

# COMING BACK

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## Builders of Eternity (Part 10)

Text: Nehemiah 13

### I Don't Have It In Me

“I just don't have it in me.” Have you ever said those words to yourself? Have you ever faced a loss so great, a hurdle so high, that you just cried out those words, “It's too much. I can't do it. I just don't have it in me”? The great historian Thomas Carlyle came to a moment like that. Perhaps you know the story. Carlyle had spent two long years writing by hand a massive study of the French Revolution. Finally finishing his master work, the author gave the manuscript to his friend, John Stuart Mill, for proof-reading. Mill, however, accidentally left it someplace where it was mistaken by an illiterate housekeeper as a pile of waste papers which she used to start a fire in the hearth. In a matter of seconds, two years of work -- thousands of hours of sweat and genius, the lone copy of the book -- went up in smoke.<sup>1</sup>

Can you imagine Carlyle's state of mind at hearing this news? If you can, then you will understand something crucial to grasping the message that comes to you and me this morning from the final chapter of the Book of Nehemiah. For not just two, but for twelve long years, God's servant Nehemiah had labored on his master work. He had sacrificed all the perks and pleasures of a job in the White House of his day, to travel hundreds of miles to undertake a job that few thought could be done and many clever and powerful people did not want to see done.

Nonetheless, Nehemiah had painstakingly planned and undertaken the rebuilding of ancient Jerusalem. He had mobilized a staggering array of political, financial, and physical resources. He had rallied a divided and disputing people, transforming them into a highly motivated, brilliantly integrated army of workers. He had stood his ground against the repeated attacks of a well-organized opposition. He had led his people through famine and fighting, restoring the walls and gates of Jerusalem to their ancient strength and glory.

And as impressive as this physical rebuilding process was, it was hardly anything compared to the scale of the spiritual renovation God had accomplished through Nehemiah. Israel had undergone an amazing season of national repentance and revival. The Jews had rediscovered their identity and mission as the people of God. After decades of being acculturated in the mindset and ways of the societies in which they'd been exiled, the Israelites now saw clearly that God intended them to be set apart as salt and light for others. They finally grasped that this would require that they dedicate themselves to living by a very particular set of principles and practices set forth in God's law – and with a stunning unity of spirit they had stepped out and signed on to that magnificent commitment.

If we had time to read Nehemiah chapters 11 and 12 together – we'd see Nehemiah and his compatriots engaged in exalting God in WORSHIP -- literally marching around the walls of Jerusalem, contemplating the greatness and goodness of God and singing his praises. We'd hear the Israelites declaring once again their commitment to GROW in obedience to all of God's commandments. We'd watch them starting to SERVE God with more of their time and treasure and key relationships than God's people had done in centuries. And this would make a wonderful end to the story.

## Life in Smoke

If this book was essentially a work of fiction out to show how life can be cleaned up in twelve easy steps, this would have been the perfect place to end the tale. But life doesn't often work this way, does it? And the end of the Book of Nehemiah, like the whole of the Bible, is ruthless about telling the truth. To get at that truth, it helps to know that between the events described at the end of chapter 12 and the beginning of chapter 13 there is a gap in time of more than a decade. For some eleven years following the reconstruction of Jerusalem, things go relatively smoothly for Nehemiah and the people of Judah. But then, **"in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes"** kingship, Nehemiah keeps the promise he'd made to his boss and returns to the court of the King.

How long Nehemiah is back in the Persian capitol is not known for sure. What is, however, is what happens when the cat is away. Corrupt leadership creeps into and then dominates the Temple, the hub of the nation's life. Moved by commercial interests and the pattern of surrounding cultures, the people of Israel start buying and selling goods on the Sabbath again, losing the spiritual focus and fount people needed to stay in communion with God. People stop giving the tithes that had recently been restored to fund the vital worship, teaching, and compassion ministries that flowed from there.

Not surprisingly, the life-changing witness of the Temple fades even further. Soon, Jews see no problem with marrying Ammonite or Moabite people with no respect for Israel's God. Degree by degree, the heartbeat, purity, and stability of God's people suffers. The salt loses its saltiness, the light fades, and the crumbling of the culture starts all over again. All the work that Nehemiah has done over all those years goes up in smoke.

