

SCRIPTURE:

Nehemiah 1:1-11

SERMON:

This church had its first public worship gathering on Sunday, January 22nd, 2006. That was 17 years ago last Sunday! We turned 17 last week and didn't even celebrate it. We forgot!

It is crazy for me to think about as I look back. I was 26 years old. I didn't have much ministry experience. I'm from Lebanon so it is considered crazy to plant and pastor a church in your hometown. But my heart was burdened by the fact that many of the folks I grew up with and cared about did not have a relationship with Jesus and most of them had walked away from church/Christianity - not because Jesus was boring or unworthy - but because they didn't really understand it. Most of their experiences in a church were boring. They weren't learning anything. It didn't connect to their lives. So they grew up in it and walked away from it. That bothered me, especially as someone whose eyes were opened that it was actually very different. I had tasted and seen that the Lord is good and I wanted others to know it as well.

So I planted a church in my hometown. TJC started on Hwy 109 (in the building beside Interstate Battery), eventually relocated to Mt Juliet at West Elementary, then to the old lighting store by Cumberland, and now to here. We started running after people with the hope of Christ since 2006 and remain passionate and committed to doing that to this day.

But this area has changed a lot since 2006. Wilson County has grown by 30% since 2010. We are the 3rd fastest growing county in the state with over 152K residents as of 2021 census data (so it's more now). The latest data also shows Lebanon is the 4th fastest growing city in the state. The county has nearly 160K residents.

Our church started with about 30 folks who resonated with the idea of taking the life-changing hope of Jesus to this area. We have been pushing 1700 people in weekend

worship on Sunday, which means hundreds more call TJC home. Those who orbit TJC are probably somewhere around 2,500 people.

So what I want to do over the next 5 weeks is share where we are going as a church family. God has blessed our church. In a country where 90% are either plateaued or declining, even worse are the numbers each year closing their doors, we have seen the opposite. I'm going to ask you the same questions I started asking our elders and staff several months ago:

What does God expect of a church like ours that has been blessed by Him in this way?
What is required of those who have been given much?
What are we going to do with what God has put in our hands?

Are we going to pat ourselves on the back and boast? By no means. We can't do that.
Are we going to sit back and play it safe, basking in our blessings, burying our talents so we do risk losing any? By no means. We can't do that.

So what are we going to do? That's what we are going to be answering as a church over the next 5 weeks. If you have your notebook you can take notes each week. Write your name in your notebook so if you leave it we know who to get to. Make an effort to be at each of the next 5 Sundays.

Scripture Exegesis: Nehemiah 1:

When it comes to seeing the condition our society is in spiritually, and the trajectory it is heading on...

Are we blind because we can't see or because we don't want to?

In the 1930's and 1940's, the Nazis in Germany committed ruthless and heinous crimes against millions of Jews. Jews were arrested, imprisoned, and put in camps where they were starved, diseased, and worked until death. Many were shot. Many were burned alive. It is one of the most disturbing events in human history. One of the great questions that many have asked over the years is: did the German people know what was happening? The question attempts to get to the heart of whether or not they knew and did nothing about it. Most scholars believe that while some may have known, the vast majority did not. In fact, the Nazi officials purposely sent out propaganda about where the Jews were and what was going on, to appease the minds of its citizens, who honestly didn't want to know. When the Americans began to advance and the war began to swing

towards the Allies, camps were discovered and the horrors of Hitler and Nazi Germany were exposed. But the Allies didn't stop there, they went into the cities, usually a few miles from the camps, and made citizens walk through the camps to visually see and absorb the reality of what had happened in their backyard.

Reality was revealed to these citizens about the horrors committed by their country. They knew something bad was going on, but they didn't want to know the extent of it, they didn't want to see it. They didn't want to truly know what reality was.

Are we blind because we can't see or because we don't want to?

I believe we are very similar in many ways. You and I know serious problems exist around us. We see the direction of the culture. We feel the foundations of truth slipping away. We sense the chaos that follows throwing off God's boundaries. We see the culture devouring our kids and students, confusing them on issues of sexuality and gender. And for many churches, if not most, they choose to stay blinded. They choose to bury their head in the sand, crossing their fingers that the gospel will go forward, their kids will persevere, and that the world gets better. Friends, that's not how it works.

We are beginning a series today called: **ARISE**. We are going to be looking at the need around us and be challenged about our willingness to be inconvenienced and shaken up over it. We will be using the story and the book of Nehemiah as our guide, and simultaneously outlining how we as church believe God is leading us to act.

