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NEHEMIAH 2:11-20

Series: Life Lessons from Nehemiah

Let's pray before we open God's word to Nehemiah 2.

[PRAYER] Lord, we thank you for your goodness in our lives. So many things we can be grateful for. It is challenging, Lord, when we lose someone we love or when things are struggling in our own health or when we're experiencing some difficulties. It's easy for us to become self-focused or to focus on our own pain. But Lord, we want to thank you for your goodness. There's so many things we can be grateful for. Things you've done for us and that we are encouraged by. So just focusing on who you are helps us to be able to adjust our own hearts, keep our hearts focused on you. Lord, we know that you use your word to help us do that. So this morning as we open your word, we ask that you would adjust our hearts, correct our thinking. In Jesus' name, amen.

We're going through the book of Nehemiah. We happen to be in the book of Nehemiah 2 today. Now I'm going to share with you a verse from the New Testament first because I want to remind you about what God's word does for us. I like this verse because it describes the power of God's word and how it works with us. So in Hebrews 4:12 it says – *The word of God is active and alive*. The fact that it's alive and active means that it's an experience we have. When we come to God we connect together in this way that is powerful. When you look at God's word today or tomorrow or the next day, when you open it up, it should be with a sense of anticipation because God is going to speak.

My dad used to open the Bible during devotions and he would say, "Are you ready? I don't know whether He's going to say something big or He's going to say something small, but God's about to speak," and then he'd open his Bible. So I mean every time I open my Bible on my iPad now or wherever I'm looking, I go, "Wow. What is God going to say to me today?"

I trust that God will speak to you from His word today and that tomorrow when you open His word, He'll speak to you tomorrow too. So this isn't just a Sunday experience, this is something that God is doing.

And notice what He does. That this word of God is *sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart*.

Now what is an attitude? An attitude is an approach to something. We all have attitudes in our lives. Attitudes about sports or a particular sports team. We have attitudes toward food. You have

an attitude about McDonald's. For some that is a really positive attitude. "I can hardly wait to get a Big Mac." For others there's this repulsion, this attitude about McDonald's that "I would never go to McDonald's." It's pre-packaged. It's a pre-packaged response.

Now I would suggest we all take these pre-packaged responses into life. We all have life attitudes that determine how we're going to respond. Today we're going to look at Nehemiah and see how he had some ways about approaching life that we need to grasp. I think we're going to learn today from this man Nehemiah how he approaches the challenge of going to Jerusalem and rebuilding the walls. Today's the week where we start with him actually doing the rebuilding. So we want to see that as it opens up and takes place. But his attitude toward that is pretty powerful.

I want to read the passage to you first. As we read this passage, you're going to see what we're going to talk about, then I'm going to go back and show you some of his attitude and his approach to the whole package, to the whole experience of rebuilding the walls. So let's read the passage. Would you please stand up with me as I read these two slides, Nehemiah 2:11-20. You can read it in your Bible. That would be great.

It says – I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days (don't skip over that...three days before he started doing any work) I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. So he's careful about his mouth. He's not just talking all the time. He's careful. He doesn't say anything. 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. Again, he kept his mouth closed up to this point.

But then it says in verse 17 – 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 on 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."

You may be seated.

When we think about attitudes in life, we think about like a predisposition, a way of approaching life. People have all kinds of attitudes. I think it's like some people have just reactive attitudes. They just react to life situations. It's not intentional, it's not planned, it's just reacting. It's like putting splattering paint on a wall.

Here's some examples of some negative attitudes that people have. Selfishness becomes a predisposition that it's all about me in life. Or a victim mentality. It's your fault that I have this problem that I have. Or negativity. Just thinking negative continually. Or resentment. This is this angry response to the things that are wrong. In all of these cases there's some real realities that there's some challenges in life, difficulties in life. But how we approach those challenges is very important.

