



STONE-LAYERS

Rebuilding the Walls

Texts: Ezra 7; Nehemiah 1-2, 4, 6-8; Malachi 1-4

Living in Calamitous Times

In the countryside near Leicester, England, there stands an ancient church whose walls are inscribed with an eloquent memorial. The inscription recalls the life of a man who made the laying of that church's enduring stones possible long ago, and it reads as follows: *"In the year 1653, when all things sacred were throughout ye nation either demolished or profaned, Sir Robert Shirley, Baronet, did found this church: Whose singular praise it is to have done the best of things in the worst of times, and hoped them in the most calamitous."*¹

I don't know about you, but it strikes me that we too are now living in calamitous times. Unless you've got a much wiser investment advisor than I have, then you're seeing your assets demolished. You've watched too many of the business, political and even religious institutions of our day profaned by greed and arrogance. You're aware that an increasing number of people are losing their jobs, their homes, even their hope. If it isn't the worst of times, it sometimes seems to be heading that way. So, what does it look like to be a people who do the best of things in such a time as this?

The Recovery Process

To get at an answer to that question, we go back this morning to a time in history when another people were facing difficult days. You may recall that when Cyrus the Great overthrew the Babylonian Empire in 539 B.C., he and subsequent kings of the new Medo-Persian dynasty released the Jewish people from their 50-year exile in Babylon. In a succession of waves, the Hebrews now return to Palestine, only to find their beloved country in ruins. The physical infrastructure has crumbled. The economy is withered. The religious life is dead.

The first returnees, led by Zerubbabel, languish at first, but finally jump start a recovery by rebuilding the temple and the religious rhythms of the nation. The prophets Zechariah and Haggai help fuel a spiritual revival and the temple is completed in 515. In 458 B.C., another group of Jews also return to Palestine under the leadership of the priest, Ezra. By now, the Jews have intermarried with pagan peoples and lost their spiritual center again. Ezra leads another revival and gets the recovery back on track, but it soon stalls again.

Finally, in 444, the Persian king's Jewish chief-of-staff, Nehemiah, becomes aware that his homeland is still in dire straits. Nehemiah leads a massive task force from the Persian capitol city, Susa, 900 miles back to Jerusalem. He finds the once-renowned capitol of David and Solomon looking like the Gaza Strip does today and under assault



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from a variety of marauding tribes and exploiting overlords. In the space of just under two months, however, Nehemiah manages to lead the people in the rebuilding of the walls and gates of Jerusalem to their former strength. In the process, he sets up an administrative structure among the people that will eventually lead to the restoration of the political and economic vitality of Israel. And, with Ezra's help, Nehemiah re-starts the worship life of Israel. If you've read the storyline, then you know that the prophet Malachi also helps to keep accenting the spiritual values that must be at the heart of the nation. And for a season, Israel recovers some of its ancient luster again.

To put it another way: *"In the year 444 B.C., when all things sacred were throughout ye nation either demolished or profaned, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi, did re-found Jerusalem: Whose singular praise it is to have done the best of things in the worst of times, and hoped them in the most calamitous."*

On Doing the Best of Things

Am I the only one who hopes that President Obama and Governor Quinn and their cabinets are familiar with this part of the Bible? That, however, is not where I started today, or where I hope to finish. Governmental action is surely needed to address the issues of today, but so is a response at the grassroots level. So let me come back to that question I posed at the start: *"What would it look like for the people of the Church of Jesus Christ to do the best of things in the worst of times?"* You'll come up with a lot of ideas, if you read our texts for today closely yourself. Let me close today, by lifting up just a few for our consideration and then send us on your way.

It is fascinating to me that the recovery of Israel begins with a conversation between a small group of people. Nehemiah chapter 1 opens up with an encounter between Nehemiah, his brother Hanani (we don't know if he was literally Nehemiah's sibling or simply a Jewish kinsman), and **"some other men."** What I want you to note, however, is how the conversation goes. These men could have chewed the fat about the sports scores in Susa, but instead Nehemiah asks these very pointed questions. He says in effect: "How is it really going with the family? What's really going on in the world from which you've just come?" And these men open up and tell the truth. "It's going terribly," they say. "We're in great trouble. It's all falling apart for us." And Nehemiah, the Bible says, **"sat down and wept."**

One of the best things that we can do for one another in the midst of these calamitous times is to ask each other serious questions: "How is it really going?" And if someone asks us such a thing, to tell the truth. I walked into a staff meeting this week, feeling completely overwhelmed by a laundry list of problems and worries: The economy's impact on our church, family needs I felt like I was failing to address, a legal problem, a



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physical ailment. One of the staff asked, "How's it going?" and I paused for a moment, readying my usual "Great!" when it all just came gushing out. The people in the room didn't literally sit down and weep. But they gathered around me, put their hands on my back and shoulders and prayed for me. In their prayers they identified deeply with the chaos and weariness I was feeling. They didn't change a thing about the external circumstances I still had to go out and face. But what they did, dramatically and helpfully changed something inside me.