Can you imagine Nehemiah getting this news? Have you ever spent hours cleaning up after others, then returned to find things looking like a bomb blast had hit the place? Ever broken your back shoveling snow, just before the next blizzard struck? Of course you have and you've seen much worse. Some of you have spent years raising a family only to have it shattered in a single moment. Some of you have devoted decades to caring for your body only to have it apparently crumble in one instant. Some of you have poured thousands of hours into building a character or a career or crucial relationship only to watch it suddenly go up in smoke.

What do you feel in those moments? There have been times in my life where I have worked so hard and then seen someone or some circumstance come along and trash it all and I have said in my heart: "I give up. It's hopeless. Someone else will have to deal with this mess." There have been times when I've had to say "I'm not as bright or as good or as strong as I thought I was. It's all coming apart. I don't know how to fix it. I don't want to face it. I just don't have it in me." I would not have blamed Nehemiah for a New York Minute if he'd said the same thing. There are just times when you realize that sin and stupidity and decay aren't annuals you can uproot and be done with; they are perennials. They are like weeds or insects or bad genes that just keep coming back.

### **Coming Back**

No wonder Thomas Carlyle fell into a profound depression that day. I'm told that his associates feared he would never recover from his loss. Then one day, while out

walking, Carlyle happened upon some workers who were building a wall and he found himself transfixed. Suddenly he saw it. Suddenly it occurred to him that this immense, extensive wall was being raised one stone at a time. And in that moment something in Carlyle began to come back. “If I write just one page at a time, one day at a time, maybe I *can* write this book again.” Today we have the definitive history of the French Revolution because he did.<sup>2</sup>

Do you know what Nehemiah did after he heard the news that the life of Jerusalem was again in flames? The text doesn't say this, but I have to believe that he did what he had done the first time he heard of its desolation. I imagine he wept and mourned and began to pray. What the text does tell us is this and you find it in chapter 13 verses 6 & 7. Nehemiah says: “**Some time later I asked [the King's] permission and came back to Jerusalem.**” He instituted a program of even more radical reforms that ended up securing the spiritual and political life of his people for another generation.

I don't know where you see the smoke rising in your life today or will see it in days to come. Maybe it is in your marriage or the life of one of your kids. Perhaps it is in your health or your career. It could be in your church or your own character. It may be where the walls of some portion or our society are broken down or some important gates have been consumed by fire.<sup>3</sup> What I do know is that God has called you and me to be Builders. He has set us apart to be Builders of his eternal Kingdom -- one step at a time, one page at a time, one day at a time.

“But I've already tried,” you may say. “You have no idea how hard I've tried.” “The job's too big. You don't know the obstacles. I just don't have it in me to come back.” And I would say to you, I understand that feeling. Believe me, I do. But much more important to your future, my future, and this world's future is the fact that *God* understands.

Think of what He's done. He built a perfect Creation, but it was not enough to secure the faithfulness of humanity to Him. He liberated his people from slavery and gave them a perfect Law and led them into a promised land, but still their hearts turned from Him. Again and again, He raised up judges to rescue them from their enemies and good kings to lead them back to the Way of life. When centuries of prophets had not penetrated their hearts or softened their souls... When design and beauty, war and exile, wooing and waiting, had somehow proven insufficient to awaken humanity to their need of God and one another... When the smoke was rising and all the angels were crying out: "That's it. Case closed. No more. It's enough!" -- One voice spoke louder.

The One at the right hand of the King himself stood up and said: "No, I'll go back." And the Bible says: **The Word became Flesh and built his life with us, and we beheld His glory, full of grace and truth.**<sup>4</sup> No, none of us has it in us to do what needs to be done. But Jesus does. And if we open our hearts, He will be in us. He will give us the power to come back to Him, to return to our calling – one step at a time, one day at a time, one life at a time – until He comes back once and for all to establish the new Jerusalem where Light and Life will be all there is and tears and terror and tearing down will be no more.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to Greg Asimikoupoulos for making me aware of this story.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution: A History*, Volumes 1 & 2, 1837.

<sup>3</sup> *Nehemiah* 1:3

<sup>4</sup> *John* 1:14