Here's just four examples of attitudes that a lot of people have and I want to share these with you because I'm wondering if you are doing a self-assessment at the moment. What you would say about your attitude. Does your attitude tend to be guarded? Or does your attitude tend to not have a filter? What kind of approach do you have as you come before life itself? Because Nehemiah is rebuilding walls, but we're talking about building our lives. We're talking about rebuilding in some cases, but just approaching life's challenges.

So today we can learn some valuable things from Nehemiah. In fact I would suggest there are four tools and I've outlined the passage here for you to see them. There are four tools that we're going to see in this passage that illustrate Nehemiah's approach to life situations. And these life situations are challenging for him. He's got a big job to do. What is his attitude toward life?

Well let's start with this first one in verse 11. I call it rest because I'm impressed with this first verse is that he *went to Jerusalem and after staying there three days...* So we don't know exactly what happened during the three days, but we do know he didn't start meeting with people, he didn't start talking to him about the job because that's what it says in the next phrase, in the next verse. He says – *I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem.* So he hasn't done anything yet.

Now he's been on a long trip. Probably a three-month journey to get all the way from Susa, a thousand miles over to Jerusalem. And you know if you traveled, sometimes there's some jet lag. Obviously he didn't experience jet lag. Maybe camel lag would be a better expression for him. But whatever it is, you can imagine travel is tiring. He gets to this place and he's just tired.

I really like it that he rests. I just find this personally convicting in my own heart. Because if I would have landed and got to Jerusalem, I would've said, "Alright. Let's get together. Where's the leaders here? Let's check things out. Who's going to be in charge of the supplies?" It wouldn't take me three days to get involved in what's going on. It just reminds me of the value of rest.

Alistair Begg is a pastor in Cleveland, Ohio and he says this: “Six things we should never do when tired.” It just reminded me about how we can mess up if we go into things too quickly. He says: “Avoid making important decision. Avoid writing important letters (or I would suggest emails too. Sometimes we hit ‘send’ when we shouldn’t). Avoid launching a new project. Avoid the temptation to quit. Avoid assessing your spiritual condition. And avoid assessing the spiritual condition of others.” I like that. Because what he’s saying is be careful. When you’re not rested you’re liable to make reactionary decisions.

Nehemiah doesn’t do that. He’s very clear and intentional about his approach to this problem of rebuilding the walls. He’s intentional about life. I would suggest that rest is going to be an important part of that in our lives. As I reflect on rest in the Bible, I want to take you to a couple passages of scripture because I think this will just motivate you to think about what rest really is.

You remember back in creation when *the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils and the breath of life...* [audio glitch] It’s interesting when God created a person, He *breathed into him a breath of life, and the man became a living being.*

Now the word there is *nephesh*. *Nephesh chayyah*. *Nephesh* mean soul, *chayyah* means new. He breathed into him this breath of life, this new living being. Now if you get that back in creation this idea about the *nephesh* and that the *nephesh* is this soul of a person, it’s the soul that becomes weary. And that’s why the same word is used when God is giving instructions about the Sabbath. When He talks about the Sabbath He says – *Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed.* And the word *refreshed* is *nephesh*. *Nephesh* is this idea of your soul being refreshed.

I think we should question whether entertainment is rest. Because if we’re sitting there watching a movie or getting on Facebook or other electronic stuff for rest, then maybe it’s not doing what it needs to be doing to refresh our soul. It’s the soul of a person that needs the rest and that’s what the Sabbath is all about. It creates this *nephesh chayyah* in who we are.

So just think about your rest. Do you have times or a way in your life to experience the rest so you can face the challenges like Nehemiah is going to face. He spends three days before he takes action. So the first thing on our list here in this outline is that he rested.

The second thing is that he evaluates. In verse 12-16 I’m going to read to you how he evaluates. But in order to do that, you kind of need to get the geography laid down of what’s going on here.