Book Summary:

The book of Nehemiah is a story about a man who sees and learns of the condition of his city and his people, and is wrecked over it. This sets into motion his resolve to do something about it. Let me give you the BIG PICTURE background of where the book of Nehemiah falls within the greater storyline of Scripture.

Creation - Fall - Israel (slavery, exodus, promised land, kings, two kingdoms, exile) - 400 years prior to the coming of Jesus.

Specifically, here is what was happening as we approach Nehemiah. Our text this morning is where Nehemiah learns of the condition of Jerusalem happened in 445-444 BC. Over a century before this took place, King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon invaded and captured Israel (598 BC), destroyed the Temple built by Solomon, and sent many Jews

into exile (story of Daniel). But 50 years later, King Cyrus of Persia overthrew the Babylonians and took control of the vast empire. And as we see in the book of Ezra, allowed a wave of exiled Jews to return to their native land. Ezra himself returns to Jerusalem in 458 BC, just 13 years prior to Nehemiah receiving word of the condition of his homeland. Now Nehemiah himself, as we will see, is the cupbearer of the new king of Persia, Artaxerxes - the son of Xerxes (the bad guy in 300 movie). Nehemiah is in the capital of Persia, Susa, which is in modern day Iran.

1. We need our hearts broken over the conditions of the world.

1 The words of aNehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in dSusa the citadel, 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. 3 And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. gThe wall of Jerusalem is broken down, hand its gates are destroyed by fire."

So Nehemiah begins by telling us that in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes, while he was in Susa the capital, Hanani, a Jew, came with certain men from Judah. And Nehemiah asks them a question: how are my people who returned back home and how is the city? The answer they gave him was that the remnant there was in great trouble and shame, and that the wall of Jerusalem was broken down and its gates destroyed by fire.

Nehemiah has reality revealed. I want you to notice that Nehemiah asks. He wants to know what is going on. He was not content to ignore reality. He had a suspicion that things were not good, but he was not okay with being in the dark about it. I believe there is a serious parallel to Nehemiah's story and to us today. We live in a world where the conditions are not good. Daily in the news and in our entertainment, we are reminded of the godlessness that pervades our culture and society.

But what we need is not to focus on social problems we need to fix. You don't need to hear about why we should tackle hunger or homelessness, though those things matter, but what we need to become hungry and desperate for is a spiritual awakening. We need a move of God to come upon our land. If we experienced a spiritual awakening in our cities, it would be followed by a social awakening. Introduce people to Jesus and you'll find people who want to meet needs around them. Like Nehemiah, we need to get

out of our bubbles of complacency and safety, and begin to take some risks with our faith. We need to have our eyes opened to what is really the condition of people around us.

I want you to notice that Nehemiah first asks about the people, then the city. The report went on to say that the remnants preserved in the city were in great trouble and shame. Friends, we live in a nation spiritually destroyed. We who are true followers of Christ are a remnant. There are people all around us that are facing a Christless eternity. They don't know the Lord. We have churches dying all around us or just surviving.

Do we even realize this is true? We need a sobering dose of reality. Things are not well.

Are we blind because we can't see or because we don't want to?

2. Prayer precedes movements of God

4 As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

As terrible as these things I previously mentioned are, they are only temporary issues, there is still something much worse...men and women within reach of the gospel who perish in their sins and suffer eternal condemnation in hell is an even more devastating reality.

Every person you see will spend eternity somewhere

Nehemiah's response to what he hears can be summed up in one word: **broken**. Nehemiah was broken over the condition of the people and his city. When he heard these words he sat down and wept and mourned for days. This was no small, temporary sadness. He wasn't shaken up for a moment and then returned to normal. Nehemiah was devastated. He wept and mourned for days. He grieved for the people and city. He grieved over what it meant.

Here's my question for all of us: What will it take to break our hearts over the fate of people's eternities? How bad do things have to get in the culture before we say "enough, something has to change!"?

There is a reason why we cannot remain apathetic towards the spiritual condition people are in. There is a reason why lost people need to matter to us. Unlike the short-term nature of pain and devastation in this life, if people perish and die in their sin, they will experience an eternity of condemnation that will never be quenched or relieved. The worst pain and hardship imaginable on earth is not even a comparison to the tortures of hell. We must make rescuing people from eternal damnation a higher priority than relieving temporary problems. We also must recognize the conditions of our world and get serious about building people up that can withstand these pressures and forces. But how will this happen? What is going to be an important factor in this becoming reality and not just a dream or a hope? One of the ways, massively important, is Prayer. Powerful prayer precedes any mighty movement of God

Welsh revival: In 1904/1905, over 150,000 were converted and joined churches throughout Wales. A great revival swept the land. Like our cities today, the culture was one of gross sin. Destructive things were celebrated and laughed about. But a movement of God broke out. And it literally changed a nation. Families were restored. Crime almost became non-existent. What happened? There was a movement of fervent prayer that precedes a mighty movement of God.

