

MAIN TEXT: **NEHEMIAH 2:1-18**

COMPANION TEXT: **LUKE 14:27-33; EPHESIANS 5:15-17**

Getting Started

After greeting one another, take a minute or two of silence together and offer an opening prayer.

Opening Question

Describe a time when you had to rebuild a part of your life from scratch.

It doesn't need to be inherently negative:

a graduation, a new job, or a big move are also times for rebuilding.

Do you feel like you had a particular strategy for piecing your life back together, or was it more about figuring things out as you went?

Purpose of This Week's Study

Taking a courageous look at change and loss during this pandemic and seeking God for the vision to move forward together.

INTRODUCTION TO THIS WEEK'S STUDY

This week our sermon text is Nehemiah 2:1-18, where Nehemiah asks the Persian King Artaxerxes if he can go back to his home city of Jerusalem to help rebuild it.

(Jerusalem had been sacked by Babylon in 586 BC and many of its residents exiled.

Then, in 539 BC, the Persians conquered Babylon.)

The King gave Nehemiah the green light to go, and also gave Nehemiah letters and papers that would give weight to Nehemiah's plans, as well as army officers and a cavalry.

Nehemiah didn't tell anyone with him what his plan was. When he got to Jerusalem, he spent time one night examining the broken walls of the city. Only after he had what he needed, and had a bird's eye view of the problem, did he announce his plan and gather a team.

In our LIFEGroups this week, we will be focusing on two different texts that relate to the sermon, Luke 14:27-33, and Ephesians 5:15-17.

- In the first, [Luke 14:27-33] Jesus is teaching the crowds what it means to count the cost and follow him. Just as Nehemiah made plans and surveyed the city before declaring his end goal, Jesus is telling the people to consider the entire vision he is setting before them: to build a life with him is to bury your old life and build something entirely new, which requires foresight and commitment.
- The second text in Ephesians [Ephesians 5:15-15] is straightforward: we are called to be careful and wise in how we live, not spending our lives foolishly.

All three of these texts work together this week to show us that having a framework for our lives, especially in times of rebuilding, is an act of courage. We are called to seek God for an overarching vision for our lives and for the collective life of our community.

NEHEMIAH 2:1-18

V	NIV	MSG
1	In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before,	It was the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king. At the hour for serving wine I brought it in and gave it to the king. I had never been hangdog in his presence before, so he asked me, “Why the long face? You’re not sick are you? Or are you depressed?”
2	so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.” I was very much afraid,	That made me all the more agitated. I said, “Long live the king! And why shouldn’t I be depressed when the city, the city where all my family is buried, is in ruins and the city gates have been reduced to cinders?”
3	but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”	
4	The king said to me, “What is it you want?” Then I prayed to the God of heaven,	The king then asked me, “So what do you want?”
5	and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.”	Praying under my breath to the God-of-Heaven, I said, “If it please the king, and if the king thinks well of me, send me to Judah, to the city where my family is buried, so that I can rebuild it.”
6	Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?” It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.	The king, with the queen sitting alongside him, said, “How long will your work take and when would you expect to return?” I gave him a time, and the king gave his approval to send me.
7	I also said to him, “If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah?”	Then I said, “If it please the king, provide me with letters to the governors across the Euphrates that authorize my travel through to Judah; and also an order to Asaph, keeper of the king’s forest, to supply me with timber for the beams of The Temple fortress, the wall of the city, and the house where I’ll be living.”
8	And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?” And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.	The generous hand of my God was with me in this and the king gave them to me. When I met the governors across The River (the Euphrates) I

9	So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.	showed them the king's letters. The king even sent along a cavalry escort.
10	When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.	When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very upset, angry that anyone would come to look after the interests of the People of Israel.
11	I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days	And so I arrived in Jerusalem. After I had been there three days, I got up in the middle of the night, I and a few men who were with me. I hadn't told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. The only animal with us was the one I was riding.
12	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. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on.	
13	By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal[a] Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire.	Under cover of night I went past the Valley Gate toward the Dragon's Fountain to the Dung Gate looking over the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken through and whose gates had been burned up. I then crossed to the Fountain Gate and headed for the King's Pool but there wasn't enough room for the donkey I was riding to get through. So I went up the valley in the dark continuing my inspection of the wall. I came back in through the Valley Gate. The local officials had no idea where I'd gone or what I was doing—I hadn't breathed a word to the Jews, priests, nobles, local officials, or anyone else who would be working on the job.
14	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;	
15	so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate.	
16	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.	
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."	Then I gave them my report: "Face it: we're in a bad way here. Jerusalem is a wreck; its gates are burned up. Come—let's build the wall of Jerusalem and not live with this disgrace any longer." I told them how God was supporting me and how the king was backing me up.
18	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.	

