

**Christ Presbyterian Church  
Edina, Minnesota  
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John Crosby  
GRIT | Nehemiah 1:1-6**

You'll see these signs, GRIT, on the walls all around CPC, and on the carpets that are going to be replaced. We want to be reminded of what's going on here. Not just what's going on around the building, but what we believe is going on in our lives. It's easy sometimes when you see a building go up to forget that this is what we were created for. We believe here that there is a God and that God created us in His image. Part of being made in the image of God is that we are to be builders. People—women and men, young and old—are to be builders, and sometimes that means a little hut, sometimes it's a school, sometimes it's a skyscraper, and sometimes it's rebuilding ancient ruins that have fallen down. Sometimes we outgrow something and it needs to be remodeled and made bigger. Sometimes building comes in the reviving of something that has been demolished, whether that's the Twin Towers in New York, or the incredible destruction of Syria, or what's happening now in Texas and Florida. Or maybe it's the brokenness happening at your house, your school, or your job. Something needs to be rebuilt, to be put back together. In some ways, CPC has been waiting for 20 years to remodel. Since we built this it has never been the right time, the right place, to make our facility more useful for reaching out to new people, to create an environment that would help children and grandparents and singles not only feel like they have a place here, but that they could experience the grace and love of God here also. There's so much more to the idea of building than just the structure, and we want to explore that in one of the Biblical stories of a rebuilding project. So, over the next three weeks we're going to look at the story of Nehemiah. Take out a Bible and let's try to find the Book of Nehemiah together. It's in the first half of the Old Testament. I looked through my files because I love the story of Nehemiah and I talked about Nehemiah recently—just 23 years ago—and I believe that now I'm a different person and we're a different church. We need to hear in a fresh way the story of Nehemiah, so let's start it together. Circle or underline these three phrases from Nehemiah 1.

1-2 These are the memoirs of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. It was the month of Kislev in the twentieth year (that means it was like January in the twentieth year of the reign of the emperor of Babylon). I was in the palace complex at Susa.  
[Nehemiah 1:1-2 MSG]

That's in Iraq. And later it is going to say that Nehemiah was there because he was the cupbearer to the king. It's important to understand that the role of the cupbearer is very important. He's basically the food tester. The cupbearer isn't the person that comes out and goes "Oh this is a nice 1948 Chablis. I think you'll appreciate the nose on the wine, let it breathe." No, it goes like this: he brings the red wine, pours it and hands it to the king, and the king hands it back and says, "Why don't you try it first?" Poisoning was common back then. So the cupbearer would take the wine and drink it, and they would

talk for several minutes to make sure he didn't collapse, and then they would eat the meal together, the cupbearer eating the food first. It was an odd relationship, an intimate relationship, and one of the things that happens is that the cupbearer often becomes very close to the king. Who does he trust more in his whole life with his whole life? He was often one of the last people of the day to talk to the king, and through their relationship, the king finds out what real people think because this is a person who will literally risk his life for the king.

1-2. Hanani, one of Nehemiah's brothers, had just arrived from Judah with some fellow Jews. I asked them about the conditions among the Jews who had survived the exile, and about Jerusalem. [Nehemiah 1:1-2 MSG]

What's happened is that they have been crushed. The Israelites have been crushed by the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and the last group destroyed the city. They knocked down the city walls and then took about 10% of the Jews captive and brought them into exile. Now, it's important they didn't take everybody; they only took the top 10%, the young leaders and the current leaders of Israel. They figured if they got rid of the leaders they wouldn't have a problem with revolution. They thought that if they took the leaders back to Babylon and taught them their language and customs, showing them how much better it is there, when they sent them back they would be little Babylonian rulers in Israel. That's Nehemiah. He's one of the lucky one, the exiles.

