

The Joy of Restoration Nehemiah 12:43

We have reached the end of our sermon series about restoration from the book of Nehemiah, and we've covered a lot of ground to get here. The road to restoration began back in Persia when Nehemiah heard a disturbing report about the condition of Jerusalem and the people living there. God moved his heart and he was determined to go back. After getting permission, he made the journey and began to lead the people in rebuilding the walls. It was a long and difficult process. They faced danger from enemies on the outside and major upheaval from within. The work was heavy, difficult and dangerous and the people were exhausted. Nehemiah endured multiple personal attacks and an incredible amount of pressure. But today we are going to see that neither he nor the people gave up. They persevered through all the hardship and completed the walls. And once the walls were completed they had even more work to do in the city, which we'll see today, in order for restoration to be complete.

If Nehemiah was here today, I'd like to ask him: "Why did you keep going? What made it worth it?" This morning we're going to look at what I think he would say. And in seeing what made it worth it for him, I think we'll also see why it will be worth it for us to keep pressing forward in our own process of restoration today. The goal of our restoration is to become more like Jesus, which means we'll never quite get there in this life. We'll never get to the point where we can say, "I've arrived." As long as there's breath in our lungs, there's always more room to push forward to become more like Jesus.

But that journey is long and difficult, and it would be easy to get to a point where we say, *"I've made it far enough. I'm tired. I'm entering my spiritual retirement and I'm just going to coast from here. Time to relax and kick back and let the younger ones take it from here."* Maybe you're an older believer and you've begun to think that way. You've put in your time and started to pull back from ministry. Why keep pushing forward? You've done your part and you're going to heaven, why not ease up a bit and coast into the finish line? This morning I hope you will see why it's worth it to keep pressing forward no matter where you're at in the journey.

Most of you know we made a trip to Montana last week to visit Amy's family. It's a 725 mile journey that seems to always take us 12 hours. The first part is through

the Twin Cities where there's lots of busy traffic and road construction. It's loud and dangerous. Often times the lanes narrow with cement barriers on one side and construction pylons on the other. Traffic is flying along at about 70mph and there's only a few feet between you and other vehicles.

Then things loosen up and you drive through the rest of MN, which has a lot of pretty scenery, but it's still a long drive. Then after about 4 hours when you're starting to get tired of driving, you hit North Dakota. I don't know if you've ever driven through North Dakota, but it's about 350 miles of fields and marshes. Hardly any trees or hills to look at. There is a city about every 90 miles, but for the most part it's straight and flat and mundane... for 350 miles... It seems like it goes on forever.

Somewhere along the journey my back usually starts to hurt and my legs get stiff and restless. And then there's the constant battle with sleepiness. I start out eating sunflower seeds to stay awake, which eventually gives way to snacking on anything I can get my hands on. So I overeat and my stomach feels gross. Sometimes we've had to deal with vehicle problems, sometimes we've dealt with terrible weather conditions, sometimes the kids start fighting... It's a long trip.

By the time we reach the west end of North Dakota we're tired and ready to be done. And at that point there's some beautiful places to stop. The unending fields give way to the beautiful hills and valleys of the Theodore Roosevelt National Park. There's hotels and campgrounds to stay at and it would be easy to stop. Why keep going? It's beautiful right there... We've already come far enough haven't we? Well in all these years of travel, we've never ended there. We always keep going. We always pushed forward for two more long hours to the end. Why? Because at the end of the journey we get to spend time with Amy's family in the hills of eastern Montana, and that's what we really enjoy. That's why we make the trip and that's why it's worth it to keep going.

What makes it worth it to keep going in the process of restoration God is doing in your life? Why should you keep pushing forward 'til you reach the end of this life? Today we're going to see what I think made it worth it for Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem to push forward, and I believe it's the same thing that will make it worth it for us to push forward in the journey of restoration in our lives.

We got to the end of chapter 5 in the last sermon and the work of rebuilding the city walls was almost complete. At the beginning of chapter 6 you can see three more futile attempts by Israel's enemies to stop the work by going after Nehemiah directly, but it didn't work. Nehemiah didn't give in and in Nehemiah 6:15, you read these words: "*So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth day of the month Elul, in fifty-two days.*" The wall was finished! But you may notice that we're not even halfway through the book. There are still 7 chapters to go. Isn't restoration complete? What happens in the rest of these chapters?

Well the rebuilding of the walls was complete in chapter 6, but the process of restoration in the city wasn't complete until chapter 12 when the walls were dedicated to the Lord. So these chapters describe the work that Ezra and Nehemiah did among the people to bring about restoration in the city. Not only was there a rebuilding of the walls, but there was also a rebuilding of the people, and once both of these were complete, the walls were dedicated and the process of restoration was complete. So I want us to briefly look at what Ezra and Nehemiah did among the people to rebuild and restore them, and then we're going to see what happened in the end to make it all worth it.

Upon completion of the walls, Ezra and Nehemiah led the people in taking major steps to reestablish themselves as the covenant people of God. They were living in the area since returning from exile many years before, but they had never begun to practice the laws and statutes of the covenant. But now that the walls were rebuilt, it was time to get back to living according to the covenant. Here's one of the first things that happened...

