

Rising From The Ashes
Nehemiah 1:1-11
Trey Davis
Ridge Road Baptist Church, Raleigh
January 23, 2022

Fourth grade. Our teacher, Mrs. Burnette, is trying to explain to us the difference between a physical change and a chemical change. The explanation offered to a classroom of knucklehead ten-year-olds is that a physical change doesn't really alter the makeup of the thing being changed, but a chemical change does. We stare at Mrs. Burnette—who, for the record, was an excellent teacher—with slack jaws and vacant eyes. Patiently, she continues, telling us to think about it this way: with a physical change, you could kind of go back to the original state, but you can't do that with a chemical change. She explains that freezing ice cubes in a tray is a physical change, because if the tray gets left out on the kitchen counter, it'll go back to water. Likewise, she tells us that burning logs in a campfire is a chemical change, because once they're ash, the logs can't go back to being logs. They'll always be ash.

To further strike the point home, she has each of us do an art project where we illustrate one of these changes. She tells us she'll assign each of us a different change, we're supposed to cut pieces of construction paper to form images of the before-and-after of that change, and then we label it as either "physical" or "chemical."

I won't speak for the rest of the class, but I wanted—badly—to be assigned a chemical change. They were so much cooler. Most of the physical changes were things like "crumpling up paper" or "chopping wood." Those didn't make for interesting art projects. Physical changes were, however, a lot easier to brainstorm, and it felt like approximately 95% of the class ended up with physical changes. Mine was "cutting up carrots into carrot sticks." Do you know what it looks like when a 4th-grader tries to make "carrot sticks" out of orange construction paper? It looks like scraps of orange construction paper. In the end, the girl who got "logs into ashes" was the best artist in the class, she blew the assignment out of the water, and I still remember the project vividly and retain a marginally respectable understanding of the difference between physical and chemical changes, so Mrs. Burnette clearly knew what she was doing.

Still, there is something about a chemical change that is mesmerizing for the human spirit. The creation of something new and different out of materials that seem fixed and yet are somehow transmuted, not just the shift of form but the alchemy of life captivates and entrances us.

* * *

Perhaps this is why the mythological creature of the phoenix is so fascinating. Again, as a child, I remember learning about other mythological creatures, and they just seemed like slight adaptations of existing animals. Dragons were really big lizards that breathed fire; the leviathan was a giant sea serpent; unicorns were horses with horns. They were all easy to envision. They were all, scientifically speaking, physically changed animals.

But the phoenix—the bird that would combust and settle into ashes, then rise back up from those ashes and find new life, regenerated, reborn—the phoenix defied the science that Mrs. Burnette taught me. A horse *might* be able to grow something that resembles a horn, but those ashes are supposed to stay ashes. But the mythological phoenix defies the science of chemical changes. It is a bird beyond belief.

* * *

Today we start a new (now abbreviated) series grounded in the book of Nehemiah (which, it may surprise you to learn, does not feature any phoenixes). The story told in Nehemiah is one of the more overlooked parts of the Old Testament, but it includes several valuable truths that are particularly relevant for us at the start of a new year and in the current social climate. When the book begins, Nehemiah is an Israelite living in exile. Although he is separated from his homeland, he is living a relatively good life as a member of the king's court. He is specifically serving as the king's cupbearer, a role with significant influence and reward.¹ He refers to his situation as "captivity," but there are undoubtedly other captives who look on his life with envy.

When his brother arrives, Nehemiah asks for a report from home and learns that things back in Jerusalem aren't going very well. The surviving Israelites who remain there are barely scraping by, and the city itself is also literally falling apart: "the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire."²

In other words, the city of Jerusalem—the city that the Israelites made their home, their capital after being led to the Promised Land, the city that represents their nation, their struggle, and their relationship with Yahweh—this city is crumbling. It is going under, and the people who are capable of rebuilding it are trapped in a foreign country serving wine.

