

LET US RISE UP AND BUILD

Nehemiah 2:9-20

Some books like some people have exceptional impact on one's life. I suppose it is as much a function of the moment as it is a function of the message. For me the moment came in the latter part of my teenage years. The message was to do something significant with my life. The book was Jim Elliot's biography, *SHADOW OF THE ALMIGHTY*.

Jim Elliot was a young man who committed himself to do whatever God wanted him to do in life. His God-given vision was to reach the Auca Indians of Ecuador, a group of primitive people who were untouched by western civilization and totally unaware of the name of Jesus Christ or his gospel.

Jim and four colleagues landed a small plane on the river's edge near an Auca village where they had been dropping gifts. They hung hammocks thirty-five feet off the jungle floor. And they waited to make contact with those primitive naked people who needed to hear about Jesus Christ.

Betty Elliot finishes her 27-year old husband's biography with these words:

Suffice it to say that on Friday the thrill of Jim's life was given. He took an Auca by the hand. At last the twain met. Five American men, three naked savages.

Two days later, on January 8, 1956, the men for whom Jim Elliot had prayed for six years killed him and his four companions.

It was a high price, five lives. Yet their deaths eventually brought eternal life to the Auca Indians. They came to know Jesus Christ as Savior.

Nate Saint was one of the five martyred men. He was the pilot of the single engine aircraft. Years earlier he had written, "I'd rather be dead . . . than live a life of obscure ease in so sick a world."

Let's face it, we live rather easy lives in this very sick world. Yet there are those times when we really want to do something significant with our lives. We want to make some lasting contribution. We want to do something great for God.

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The last half of Nehemiah 2 is a wonderful place to look when we seek to satisfy those yearnings for significance. There Nehemiah gives to us the ingredients for doing something great for God.

Leading his list in verse 12 is the first of those ingredients, and that is vision. It was Robert Kennedy who said, “Some people look at the way things are and ask why; others look at the way things might be and ask why not?” That's vision.

Nehemiah was that kind of a man of vision. He looked at the city of Jerusalem with all of its rubble, its broken gates, its devastated temple, and asked, “why not?” He saw the city with crumbled walls rebuilt, with discouraged people uplifted, with forsaken worship restored. He was a man of vision whose life was consumed with “what God has put into my heart to do for Jerusalem.”

For ninety years the city of Jerusalem had laid in waste. But persons of vision don't look at yesterday. They look at tomorrow. They see things others cannot see and they will not be convinced that their vision will not happen.

Such exciting thoughts! Except most of us are neither Kennedys nor Nehemiahs. Few if any of us are the originators of any great visions of what might be. Frankly I am sometimes turned off by the abundant examples of other people's successes. I don't see myself as any world-class visionary. I don't expect to ever be featured on Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. I don't identify with President Harry Truman's desk motto that said The Buck Stops Here. In fact, I've thought of getting a sign for my desk that says, “The buck doesn't even come by here.”

But none of this means that we cannot share in something great, for it is possible for us to share in the great vision of someone else. Actually, that's what Nehemiah did. It was not his own vision. He was very candid in explaining that it was a vision that God himself had put into his heart. In fact, the purest ingredient of vision for doing something great in life is vision from God! When our vision is God-originated we are certain to be on the threshold of significance.

Nehemiah prayed about his problem for four months and God gave him a vision for doing something great. **Want to do something great? Then ask God for his vision! Don't settle for some second best human-made substitute.** Don't settle for a life of

obscure ease in a sick world. Dream dreams. Think big. Open your heart for the vision God wants to put inside it.

But vision without reality usually makes for disillusionment. In fact, the most practical test of vision is often its relationship to reality.

I have often talked with unrealistic visionaries. They are individuals who insist on living in closed systems of their private imagination. It is the student who thinks he can achieve some form of perpetual motion but refuses to do homework for his Physics class. It is the investor who is certain he can beat the system and make millions in stocks or commodities but is unwilling to address market realities. It is the divorcee who is convinced that the marriage will be reconciled but refuses to deal with the facts.

Nehemiah was no such unrealistic visionary. This guy did his research. He gathered the facts. He made a first-hand inspection. He knew the problems better than anyone else. Listen to what he writes in verses 11 through 16:

I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days, I set out during the night with a few men. 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.

By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. 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; so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. 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.

The situation was really sad! Reality was that the once thick and impregnable gates of the city of Jerusalem had been burned to ashes. The once magnificent terraces down the side of the Kidron Valley had all collapsed. The rubble was so great that his donkey couldn't even walk and Nehemiah had to go on foot.

Reality was that he was in this vision alone. Nobody else knew about it. It was between himself and God. And there was danger that when they found out about his vision, they were more likely to oppose him than support him.

If you want to do something great for God, be a realist! Don't just manufacture some far-fetched dreams. Get out there and do the research. Face the facts. Know the problems better than anyone else.