Read Nehemiah 8:1-3.

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the Lord had commanded Israel. ² So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. ³ And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until midday, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law.

Before the workers returned to their homes, which were mainly in the towns outside the city, a huge assembly gathered in Jerusalem and Ezra read from the

Book of the Law of Moses. This was something that hadn't happened in a long, long time so the people were unfamiliar with the Law. Chapter 8 shows us that he read a portion and then took a break so that the priests could teach the people the meaning of what was read. This was a process that lasted over a week and during that time the people felt both conviction because of their trespasses against the Law, but also joy because of God's patience and mercy.

In chapter 9 you read about how the people then confessed their sins. Nehemiah 9:1 says, *"Now on the twenty-fourth day of this month the people of Israel were assembled with fasting and in sackcloth, and with earth on their heads."* Because of conviction brought about by the reading and teaching of the Book of the Law, about two weeks after the reading of the Law, the people had a solemn assembly during which they publicly confessed their sins and repented. During this time the priests told of the history of their people – how God acted faithfully through all the generations to fulfill his promises, but how their people had repeatedly turned away from him in disobedience.

The last verse in Nehemiah 9 says, *"Because of all this we make a firm covenant in writing; on the sealed document are the names of our princes, our Levites, and our priests."* So then in chapter 10 it talks about the signing and renewal of this covenant. At the end of the solemn assembly the leaders all made an oath to obey all the commandments of the Lord and to keep his covenant.

Chapter 11 talks about the repopulation of Jerusalem. Very few people actually lived within the city walls. Most lived in the towns outside Jerusalem. So in order for restoration to be complete, people had to move and repopulate the city. As an act of submission to the Lord, the families in each town cast lots and one out of ten families willingly left their town to move into the city. Nehemiah 11:1-2 says, *"Now the leaders of the people lived in Jerusalem. And the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem the holy city, while nine out of ten remained in the other towns. ² And the people blessed all the men who willingly offered to live in Jerusalem."*

That finally brings us to chapter 12. The walls had been rebuilt, the covenant had been reestablished, the city had been repopulated and now it was time for the dedication of the walls which signified that the process of restoration was finally complete. This was done at a great ceremony described in Nehemiah 12:27-43. All the people gathered in Jerusalem and their excitement was bursting at the seams.

There was joyful singing, triumphant music, and ritual purification of the people and the wall. Two great choirs were appointed and they ascended to the top of the newly built wall. One choir went one way along the top of the wall and one went the other way. They eventually met at the temple where a great congregation was gathered with Nehemiah, the officials and the priests. Nehemiah 12:43 describes what happened: *“And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.”*

As Nehemiah stood there and took it all in and thought about the long and difficult journey it took to get to that point, I can just imagine him thinking, “This is why it was all worth it.” The glory of God was all around them, the people were filled with rejoicing and celebration, and the joy of the people was heard from far, far away. That was a joy that those people had never experienced before. That’s the way things were meant to be. They had finally arrived and for Nehemiah and the people it was all worth it.

Joy and fulfillment and the glory of the Lord that fills your soul so full you burst forth in rejoicing. It doesn’t get any better than that. That’s what we were made for. That’s what God wants for you and that’s what’s waiting for you in growing measure as you keep moving forward in the journey. That’s what makes it worth it to keep going. The New Testament authors write about the joy that is waiting for us in heaven and that joy will be greater and greater if we keep pressing on in the journey. What you do in this life matters for eternity. It’s not just about getting there; it’s about experiencing more and more joy as you do. That’s a joy you begin to experience in this life as you grow closer and closer to Jesus. Pushing forward in restoration increases your capacity for joy in him. And that joy comes to fulfillment when you’re with him in heaven. That’s what makes it worth it to keep going.

You can see that’s why the apostles kept going in spite of all the struggles they went through. Paul is a great example and writes about it often. In 2 Cor. 4:16-18 he writes: *“So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. ¹⁷ For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, ¹⁸ as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”*

In Philippians 3:8-14 he writes: *“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.¹² Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.¹³ Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead,¹⁴ I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.*

Paul was motivated by the overwhelming joy in Christ he knew would be his if he continued to push forward. Peter was too. In 1 Peter 1:3-9 he wrote to encourage his readers to press forward in restoration in spite of how difficult it was: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you,⁵ who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.⁶ In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials,⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.⁸ Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory,⁹ obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.”*

Even Jesus was motivated by the promise of overwhelming joy as he persevered through the worst suffering imaginable. Hebrews 12:1-2 tells us: *“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,² looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

The reason we continue to press on and move forward in the process of restoration is that the joy that we will experience will be abundantly worth it. Therefore, as we reach the end of this series I urge you to keep up the good fight, keep pressing on, keep straining forward. Don't coast to the finish line. Imagine what it will be like on that day when you are gathered with the rest of the saints to rejoice and marvel together in the glory of Jesus and the wonder of your salvation. The road is difficult, the journey is long, but there will be exuberant joy and celebration as you see and experience the glory of the Lord. It will all be worth it.