus, and this time it is **From the Record to the Redeemer.**

The people were all focused on their track record. Otherwise, why would they need an outsider like Nehemiah to get this wall built? History was too fresh in their minds and they didn't want it to repeat itself. They looked at the record and thought if we try again it will just get knocked down again.

But Nehemiah doesn't believe the outcome depends on what's happened previously. That's not where his confidence lies. He's betting the farm on God.

This is really the key to this whole message. The reason we can have hope isn't because we're going to be better next time. We may fail again. Our confidence is not in us – it's in a God who specializes in loving failures and saving them. That's what being a Christian is all about. The band Switchfoot has a song that says,

*We are a beautiful letdown
Painfully uncool
The church of the dropouts
The losers, the sinners, the failures, and the fools*

That's a new church slogan for you. But it's reality. Our only hope for success and moving beyond our failures will come when we can leave our failures in the hands of the one who never fails. To quote my father-in-law, "Remember that God forgets."

That's hard to do, especially when there are people around you reminding you of your failures. And the Israelites had plenty of naysayers. Look again at the story:

But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"

I call them the bad voices. They came up with every reason they could think of as to why the Israelites would fail. They even tried to turn it around and make it look like what they were doing was illegal – rebellion against the king, when it was the king who authorized the whole enterprise.

But Nehemiah would have none of it. Here was his response:

I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

Nehemiah refused to listen to their taunts, because he knew that as loud as these critics were, they had no authority over what happened in Jerusalem. In spite of how they sounded, their words were powerless.

To get beyond the rock of failure, Nehemiah invites us to shift our focus **From Talk to Truth.**

We all have the bad voices in our heads. Voices that taunt us and say, "What are you doing? You're not qualified. You're worthless. You'll never succeed."

Bad voices can be very loud and convincing. But they are lies we no longer need to listen to, thanks to Jesus. Christ is the one who has authority in our lives, and he says differently. I love the scene in Revelation that John describes:

Revelation 12:10

Then I heard a loud voice in heaven say: "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God, and the authority of his Christ. For the accuser of our brothers, who accuses them before our God day and night, has been hurled down."

Our accuser would like you to believe he is right. He'd like you to believe you're defined by your failures. But guess what? He's been hurled down. What has ultimate authority in your life is the truth of the cross. Jesus died to silence the enemy. There is no more need to listen to what the devil has to say, because we know the truth.

What rock is blocking you this morning? What piece of your past is interfering with your future? Jesus said he is the Way. He's the way through the desert and the way over the rock pile. And he wants to set you free.