LUKE 14:27-33

V	NIV	MSG
27	And whoever does not carry their cross and follow me cannot be my disciple.	Anyone who won't shoulder his own cross and follow behind me can't be my disciple.
28	"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?"	"Is there anyone here who, planning to build a new house, doesn't first sit down and figure the cost so you'll know if you can complete it? If you only get the foundation laid and then run out of money, you're going to look pretty foolish. Everyone passing by will poke fun at you: 'He started something he couldn't finish.'
29	For if you lay the foundation and are not able to finish it, everyone who sees it will ridicule you,	
30	saying, 'This person began to build and wasn't able to finish.'	
31	"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?"	"Or can you imagine a king going into battle against another king without first deciding whether it is possible with his ten thousand troops to face the twenty thousand troops of the other? And if he decides he can't, won't he send an emissary and work out a truce?"
32	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.	
33	33 In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples.	"Simply put, if you're not willing to take what is dearest to you, whether plans or people, and kiss it good-bye, you can't be my disciple.

EPHESIANS 5:15-17 (NIV)

V	NIV	MSG
15	Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise,	So watch your step. Use your head. Make the most of every chance you get. These are desperate times!
16	making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.	
17	Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.	Don't live carelessly, unthinkingly. Make sure you understand what the Master wants.

For Reflection & Discussion

- As you read Nehemiah 2
 - What were the things that Nehemiah was afraid of?
 - A little background of the timeline
 - The time between the beginning of Nehemiah 1 [Kislev – late November] and the beginning of Nehemiah 2 [Nisan – late March] is about 4 months.
 - How does this encourage you when the beginning stage of something seem to take a long time?
 - When Nehemiah comes before King Artaxerxes, do you think he intentionally allowed his face to show sadness or could he simply not contain his sorrow?
 - Have you ever dreaded a conversation more than how it actually turned out? Did prayer play a part in the outcome? How?
 - What did Nehemiah ask the king for? Why are these items important?
 - How did others react to Nehemiah coming on the scene (v10)
 - The MSG says *“they were very upset, angry that anyone would come to look after the interests of the People of Israel.”*
 - Why?
 - Does the expectation of opposition stop you from promoting the welfare of others?
 - In the early stages of exploration of the broken city walls, Nehemiah says *“I hadn’t told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem.”* (v12) Why did he keep it a secret?
 - Why did he go out at night?
 - What might have happened if he told his ideas too early?
 - How do you see your passions intersecting with God’s desires?
 - What is one of the reasons Nehemiah gives for rebuilding the walls (v17)? Remember 1:3.
 - Does our heart break for the disgrace of the poor, abused, abandoned and lost?
 - What about those who look like they have it together, but are tormented with shame on the inside?
 - The focus of our study is not rebuilding walls or other physical structures, but about bringing restoration to people who have been knocked down.
 - In Nehemiah’s day, Israel understood God to dwell in a [physical temple.
 - The New Testament says that God dwells where?
See 1 Corinthians 3:16-17; Colossians 1:27
- Read **Luke 14:28, 31**.
 - What does Jesus say is the first thing someone should do before they make a big decision?
 - With that in mind, take a moment to take an inventory of where you are right now: as an individual, family unit, a LIFEGroup, and as a church community.
 - What are the challenges we are facing in each of these different spheres of life?
- Read **Luke 14:33** again.
 - What is Jesus ultimately asking of us?
 - As Christians, being disciples of Jesus is the framework for our lives.
 - Having looked at the challenges we are facing, what would it look like to invite Jesus into all of it?
 - What might he have to say about how we are dealing with these things moving forward?
- In the passage from **Ephesians 5**, we read about our need to be wise and not foolish.
 - Discuss as a group what foolishness would look like in the process of rebuilding.
 - Maybe it would mean planning a big trip to celebrate even though it would put you in debt, or choosing to disengage from the church when we disagree with something.
 - In contrast, what would it look like to rebuild wisely?

For Prayer

- Take some time to be quiet before God and to wait in his presence, and give opportunity for group members to speak out impressions, scriptures, prophetic words and images, etc.
- Also, pray that God would reveal his vision.
- Ask him to help you sort through the clutter of this season and to give you courage and vision as you move into the fall.
- Then take some time to respond in prayer, and to pray for one another.

For Further Reflection & Action Outside of Group

- Spend some extra time in prayer this week asking God to help you “*sit down and estimate*” what the next season will look like – in your life, in OCC’s life, in our city and beyond.
- How do you want to live your life differently as we slowly come out of this pandemic?
- Ask God to reveal how you can be a partner in rebuilding, renewing His church, as well.
 - Is there a need in your LIFEGroup you can fill?
 - Can you serve on a ministry team (i.e., welcoming, children, youth, worship)?
 - Or maybe God’s birthing something new in you?
 - Can you work through a divide that’s been growing between you and someone else?
 - Ask God to help you create a framework for moving forward.