3 I asked him about the Jews who remained and Hanani told me, "The exile survivors in the province are in bad shape. Conditions are appalling. The wall of Jerusalem is still rubble (it's been like 40 years); the city gates are still cinders."  
4 When I heard this, I sat down and I wept. [Nehemiah 1:3-4]

We're going to talk about what it's like to rebuild a life, rebuild a church, take a next step in a society, and I have to contend it all begins when somebody sits down and his or her heart is broken. When people's hearts are broken, that's when God starts to REBUILD. We're calling this series "Grit." It's a reminder of all the dust that will settle and make things harder at the time, but Grit is also the determination to make something different, to endure. You don't get grit until it becomes personal, whether it's a relationship, or a job, or school, or a church, it has to become personal. "When I heard this, I sat down and I wept." Where is that hitting you?

It's important to realize, just for a second, this is not feeling bad about the news. The news 24/7 is filled with bad stories. It is designed to make you feel bad, and it does a very good job of that. The challenge is that after you've gone through a 24/7 news cycle and you have heard about DACA, and Syria, and Harvey, and Irma, and immigration, and politics, you are ready to kill yourself and everybody around you! It's just terrible! But if everything is bad you become numb, so that's not what Nehemiah is talking about. *When I heard **this**, this one thing, it punctured the shield of all the bad news. It became personal and I wept.*

There was an evangelist missionary who went to Korea right after the Korean war to do

evangelism and instead found himself visiting all the orphanages where the Korean children had been abandoned and it broke his heart. It literally broke his heart. And the way he described it was, “Let my heart be broken by the things that break the heart of God.” He said, “I saw these children through the eyes of God and both God and I wept.” Where does that come, that moment where something pierces the shield? Usually it’s not something you’re looking for, but you have to be open to it. When something breaks your heart, when you sit down and cry, part of you is thinking, “Why doesn’t somebody do something about that?” Like I said, it can’t be every bad thing that happens, but it can’t be nothing. If nothing disturbs you, we need to talk.

There was a businessman in Chicago around the turn of the last century—when a dollar was like 20 dollars—and he walks out onto Michigan Avenue, busy then and busy now. He’s walking and he sees a delivery boy ducking in and out, bringing some food to a rich family. As he watches, the boy gets cut off, knocked to the ground, and his basket goes spilling. The basket was topped off with eggs and all the eggs fall to the sidewalk and break. Well, this is Chicago, not New York. In Chicago people say “Oh, that’s too bad”, and then they walk by. Everybody in Chicago came up the sidewalk and said, “Ohhh, I feel so bad” and then walked by. Well, this man walks up to the scene, sees the little boy trying to put the eggs back together and says, “Oh, I feel so bad!” Then he reaches into his pocket, looks at the crowd and says, “I feel this bad” (with some money in his hands), “I feel this bad. How bad do you feel?” And he puts the money in the boy’s basket. “I feel this bad. How bad do you feel?” What breaks God’s heart breaks our heart and it says it bothers me this much. How much does it bother you?

You guys ever have a quote that just sort of sticks with you? I was reading a manuscript about a month ago and this one quote just killed me. It was by the guy from Chariots of Fire, you remember? Eric Liddell, the runner, who is the fastest guy in the world, but he’s also a Scottish missionary. Well, he turns away from all the fame of winning the Olympics and goes as a missionary to China in the years before World War II. He builds up this big church and does great missionary work, and then in WWI he and many of the missionaries are put into a concentration camp called Shantung. Shantung Compound. The author of the book, *Shantung Compound*, says, “Yeah, and there were all the Protestants” and this guy said, “And all the Protestants, they weren’t worth a damn”. His words not mine. “They weren’t worth a damn because they were judgmental and grumpy—except for Eric Liddell. Wherever Eric went there was a little spot of light.” And the quote I love from Eric Liddell was this. “Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and wreck God’s plans, but God is not helpless among the ruins.” I love that phrase. I want to live that phrase. “God is not helpless among the ruins.” Nehemiah sits down and he weeps, and he senses that God is not helpless among the ruins. So back to our story. Verse 4:

4 Nehemiah says, “I mourned for days” (and we’re going to find out really that it wasn’t just days, it was months). “I mourned for four months and I fasted and I prayed before the God-of-Heaven. [Nehemiah 1:4]

Nehemiah is a second rank figure in the Old Testament. You know there's David, and Moses, and Joseph, and Isaiah, and Jeremiah, all the big figures. The only figure in the Old Testament that nothing bad is said about is Nehemiah and I don't think it's because he was smarter. I don't think it's because he wrote about himself. I think the reason that Nehemiah is portrayed so well is that right from the start and right until the end Nehemiah prays, and prays, and prays again. Here he prays for four months. Dangerous prayers!