* * *

Last August, there was yet another school shooting, this one here in North Carolina, in Wilmington. I have to admit that, while I followed the story, it didn't really seize me. It's terrible, but there have been a lot of school shootings over the past couple of decades, and some stories captivate us and move us more than others do. I doubt anyone has the energy to invest fully in every one that comes along...which, again, is possibly the saddest thing of all about this issue.

Two days later, however, there was another North Carolina school shooting, and this one I followed fervently. I had the news streaming on my computer while I worked, I stopped and prayed repeatedly throughout the day, and I continued to search for updates about what exactly had happened in the weeks (even months) that followed. This tragedy gripped me tight and wouldn't let go...because this one happened in my hometown, at my alma mater.

I obviously no longer live in Winston-Salem, my teachers have retired, and my friends and family largely reside in different school districts now. But that's still *my* high school, and the thought of the safety of those walls being breached was and is disturbing to me. There are certain places in our lives that are more than just places; they are pieces of us that hold power and meaning in their bricks and mortar.

Jerusalem is a place like this for Nehemiah. When he learns that the city walls have fallen, he feels his own soul, his essence, also descending downward. He is distraught with grief, with sadness, perhaps with a little fear, and with a weirdly nostalgic pain. He is grieving the loss not only of the current state of Jerusalem but also of his past. The grief strikes him down, leading him to fast and to mourn and to weep, crumbled like the city of Jerusalem itself.

¹ Brady Whitehead Jr., *Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther; Basic Bible Commentary; Volume 8* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1988), 59.

² Nehemiah 1:3, NRSV

He is, in this moment, not unlike many other biblical characters who find themselves crippled by mourning. He is Job, sitting on an ash heap and bewailing his loss. He is Jonah in the belly of the fish. He is Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus. These men are enveloped by the circumstances that surround them, they weep, and—perhaps most significantly—they pray.

* * *

Nehemiah's prayer is preserved for us, the bulk of the scripture that we read this morning. This is not an instructional prayer—it's not saying "here's how you should come to God" the way that Jesus does with the Lord's Prayer in Matthew—but the way that Nehemiah prays remains helpful for contemplating how we approach God, particularly during times of tribulation.

His prayer begins with an acknowledgement of God. So often our prayers jump right in with our own concerns or celebrations, but Nehemiah spends a sentence or two recognizing that God is impressive and loving, that God's covenant is strong and steadfast. Nehemiah has a lot on his mind at this point—he's several days into a time of mourning, he's got his duties as the cupbearer to uphold, and (as the rest of the book will tell us) he's got a plan to set into motion. We would understand if his petition started by addressing one of these things...but it doesn't. Nehemiah starts with God.

He follows this acknowledgement with a confession, laying the sins of Israel and of himself at the feet of God. This is interesting, because Nehemiah seems like a pretty solid guy prior to this: unlike many Old Testament characters, we haven't seen him worshiping idols or disobeying God's orders or succumbing to a Delilah or making any number of the other dubious decisions that populate the Old Testament. Nehemiah is a faithful and dutiful man checking in on Jerusalem...but his prayer includes (fairly close to the top) a sincere and dedicated confession.

The result of these two points—the acknowledgement of God's magnitude and the confession of sin—is that Nehemiah approaches this prayer from a soundly humble place. He is keenly aware of his station in the world. He is a cupbearer, not a king; he is a worshiper, not a god. This awareness is critical to how his prayer unfolds.

It's critical because the rest of the prayer is a sneaky insistence that God might grant him success in maneuvering a king into letting captives go. Nehemiah would have known well the story of Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt. He knows that the prospects for convincing a king to release captives aren't great. But he is determined to take this endeavor on, to gather his compatriots together and return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city that he believes God has promised to his people.

This is Nehemiah's prayer: "God, you are great. I am not. But I am going to take action even though I am not, and I pray that you will lend me some of your greatness and help me to succeed, because I believe that you want me to take this action."

Notably absent from his prayer is an expression of grief. Nehemiah does not lash out in anger, he does not tear his clothes in sorrow, he does not point fingers and blame others for his situation. He does not try to make a deal with God, to bargain his way out of his despair. Surely he is feeling at least some of these things, because the scriptures tell us that he is grieving deeply, but his prayer does not show us this side of him.