So this is a model of what Jerusalem looked like in the time of the rebuilding. So this is what the walls would look like when they’re all completed. And he’s evaluating, he’s going to evaluate them. We can’t see them while broken down. We don’t know what they looked like. But this is what they look like when they’re done. Here is another shot of this rendering so you can see the walls. In a city, typically in those days there would be walls around the city and there would be people who lived outside of the city and that was okay. They would live out there in the farmlands, but when an attack came they would all come inside of the city for protection. That’s

kind of what you see here in the picture with people outside of the city, but you have the city walls. Notice the shape of the city walls, the shape of the city itself.

Let me show you a map of this so as I read it you get the idea. Notice it's in this particular shape. We're going to talk about the Valley Gate. I'm going to read the passage in a moment. From the Valley Gate he's going down here to the Dung Gate, Fountain Gate, and then he's going to get stuck. I don't know if he goes around or not, but let me read the passage to you so you can see what he says here.

It says in verse 12 – *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 (so that was that gate on the left side) toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate (that's south), 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 (that's up around the bottom coming up) and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; so I went up the valley. Now we can't see in the rendering, but there's a valley down there outside of the walls themselves. So he went down the valley to examine the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. So he either went around and turned back, which means he came back down to the Valley Gate, or he just stopped and he came back down and went through Valley Gate. He had seen enough.*

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. So he took some time to evaluate.

It's a good thing for us to do every once in a while to pause and evaluate what we're doing. It appears that Nehemiah evaluated before he spoke. And that would mean in our lives we probably need to do more evaluating before we speak on a regular basis. It would be a good idea.

But this evaluation can take place if you're a student and you're looking at your schoolwork and you're trying to evaluate, where am I? Am I moving along at the right pace? Do I need to change my study habits? Or maybe you're trying to evaluate your finances. It's good for us every once in a while to sit down and evaluate finances or maybe to evaluate our relationship with someone. Am I where I want to be here? And certainly to evaluate our relationship with God. To come before the Lord and say, "Lord, I just want to do a little check-up here. Would you use your Holy Spirit in my life to be your finger on areas of my life where I need to change? Lord, I want to be the person you want me to be." This evaluation that we do is strategic.

Jesus was big on evaluation. That's what Jesus said when he talked about becoming a disciple. He said these words: *And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple. Here's the evaluation part. Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Won't you first sit down and estimate the cost to see if you have enough money to complete it? For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you, saying, "This person began to build and wasn't able to finish." Or suppose a king is about to go to war against another king. Won't he first sit down and consider whether he is able with ten thousand*

men to oppose the one coming against him with twenty thousand? If he is not able, he will send a delegation while the other is still a long way off and will ask for terms of peace.

This evaluation is this necessary component in our lives. That's what Nehemiah is doing. But Jesus is pointing to discipleship and evaluating our discipleship. Are we ready to count the cost? He says – *In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.* There's this I'm either totally in or I'm not.

An evaluation will be really good in our lives to ask the question, have I allowed the Holy Spirit access to every room in my life? And the Holy Spirit is very gracious but convicting. He'll come right to those places where we need to make changes. You don't need somebody else to convict you, you've got the Holy Spirit who can convict you of areas. This evaluation is so important. So Nehemiah goes on to this stage of evaluation as he's moving forward and has this attitude or this approach to life.

The first was rest, the second is evaluate. Now he's going to communicate. Watch the communication that takes place. Because sometimes when you do evaluation, it's evaluation that requires that you be thinking of other people too. So you're solving a problem, or you've got to communicate the solution. There's other people involved often, and that's what's going to happen here with Nehemiah, of course, because he's going to mobilize a bunch of people. Notice his communication as he talks to them.

He says – *Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in."* He puts this in the 'we'. He's not doing a lot of blaming. "You guys have been sitting here all these years, you haven't been doing any work here. You need to get up." No. He says look, we've got a problem. I like the 'we' approach that he's doing that offsets any sense of blame or defensiveness because we've got a problem that we're working on.

"Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem." So he's focusing on the facts and the problem at hand. But notice what he says next because I think this is helpful for us to get a bigger perspective on the wall problem. Because it's not just a problem about walls and gates. It's a problem of disgrace. So he says – *and we will no longer be in disgrace.*

Every time there is something going on in life, there's the basic things that are happening. We're solving a problem, we're doing this. But there's also this other picture that we must consider. I call it the second game and I've shared the second game idea with you before. But I like to tell young people this, especially children who are caught in sibling conflict issues and they're fighting about things. I say, "Look. There are two games. The first game is the game you're playing, Checkers. You're playing the game, somebody's going to win the game, somebody's going to lose the game if you complete the game. But there's always the second game. The second game is the game of encouragement. It's the game of thinking about other people, not just thinking about yourself. It's the game of anti-selfishness. It's the second game that's always being played in life."

So Nehemiah is looking at the situation and he's saying we got walls to build and gates to put back up, but there's another game here. It has to do with the disgrace that we're experiencing and we want to change that. So there's a second game idea when children are playing. It's the ability to encourage somebody else. As somebody else is playing and they have a good move, you say, "Hey, that was a good move. Good job." That's the second game. If they win, either because you let them win (which is obviously a second game choice that you make) or they beat you, you say, "You played well that game." That's the second game. I like to say whoever plays the second game always wins. Because there's a sense of relationships and encouragement that takes place.

That's what Nehemiah is thinking about. He's not just thinking about the walls and the gates. He's thinking about the disgrace, that inner challenge they're experiencing because of the walls and because of the gates. There's something going on deeper inside of their hearts. So we've got the first game, the second game. But notice also there's another statement that he makes. He doesn't just tell them about the need. We need to make some changes here. But notice he also tries to motivate them by inviting them into something bigger, something exciting. He says to them – *I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me.*

There's some people... Just think about your service in the life of the church or giving in the life of the church. Some people give when there's a need. And that's great. The walls are breaking down or the gates are burned, so we're going to work on this because there's disgrace and the church is this place where we're rebuilding lives and we're helping people. So if I were to share with you needs that we have, you would say, "I want to give to that need." But there's another way that we give. The reason we give has to do with this I want to be part of the bigger hand of God. I want to be part of the gracious hand of God working in people's lives that now it's not just needs, but it's this vision of being a part of something big.

That's what Nehemiah is offering the people. He's saying to them, come on, guys, here's what God has done in my life up to this point and now we're going forward. You can be a part of this. You can be part of the gracious hand of God at work in my life, is what Nehemiah is saying. I think sometimes those are the decisions we make. We might not even know what the needs are, but we want to be part of what God is doing, so we give or we serve. We're taking on a challenge because God is at work in this situation.

So the idea of communicating becomes our next very important thing. He is communicating the need in a way that's thoughtful. He's communicating the need in a way that's persuasive because of how he does it. He doesn't just say whatever he's thinking. He's doesn't have an unfiltered mouth. There's some depth here. And he wants to present it in a way that's most powerful. I just like the way his communication is built on his evaluation. We could do a lot more of that in our own personal lives.

And then lastly this idea of perseverance. Look at these guys. These are the villains in the story. Down here in verse 19 – *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?"*

Whenever you do something, you're going to get opposition. Whenever you're trying to do the right thing, you're going to be attacked. Sometimes that attack is just negativity that other people have, criticisms they have, challenges that are presented. But sometimes it is even the Satanic attack of discouragement, the ridicule that comes from Satan's desires to destroy us, and it comes at us in a way that sometimes really is debilitating. All I'm trying to do is do what's right. But I keep running into roadblocks. I keep running into problems. This isn't working. So there's this tendency in our human heart, in our soul to become discouraged, to become disappointed. And then we start making decisions that are not the best. Because we are letting the disappointment, the discouragement, and attack to affect us in ways that are of course not helpful.

So Nehemiah's approach is this. He says – *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.”* He says we're going forward. We're going to be successful. We're following the Lord. We're going to do what God has called us to do. That's what we're doing. We're moving forward without any hinderance from you. And he says you don't have any claim to this, no historic right to this. There's no opportunity you have.