Charles Spurgeon is known as the Prince of Preachers. He pastored in London during the 1800's. He pastored what was the largest church in the world at that time, anywhere from 6,000-10,000 people. His sermons were transcribed and sent all over the world. Spurgeon's sermons were read by millions in a day where news traveled slowly. To say God blessed this man and his church would be an understatement. Though he was known as a great preacher. Spurgeon would acknowledge and insist that the reason for what his church had experienced was the prayers of the people. When visitors would come to the church, Spurgeon would take them to the basement which served as a prayer-room. He would then look at the guests and say, "Here is the powerhouse of this church." Spurgeon is quoted as saying: "A prayerful Church is a powerful Church." Powerful prayer precedes any mighty movement of God

When we look at Scripture, we find prayer as leading the way before major things begin to happen and transpire.

**The Gibeonite deception (Joshua 9)

**Gideon defeats 120,000 with 300 (Judges 6-8)

**David becomes king (2 Samuel 7)

**Elijah calls fire down on altar (1 Kings 18)

**Jesus raises Lazarus (John 11)

**Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matthew 26)

So how badly do we want to see lost people saved and saved people experiencing the fullness of life found only in Jesus? What does our prayer lives individually and as a church look like? Do we have faith that will move the heart of God?

3. Our prayers should be filled with humility, confession, and trust in His promises.

Before Nehemiah launches into action, he launches into prayer.

5 And I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. 7 We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. 8 Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, 9 but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.

outline of Nehemiah's prayer:

- Nehemiah begins by begging God to hear him (vs 5-6)
- he prays for, and on behalf of, the people (vs 6-7)
- he confesses the sins of the people, including his own (vs 6-7)
- he pleads for God to remember his promises (vs 8-9)

Humility -- recognizing that we need God and cannot do anything on our own. We have desires of what we want to see happen, and we believe they are things they God approves of and delights in, but we must humble ourselves and seek dependence upon the Lord.

Confession -- we are imperfect people seeking to do godly things. We need to confess our own shortcomings and imperfections, lest pride and deception creep in. We want our hearts pure before the Lord.

Trust in His promises -- God has committed Himself to His Word and promises. Where He speaks we want to believe and act. God is able to more than all we can think, ask, or imagine. Revival in our cities, culture, and world are not beyond Him. Strength as we go. Blessing and favor as we work. These are things that He has promised as we seek Him.

ARISE layout:

Over the years, many of you have discovered the hope found in Jesus Christ since coming to TJC. Not only have you discovered it, but many of you have also witnessed others discover it too. You've grown spiritually and found yourself involved in helping others grow. There is absolutely nothing better than seeing this happen. But there is a great need in our world for more of it to happen.

We are embarking on the most important season of our church's history. I can confidently say that because I've been here for every single one of those years. We're going to be: **Building buildings and parking** (increased discipleship and reaching capacity), **starting a Christian private school** (we don't have tons of details, but it's increasingly clear that it is a need not just as an alternative to public school, but also for families who can't homeschool), **church planting and revitalization** (locally), **full-time missionaries on the ground, pastor training and development, increased discipleship and leadership development**, and more.

This ARISE initiative is the vehicle for what we are calling our **Build Up and Send Out** vision. What we mean by that is that our focus builds up the body into maturity so that you can be effective in the home, workplace, here at church, in new churches or restarts, or on the mission field. Everyone has a "send out" posture because we're Christians. But we want to "build up" everyone to be strong in the faith.

Why this? Why now?

- We have a responsibility. God has blessed us, and with that comes a responsibility. We can't sit on it. There's a stewardship issue at hand. I shared about the growth of our area. Most of the people moving here are not in a life-changing relationship with Jesus.
- Our world is desperate for healthy Christians and healthy churches to act. We need to rescue our kids from the culture's grip. We need Christians equipped to speak truth without wavering.