What if the Christian community became the safest place on earth to tell the truth about how these calamitous times are affecting us all? What if we became the greatest place in America to find people who will stand with you in the midst of the messiness, even if they can't clean it up for you? I think it might be one of the best of things to do.

Or here's another idea from the Storyline. Time and again, the response of Nehemiah to the needs he becomes aware of is to pray, and sometimes even to fast, before God, beseeching the **"great and awesome God... of love"** to supply the needs of his servants. This pattern is all over the life and ministry of Ezra too. I think it is fair to say that the Bible suggests that the reason God moved so powerfully with grace during this season of Israel's life is because his people re-discovered the power of prayer. So what if every time we heard another dire report, our response was to send an arrow prayer to heaven: "Lord, meet the needs of those people. Father, give wisdom to the decision-makers." Maybe you'd even commit to fasting (skipping a meal) once a week as a way of identifying with somebody who's lost their job or reminding yourself with the hunger pangs to be faithful in prayer for those in need.

The truth is that part of the reason we are in this mess today is because a lot of us were not able to deny ourselves much of anything. It wasn't just those guys on Wall Street or in Washington or over there in Jerusalem that got America into trouble. We spent or took more than we needed. We let our covetousness and pride run away with us and it is important that we confess that. Why is Nehemiah able to lead the recovery of his people? I think it is partly because he is realistic about the sin in himself that has contributed to the breakdown of his nation. If we in the Christian community could do that, if we could model that kind of realism and repentance, instead of blaming others (as is all the rage) we would be doing one of the best of things in the worst of times.

One of the other striking things that Nehemiah did in his nation's time of crisis, was to call upon people to use their gifts in service to the recovery effort. In Nehemiah 2 we read how he asked King Artaxerxes to help him network with others who might be able to help. When he got to Jerusalem, Nehemiah pulled people together in groups, encouraging them to each use their gifts to support one another in the rebuilding effort.



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What if we did that? Some of us are like Artaxerxes or Asaph. We could perhaps help someone network find a job, or even offer a job to a member of the church who needed it. We have the ability to give to the Benevolence Fund the church uses to help someone cover a crisis bill. Others of us don't have that particular capacity. But we have practical skills that could help someone fix something in their home, or make sense of their finances, or solve a legal matter, or even cover the kids for a few hours so a mom or a couple who doesn't have the money can get some precious space. One of the best things we might do in the days ahead is come up with a way that our church can connect needs and need-meeters. Our staff is at work on that now and if you have a heart to help, please let us know.

In the third chapter of the Book of Malachi, we read perhaps the most counter-intuitive strategy for economic recovery in all the Bible. The prophet calls the people of God to make a priority of bringing their whole tithe to the temple. There really are two reasons for that. The obvious one is that the work of the temple is especially important in difficult times. But the second reason is that God promises to open the floodgates of his resources to those who put their trust in him. Many of us have tried letting our stewardship of time, talent, and treasure be guided by the clamoring voices out there. What would it look like to let it be guided by the voice of God in here?

These are just some of the spiritual stones that God invites us to lay down and mortar with faith in the midst of these calamitous times. It's not an easy matter to do this, of course. As Don Morgan, an eminent pastor who spoke from this pulpit nearly a decade ago, once said, there will be plenty of people who wonder: "What's the use of being a Christian in a world like this?" To which Don replied "I ask you: What's the use of being a Christian in any other sort of world?"²

May it be said that:

*"In the year 2009, when all things sacred
were throughout ye nation
either demolished or profaned,
the people of Christ's Church,
did the best of things
in the worst of times,
and hoped them in the most calamitous."*

¹ Ralph C. Wood, *Contending for the Faith* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2003), 213.

² Donald W. Morgan, *When The World Is At Its Worst*, a sermon delivered on November 18, 2001, First Church of Christ, Wethersfield CT.