It's not that his grief isn't important—clearly it is, or we wouldn't have verse four, where Nehemiah tells us that he “mourned for days.” We have an entire book of the Old Testament, Lamentations, that is essentially nothing but an expression of grief. Grief is a worthy and important focus, but it is not the focus of Nehemiah. Nehemiah certainly isn't about wallowing in anguish. He isn't even about acknowledging or processing grief. He is about taking action.

* * *

The celebration at the end of 2020 was unlike any New Year's Eve I can remember. There was a lot of unmitigated joy to be turning the calendar page over—exhaustion, certainly, but definitely a “don't let the door hit you on the way out, 2020” exuberance as well. The year had beat us up pretty good in a number of different ways, but we believed that the new year held a lot of promise.

When I watched the 2021 ball drop on New Year's Eve a few weeks ago, the exuberance seemed to be missing. The optimism or the hope that the new year would be markedly better than the old one was harder to seize. It was a very strange feeling, acknowledging that this year had indeed been better than the last but that we didn't really feel like celebrating it. As a nation, we were too tired or jaded to insist that 2022 would be a collective improvement over 2021. My guess is that most of us have experienced this in our personal lives as well, in more individual ways. We are currently living in the ashes—not in the fire of 2020 but in the ashes of 2021, the grey soot that covers and smothers and leaves everything feeling...well, icky. There's not a lot of promise in the ashes.

That is where Nehemiah finds himself, in the icky of the ashes, in the world of a 2022 that still feels like 2021.

What he does, then, is even more remarkable. He brushes himself off and approaches an awe-inspiring God. He then approaches the king and manipulates him, coercing and brown-nosing until the king allows him to return to Judah and to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The task itself is not exactly an easy one—he has to rally the troops, overcome naysayers within his nation, and ward off outside attacks—but simply getting up out of the ashes might be Nehemiah's greatest feat of all.

* * *

Nehemiah experiences two things when he learns that Jerusalem is in bad shape. He experiences a deep and profound grief, one that scuttles him and sends him into a lengthy period of mourning. But he also sees, pretty much at the exact same time, an opportunity. He knows that the fallen wall is a chance to create something stronger or more impressive. It is an opportunity to rally the people living in Judah, the survivors in “great trouble and shame” and to give them something positive to restore them. He recognizes the opportunity to offer them something literally and figuratively edifying.

He grips both the grief and the opportunity at the same moment. He does not push down and ignore the grief, and he does not allow his sadness to prevent him from moving forward. Because he is able to do this, he—and, spoiler alert, all of Jerusalem—rise from the ashes like a phoenix.

* * *

I originally wrote this sermon to be delivered a couple of weeks ago, and when I did, it had a different ending. Since then, our family has experienced day after day that reminds us of the ashes. Between Covid and the weather, our kids have yet to have a normal week of school in 2022; one day, we got them all delivered to school only to receive a text half an hour later that the heat in the school had gone out and everyone was being sent home. That's the kind of year that 2022 has been for us (and, I think, for many, many people). Not awful, just not full of awe. We are, in 2022, ash-covered rubble. For now.

There is no denying that our world has been changed over the past couple of years, that *we* have been changed as well. In many ways, the changes we have lived through are like the chemical changes Mrs. Burnette taught me about: our essences have changed, not just our forms, and it feels like those essences aren't going back.

But, like the mythical phoenix, the spirit of the very real Christ is not limited by the science of chemical and physical changes. Nehemiah, even though he precedes Christ, transcends this scientific truth as well. Almost all of our scripture does. We as Christians are a people who, like Nehemiah, may find ourselves living among rubble and smothered in soot, fearful that our essence has been destroyed. But our essence is the hope of being reborn, rebuilt, of rising even from the ashes. Even in 2022—especially in 2022—this is who we choose to be: people who humbly look at the rubble, acknowledge the grief, see the opportunity, and move forward.