For three years now, CPC has started our autumn by saying, we believe there's a God and that somehow God wants to talk to us. The most important thing in your life is if somehow if we can convince you that this God who exists wants to talk to you and wants you to talk to Him. It's the most important thing that we do here. If you get nothing else out, there is a God and God wants to talk to you. So we talked about the prayers of Jesus, talked about the prayers of Moses, and last year we talked about the prayers of Paul. This year it starts with a guy who is telling a story and all he does is pray.

5-6 For days I said: "LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant, let your ear listen and your eyes open to the prayer your servant prays day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. 8 I confess the sins that you said to Moses, 9 'if you return to me and obey you, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, You'll gather them up. Now give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."  
[Nehemiah 1:5-6]

That's prayer number one. Prayer number two could be real fast.

The king said, "What do you want?" So I prayed real quick and I talked.  
[Nehemiah 2:4]

The other prayer can be where you learn to lead others in prayer. Listen to us, God.

"Remember me with favor, God." [Nehemiah 5:19]

God doesn't forget. Nehemiah wants to make sure he's not forgetting. That prayer "Remember me, oh God" is in there five times. He prays when opposition rises up. He prays when the walls are finished. He prays at the beginning, the middle, and the end.

My friend Tom was biking a few years ago and went right over his handlebars. He was wearing a helmet, split the helmet in half, and almost died. I said, "What do you remember?" He said, "Last thing I remember is I'm going over the handlebars and saying, 'Oh God, oh God, oh God, oh God.' I go, "It's not the best prayer, but it's better than some of the alternatives." And yet, in the days and weeks that followed, Tom and I prayed for each other and he is not only healed, he's a better man. Prayer over time changes things. Do you pray over time? If we want to rebuild, we need to weep or we need to pray. Back to the story, okay? It says:

It was the month of Nisan (let's call it May. Starts in January now it's May) 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 sad in his presence before, 2 so he asked me, "Why the long face? You're not sick are you? Are you depressed?" 3 That made me even more upset, and so I spoke up. "Long live the king! Why shouldn't I be depressed when the city where all my family is buried, is in ruins and the city gates have been reduced to cinders?" (There's no defense for Jerusalem) 4 The king asked, "So what do you want?" (Remember the prayer? *Praying real fast under my breath to the God-of-Heaven*), 5 I said, "If it please the king, and if the king thinks well of me, send me to Judah, where my family is buried, so I can rebuild they city." 4 The king, with the queen, said, "How long will your work take and when would you expect to return?" [Nehemiah 2:1-4]

This shows that he's been thinking about what he needs to do because it's a natural thing for the king to go, *ahhh, how long am I going to be without my guy that tells me if I'm going to be poisoned or not?*

I gave him a time, and the king gave his approval to send me. [Nehemiah 2:6]

And the story of rebuilding starts. Rebuilding comes. Grit comes when hearts are broken, and when prayers are made, and when people act. This is the short circuit here. This is the difference between a nice sermon and something that messes with you. A lot of you go, "Oh, it was a great story, it made me feel bad. Oh we prayed together and it's Tuesday and nothing has happened!" We weep, we pray, we don't act.

In a couple of weeks Laura and I are going to be in D.C. at a board meeting and we're going to have dinner with a friend of ours named Gary. Gary was the U.S. Justice Department representative to the Rwanda genocide. A million people. A million people slaughtered with machetes in one month, and his job for the Justice Department for the United Nations was literally to count the bodies. How many children? What tribe? How many mothers? How many fathers? Who was dead and where? And he would go into churches that were filled this high, and schools, and homes. At night he would come home and he couldn't sleep. He was there for six weeks. He comes back home and he can't go home. He stops at a hotel and sits on the edge of his bed all night and finally he starts to cry. He has a profound faith. He started to cry and he said, "God, how could You let that happen? How could you ever let that happen?" And he said it was as if a voice spoke to him saying, "Well, why didn't you stop it?" "Oh God, come on! What are we going to do? We've got to do something." And he said it was as if the voice said, "I agree. Somebody's got to do something. Gary, you're my plan A, I don't have a plan B." Gary quit his job at the Justice Department, came to a bunch of us in different settings, and said, "I'd like to start an organization that would bring justice for the poor, an organization that would stand up against the bullies, and the corrupt officials, and whether it was sex trafficking, or land grabbing, or child labor, we would bring justice. That's how the International Justice Mission was started—because somebody sat on their bed and wept, talked to their God and prayed, and stood up and acted.