- For those who would say, “I don’t like it when churches talk about money.” First off, the next five weeks are not about money. It’s about what God is calling us to, how we can do it, and what it’s going to take to get there.
- If you are newer here or have only been coming the last couple of years, we want you to engage and join those who have been here longer and participate in the work of building the kingdom. If you have been here a while, and are already engaged, let God challenge you again. Re-evaluate whether you are following Him, trusting Him, and living for His kingdom.

Our primary goal in this is **100% participation** from everyone who calls TJC home. That is our primary goal. The reason for that is we know that each one of us participating, stretching ourselves, exhibiting trust, sacrificing, and giving ourselves to the work of seeing the gospel go forth will make a massive impact on the faith and maturity of our church. That is the primary goal.

The secondary goal is to raise the money needed for accomplishing these initiatives. If someone came up and wrote a check for the entire amount needed over the next two years, would we still do the initiative because even though the check would meet our financial number, it would not achieve our primary goal, which is 100% participation. We are asking everyone to join in playing a part.

My experience over the years: the people who have honestly sought the will of God about this part of their lives don’t mind when we talk about it. It’s not offensive or intrusive at all.

Illustration: Two guys are supposed to be digging a ditch. One is actually doing and the other one is sitting on the sideline drinking lemonade. The foreman hollers out, “You guys get back to work.” The one actually working doesn’t object, instead he’s like, “Thank you, I’ve been down here digging by myself.” It is the one who isn’t digging that’s more likely to get offended.

I get that it is not comfortable for you for me to stand up here and ask you to sacrifice. It’s not comfortable for you. It’s not comfortable for me. But listen, Jesus said if you want to come after me you have to pick up your cross daily. It’s not something you do one time. Paul said we are to offer ourselves as living sacrifices. Here’s the thing about sacrifices: they are usually dead. So if you are a living sacrifice the constant temptation is to get off the altar. We try to angle our lives towards the pursuit of comfort. We have to keep calling

ourselves to sacrifice. We have to recognize that what God has given us has been placed in our hands as a stewardship.

TJC, I believe that what we're about to go through will change us as a church. It is not only going to extend our impact in reaching our community, but also change us as people.

ARISE Book:

- The GUIDEBOOK is a resource for the entire ARISE Initiative - USE IT to understand the scope of the initiative - USE the prayer guide - ASK questions.
- The lobby has been transformed to communicate the purpose of the ARISE initiative - and give you an idea of the planned capacity building.
- There is a Q&A area where Matt Espenshade will be located to answer questions in between services - He will also be available on Wednesday nights or by email to provide clarity on the initiative.
- There are **commitment cards** on the seat backs in front of you. We will be filling these out on February 26th - you can also make a commitment at any time before that. We will celebrate the commitments you have made to this vision on March 19th!

Are you willing to pray for the next several weeks: **“God, what part do you want me to play in Building Up and Sending Out?”**

God has blessed our church in incredible ways over the last several years. But we can't play it safe. There are things to do because what is happening here is the exception and not the rule. We have a role to play in reaching people, locally and around the world. We have a role to play in the formation of kids and students to live for Christ their whole lives. We have a role to play in helping produce more healthy churches so we can get more people in the fight. We're going to Build Up and Send Out, so Christ will be shown as Incomparably Glorious. We're going to ARISE to build.

REVIEW:

- ❖ How did Nehemiah respond after hearing the news of the wall being broken down in Jerusalem (1:4)?
- ❖ Why did he respond this way?
- ❖ What are the main components of Nehemiah's prayer in 1:5-11? What can we learn from it?

REFLECT:

- ❖ Have you ever helped build something?
- ❖ What aspects of the world today cause you to mourn like Nehemiah?

RESPOND:

- ❖ What part will your role be in Building Up & Sending Out?
- ❖ What might hold you back from being 100% committed to ARISE?

MEDITATE:

- ❖ Nehemiah 1:5-6 - *5 And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it." 6 And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time.*

MEMORIZE:

- ❖ John 14:12 - *"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father.*

PRAYER FOCUS:

- ❖ Pastor - **Erik Reed**
- ❖ Ministry - Pray that God will move the hearts of everyone at TJC to join Arise and be Built Up in order to be Sent Out into the world to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ.
- ❖ NAMB Church Planter - Josh Rosentreter - Bexley, OH - Redemption Hill Church
- ❖ IMB Partners - Brady & Julie Plunk - Middle East
- ❖ Unreached People Group (UPG): Alagwa in Tanzania
 - Population: 62,000
 - Christian: 0,02%
 - Evangelical: 0.02%
 - Primary Religion: Islam
 - Primary Language: Alagwa
 - Status: **Unreached**