You know there's this statement of fact. We sang this song that Chante taught us this morning – *I am a Child of God*. I am a child of God. There is a statement.

There was a thirteen year old girl who was just suffering with discouragement. Just felt like you know I'm not a Christian today. I must not be a Christian today because she made a mistake or because she didn't live up to her own expectations, or something was going on and she would think, “I'm not a Christian today.”

So her dad said, “Hey. Once you accept Christ into your life, you're a Christian. There's nothing that can...”

“I know, but I just forget that because I made a mistake in my life.”

So Dad said, “Let's do this. Let's take a sign, ‘I am child of God’. Let's take that sign, put it in a stake, and put it down in the ground out there in the grass next to the garage. ‘I am a child of God.’ Every time that you feel discouraged in your life, you go out to that sign that says ‘I am a child of God.’ And when you see that sign you can be reminded that Satan has no room here, he has no claim, he has no historic right to my life. I am a child of God.”

Whenever there's Satanic attack in our lives, we can take spiritual authority, as Nehemiah did. It says there is no right that you have in my life. There's no place for you here. I am a child of God. And that power that takes place in that moment takes away the power of that criticism over us.

I was working last week with a mom of a sixteen year old and the sixteen year old is at a stage where he's abusive. He's just plain abusive, sending mean texts, all kinds of... He's just abusive to his mom. It's just terrible. Mom's trying to figure out what to do. “I can't stop being the mom in this situation. How do I handle this?” I said we have to start spiritually. We have to start with your relationship with God. Because although these are personal attacks that he says or mean words that he says verbally, when you take those personally, you're allowing room in your heart for abuse. You don't want to allow room in your heart for abuse. He's being abusive and we're going to try to stop that, we're going to do everything we can in order to bring about some change using firmness and other things. But you can't allow it to destroy you on the inside.

This is the very thing that Nehemiah is doing. He is being abused, ridiculed by these people who have no authority to question the fact that he is doing God's work. Don't let anything hinder you from following the Lord 100% because God is your King, He is your Father, He is the one who is taking you forward. So we don't allow anything to trample on that in our lives.

I'm really impressed with Nehemiah's approach to life. He has an attitude toward life that's defined at least by these four things in our passage and I want to encourage you to embrace an attitude like Nehemiah had as you face whatever challenges you have in your life. Maybe you're rebuilding walls or maybe you're rebuilding a life. Or maybe you're trying to just get things done. But there's an approach to what you're doing in life that has this marked statement on it that you live differently. You don't live with all that splatter that takes place. Because God is changing you and you're a child of God.

So if we go back to our initial verse, we read about how the power of God is so important because it comes into us like a sword and it's able to change the attitudes that we have. So I want you to know, if you have an attitude toward life right now, the Holy Spirit is pointing that out and saying, "Hey, you need to change this attitude," God has the ability to do that. And how does He do that? He uses God's word to change our beliefs. That's why we study it day and night. Because if we study God's word day and night, it gives us new beliefs, new understanding of who He is so that we can influence the whole approach to life that we have. That's what God wants to do in each of our hearts. It's an attitude. But it's not just something we put on. It's something that happens because we've trusted Jesus Christ as our Lord and our Savior.

If you've never trusted Christ as your Lord and Savior, I want to invite you to do that today. Because when you do that, you embrace this new attitude about life that rises you above all the other stuff that's going on in life. God has something special planned for each of us and that is we are a child of God.

Would you stand with me and let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Lord, correct our thinking where it's off. Give us new habits to reacting to situations that are more godly. Lord, teach us. Discipline our own hearts so that we can follow you and be disciples of yours in way that you've called us to live. I ask for each young person here or each adult that's here, each man and woman, that you'd give us an attitude about life that's focused on you and that considers who you are in our lives. Lord, do that work this week. We dedicate ourselves to you today. In Jesus' name, amen.