Reality isn't bad! God is a God of reality. In fact, his miracles look all the better when displayed against the dark backdrop of the problems they have overcome.

Reality isn't bad and reality isn't pessimistic. At least not when you are talking in terms of God. Look how Nehemiah 2:16 ends: “. . . 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.” He hadn't even told them his vision and he was already counting on them to do the work!

Which leads to the third ingredient in his recipe for greatness. It is the ingredient of motivation and Nehemiah was a master motivator. He gathered all the people of Jerusalem together and motivated them with these words in verse 17:

“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.”

Nehemiah recognized one of the great principles of motivation: *a satisfied need never motivates anyone*. Their city was a wreck and they were suffering disgrace. It was uncomfortable and humiliating to have the city in such ruins and so he motivated them with their dissatisfaction.

You must be dissatisfied to be motivated. In fact, if you are completely satisfied and feel all your needs are met you'll never do anything - - - you won't even get out of bed in the morning!

TV advertising is based on motivation by dissatisfaction. Recently we were watching a sporting event on television when a Domino's Pizza ad came on. They were offering two medium-size pizzas for \$8. Up until then I wasn't even thinking of pizza. I saw it and was dissatisfied. I wanted pizza. I wanted the bargain of two for \$8. (Two medium-size pizzas for our family is like offering a nightcrawler to a school of beluga

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whales!) We ended up ordering four pizzas with pepperoni and sausage and spending \$20.

The same principle works in all different areas of life. Talk to a couple that needs marriage counseling. If a husband or wife is satisfied with the way things are they won't be motivated to get help. It's true for health; it's true for jobs; it's true for school; it's true for our spiritual lives. We have to be dissatisfied enough with the way things are in order to be motivated to do something about it.

But there's another important lesson to learn in all of this. It is the lesson that dissatisfaction in life is not all bad. **Those who are dissatisfied with their lives or jobs or godliness are the ones who can be motivated to change . . . to be and do something great for God. May God protect us from satisfaction!!!**

Dissatisfaction is what motivates. It worked in Nehemiah's time and it works in our time as well. Except that the motivation of dissatisfaction is not enough. There needs to be the fourth ingredient of encouragement. The reason for this is that big problems may motivate us but they also discourage us. Just ask anyone who is sick or poor or desperate. They are highly motivated to change but often overwhelmed and discouraged. They need encouragement if they are really going to do something significant with their lives.

Seeing the need for encouragement Nehemiah adds in verse 18: "I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me."

Nehemiah forced them to see the size of their problems in order to motivate them. Then he forced them to see the size of God to encourage them! **When God's hand is at work, every problem becomes manageable.** When God is there, nothing is impossible.

You know the ad that says, "You're in good hands with Allstate"? That's a clever promotion from some advertising agency. But when you hear, "You're in good hands with God Almighty", that's a profound truth that will revolutionize your life. This isn't Nehemiah's private promise. Be encouraged! It's our promise as well. If you are a Christian you are in God's hands. Jesus says, "I am with you always, even to the end of the world." He promises, "I will never leave you nor forsake you."

I don't know what you are up against, but be encouraged. Even though there was that fight at home. Even though there's that bill to pay or that accident to the car or that diagnosis you haven't told anyone about yet. Even though there's an addiction in your body that you don't think you can escape. Be encouraged. Be encouraged because the hand of your God is on you for good. And his hand is far greater than any problem.

Now, one final ingredient for doing something great, and that's problems. This whole section is surrounded with problems. The story begins and ends with problems, displeasure, criticism, innuendo and accusations. Listen to verses 9 and 10 that precede this section of the story and verses 19 and 20 that end it. Nehemiah says:

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.

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.

But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official and Gesham the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this thing you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?"

I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

These problems came from important and powerful people. Sanballat was the governor of all of Samaria. Tobiah was some type of civil servant. Gesham was the king of Kedar, an expansive desert kingdom.

Nehemiah could have crumbled under such pressure. Problems can often break us down. Or Nehemiah could have become defensive. He had royal orders. But, he did neither. Instead Nehemiah simply and directly declared in verse 20, "The God of heaven will give us success."

Just as problems were inevitable for Nehemiah they are inevitable for us as well. Problems are like bookends on the shelves of vision. Problems begin and end every day.

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The difference is not so much in the problems we face as in the responses we give.

Those who want to be and do something great for God do not crumble, complain or become defensive. They use problems as an opportunity to testify to the God of heaven who “will give us success.”

Vision. Reality. Motivation. Encouragement. Problems. This was Nehemiah's recipe for being and doing something great for God.

Did you notice that we skipped the people's response to all this in verse 18? They responded to the divine vision that Nehemiah spoke by replying, “Let us start rebuilding.” I like that. In fact, I think that's what we all ought to say to God when we face the problems and difficulties of life: “Let us start rebuilding!”