

“Ever Had a Crisis of Faith?”

Nehemiah 8:1-12

Preached by

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Our attention this morning is drawn to the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. It was named for one of Israel’s most outstanding citizens, a civil engineer and superb administrator. Nehemiah played a key role in the reconstruction of Jerusalem after the exiles returned from Babylon.

For several weeks, we have been tracking the Israelites through some of their most difficult years. The once proud nation of Judah was conquered by the Babylonians about six hundred years before the time of Jesus, and over the course of fifteen years, they transported thousands of Jews to Babylon. They also leveled almost every fortified city in Judah, including Jerusalem. The destruction was similar to what you would expect after an earthquake or tornado.

Fifty years after the Babylonians’ first invasion of Judah, the Persians conquered Babylon. Cyrus, the King of Persia, granted the Jews permission to return to their homeland. While some of the Jews opted to remain in Babylon because they had put down roots and grown content, many decided to go back home.

Returning home was not as easy or joyful as it may have sounded. The exiles were met with three overwhelming challenges.

They had to rebuild the Temple, the center of religious life and community. They had to reconstruct their homes and businesses, which were completely destroyed and had been virtually untouched for fifty years. In addition, they had to resurrect their faith, which had been undermined by the adversity and disappointments they had been dealing with for a generation.

You may be surprised to know that Cyrus, and his successor, Darius I, offered substantial help in the rebuilding process. They provided money and materials for reconstructing the Temple, their homes, businesses and the wall around Jerusalem.

They sent two Jews back to Jerusalem to oversee the rebuilding, at least the initial phases of each project. First, they sent Zerubbabel with money and supplies to manage the rebuilding of the Temple. In spite of a delay due to bad weather and problems with the Samaritans, he got the job done before the end of the sixth century.

A few years later, the Persians sent Nehemiah, the engineer and administrator, to oversee the construction of the wall around Jerusalem, along with more homes and businesses. He, too, finished his portion of that task in remarkable time.

I am not implying that these projects were easy when I say they moved swiftly. The work was hard and the obstacles were many. After the initial phase of each project was completed, there was still a lot of work to do. The rebuilding went on for generations because the destruction was massive, which led to despair and discouragement. Many who returned to Judah wondered if they had made a wise decision. Their friends and neighbors who stayed in Babylon did not have to confront these intimidating challenges or make these enormous sacrifices.

This brings us to today's text. While the Persians could help with rebuilding the Temple and their cities, they could offer no help resurrecting the people's faith. Many Jews had lost confidence in God, and it showed in their lifestyle and lack of attention to the spiritual disciplines which cultivated their faith.

They could not believe God allowed their homeland to be destroyed by the Babylonians and permitted them to be taken into exile. Then, those who returned to Jerusalem were shocked at how difficult it had been to rebuild their homeland. Their disappointment led to disillusionment and a crisis of faith. It wasn't that they did not believe in God; they didn't trust Him anymore.

This was why Ezra was sent their way. His task was not to rebuild the Temple or their cities, but to rebuild their faith.

Have you ever had a crisis of faith? Has God ever disappointed you? Has there been a time in your life when you became disillusioned and lost faith in God? Is this how you feel today?

Why do you think this happens? I've given this a lot of thought, as I am sure you have.

We struggle to accept that bad things happen to good people. Deep down, we believe we can ward off evil, or at least minimize its impact, by being responsible, mature, disciplined and loving. When we suffer, even though we have been faithful, it leads to doubts about God's love for us.

One of the hardest days of my life occurred when my daughter broke her leg. She walked behind a stack of bricks at church, and they fell on her leg. Seems a couple of boys were chasing her, and they hit the bricks as they approached her.

At the time, she was three years old. Jackie and I took her to the emergency room where a doctor examined her. After confirming the diagnosis, he had to put her leg in a cast. This meant he had to move her leg as he wrapped it.

I was standing beside Amy's bed holding her little hand. She looked straight at me and begged me to make the doctor stop. "Daddy, make him stop," she shouted over and over. "It hurts!" She could not understand why I would not do this, because she knew how much I loved her.

Neither can we understand why a loving God doesn't take away the pain in our lives. When He doesn't, we question His love and faithfulness.

It has helped me to realize if love could keep bad things from happening, no one in my family or among my friends would suffer. Their suffering is not a measure of my love. Bad things happen in spite of my love for them, or God's love for them.

Perhaps there is another reason we experience a crisis of faith. *We assume if God loves us, He will rescue us when we are irresponsible and make bad decisions.* I think the Israelites believed this.

They knew they had drifted away from God and lived by the culture's values. They were not pursuing justice and peace, or reflecting God's nature by the way they treated their neighbors. They were addicted to money, possessions, pleasure and a life of ease, which led to corruption in high places. They were not driven by the power of love but the love of power.

They knew they were guilty and were to blame for the mess they were in. This did not keep them from expecting God to rescue them, though, and they became disillusioned when God did not take away the consequences of their bad decisions. Sound familiar?

So, what do we do when we are going through a crisis of faith? What do we do when we have lost confidence in God?

What did Ezra encourage the Israelites to do? He invited them to come to the Water Gate, all of them, men, women and children. There he opened the Pentateuch and began reading to them the words of Moses. He admonished them not to throw their faith away, but their false assumptions.

He wanted them to know God loved them unconditionally, like parents love their children. This love, however, would not rescue them when they made bad decisions, as they had. It would not protect them from becoming victims of evil deeds, as they were.

God's love for them meant they would never face any challenge or problem alone, though. Always and at all times, God would be with them providing the strength, courage, will power, stamina, patience, guidance, wisdom and perseverance they needed to keep on keeping on so they would never give up.

God would be there among the broken pieces of their lives to help them heal from their wounds and reconstruct their homes, their communities and their faith. Once again, God would teach them what was important and take every step with them as they pursued it, lifting them up when they stumbled.

He would fill their hearts with courage as they traveled down unfamiliar roads, helping them to live one day at a time without fear or anxiety. God would also bring people into their pathway to walk with them, providing companionship and support.

God would sustain them in their darkest hours by assuring them no tragedy would have the final word in their lives; He would, and it would be good. Always, and at all times, God would be with them.

Years ago, I read an article by Paula D'Arcy titled, "Song for Sarah." When Paula discovered she and her husband, Roy, were going to have their first child, she began writing letters to her unborn child. She intended to write in this diary until her child turned sixteen, and then give it to him or her.

She began by writing to Andrew, thinking the child she was carrying was a boy. Andrew turned out to be a girl, whom she and Roy named Sarah. For the next eighteen months, Paula wrote about her experiences with Sarah, knowing one day it would bring joy and delight to her.

Tragedy struck so abruptly on a summer day when she and Roy and Sarah were on their way to Massachusetts to visit grandparents. A car swerved and hit them head on. Paula was the only one to survive the accident. In an instant, Roy and Sarah were gone.

Sarah continued to write in the diary for several years after this terrible day, which turned out to be very therapeutic. Writing enabled Paula to ask questions and express feelings she might not have been able to verbalize. I particularly appreciate the way she brought her diary to a close.

"God never guaranteed anything to be permanent except His love. I made all the other conclusions.

I look at what I wrote on your grave marker. 'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.' How well I now realize that is true.

Overall is the hand of the Shepherd. Always for me, at every moment, God was there; there when I felt His presence and equally there when it seemed I was all alone. His presence did not depend upon my feeling it, or even upon the extent of my belief. God was simply there.

'The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.' And we are all quite safe."

Yes, Paula, by God's grace we are all quite safe.