Now that's where it usually ends. That's the preacher's story, right? That's the *oh, what a story! That could never happen here!* It happened here this weekend. Last night there was a young man who had had an ugly divorce. He sat with us and he said, "I'm just praying over and over and over because my daughter is afraid of me and I am being denied permission to see her. I'm just praying that I won't be furious and I'm praying that I'll see my little girl", and for years nothing has happened. Years. But he stopped being bitter, he kept trying to reach out to his little girl, and last month I saw a picture of him and his daughter with their arms around each other at graduation. It ain't all better, but he's rebuilding that life. It happens here.

There is a woman, a member of our church, who was coming home from Minneapolis to Edina because her car wasn't working, and she happens to sit next to a lady who told her, "I'm in charge of a local food shelter and food collections are down 40% and it's a month from Christmas." Our member said, "That's terrible. What are you going to do?" The woman said, "I don't know...nothing ." So our member comes into me and says, "What are we going to do?" I said, "I don't know" and that year she put bags onto everybody's car the week before Thanksgiving, and we collected over 400 bags for Thanksgiving Harvest. The next year it was 700, and the year after that it was 1,100, and for years over 1,000 bags. That turned into our Joy of Giving at Christmas and that's going to turn into something else because somebody sat down on a bus and wept and prayed and God built walls.

A young woman in our congregation discovered that she had a brain tumor. She was a person of faith and as the disease went on she said, "I cannot believe how blessed I am. I have this incredible family, I sit in this wonderful church, and anything I want is great. We need to do something for those who don't have my system of support. Last night was the 12, 13, 14<sup>th</sup> year of a fundraiser called Humor for the Tumor. We're not laughing about cancer, we're laughing at it so it does not have power. Millions of dollars are being raised because when she sat and wept and prayed so she wouldn't be bitter, God gave her something to do . . . rebuilding the walls.

Last one, my favorite one. These are all good, but my favorite is this one. There's a doctor here—a physician—he was an elder about 20 years ago, and he was assigned to the children's department. In the children's department—this is almost hard to believe—but in the children's department the hardest people to get volunteers for are 5<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> grade boys. I know it's hard to believe, but somehow middle and senior high kids are not high on the volunteer list. I stunk, but nobody else would volunteer. He goes back the second year and comes in and says, "I've got an idea. This is what I'm going to do. I'll tell them a sports story every week that hooks them, and tie that to a Bible person or character and see if we can make the connection." He got better, and better, and better, and so all of a sudden it was a place that people wanted to have their middle school boys go to on Wednesday nights, and now for the last twenty years, all because he had said, "This is wrong" and God said, "This is you" and he said, "Well, what's next?"

"Circumstances may appear to wreck our lives and God's plans, but God is not helpless

among the ruins.” Nehemiah was sent to the ruins. The person that God uses to rebuild sits down and cries, *Let’s get personal*, kneels down and prays more than one time, stands up and acts, and God rebuilds—houses, careers, churches, relationships. Those who sit and weep, kneel and pray, stand and act, see God at work. That is what we pray happens here.

Lord Jesus, I thank You for the story of Nehemiah, that he wasn’t a tough guy who didn’t care, but when he heard bad news he sat down and cried. I thank You for Nehemiah because he reminds me that I need to pray and keep praying and keep praying. I thank You for Nehemiah because unlike me, he doesn’t come to church, and sing the songs, and feel good and go home. He acted, so he got to see You at work building. Bless my sisters and brothers here. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. And all God’s children said, Amen.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*