

Just before we get to Advent and begin thinking about what that means for us today I want to remind you that at the start of the year I asked you to think about how you would finish the following statement: This year I would like to.....

Maybe you had a load of endings, or maybe just one. How has it worked out? Maybe you don't even remember doing that!

As we go into a new year we all hope that our life is going to get better. Maybe going into 2018 you hoped that relationally your life would be better with family, with friends. Maybe your marriage is good. Maybe it's not but you hoped it would be better this year. It could be from a financial standpoint. You've hoped that you'd make more money or you'd deal with some debt. It could be from a physical standpoint. You wanted to be healthier or fitter in 2018 than you were in 2017. Most importantly perhaps you hoped that spiritually your walk with Christ would be stronger this year than it was last year. As I went through those categories how many of you remember thinking through this?

We want things to get better. Rarely if ever have I ever met someone that hoped things would get worse. Like I'm really hoping to gain 40 extra and unnecessary pounds to drive my blood pressure sky-high to put me at a higher risk of a heart attack, said no one ever. I've never met someone that said I'm really hoping to blow my emergency fund next year on gambling and leave my family debt ridden. No we're hoping things get better.

As we come to the end of this year and look toward next year how would you finish this statement? This year I hope to what?

As you're thinking about that here's what you need to realize about hope. ***Hope in and of itself changes nothing.***

Actions do that. Hope can be the catalyst for change. But actions are what is going to get us there. I mean think about it how many of us have had resolutions in the past and they never happen? I know I have. I'm not talking about hope as a passive wish but rather an active pursuit.

We need to put hope into action. 1 Peter 1:13-14 *Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. <sup>14</sup> Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance.*

Prepare your minds for what? for action. We're talking about putting hope in action and exercising self-discipline. Some versions say self-control but I want to stick on the one that says self-discipline. What is discipline? Well, way back in time I suggested that ***discipline is choosing what you want most over what you want now.***

If you want to be closer to God you need to make time to pray and read the bible – and there are lots of different ways you can do that, but it doesn't just happen – you choose what you want most over what you want now.

Today I want to look at the story of Nehemiah in the Old Testament to see three ways that all of us can put hope into action in 2019.

**Number one:** To put hope in action you need to define the problem.

We see this in the life of Nehemiah. But let me tell you a little bit about who he was. Nehemiah was a Jewish man in the service of the Persian King Artaxerxes. He was the cupbearer which meant not only did he bring the king wine but more importantly he tasted it first to make sure it wasn't poisoned and would kill him. It was a very important role in the court of the king. He was anxious to hear about the Jewish people that were returning to the province of Judah because the Jews had been in exile for decades. When he had some friends show up he defined the problem in chapter one verse three. This is what it says. *They replied, "The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire."*

The wall was the greatest source of protection for that city. It was security from their enemies. The people that were living there because there was no wall they were vulnerable and at risk because their enemy could come in and attack them any time they wanted to. You see Nehemiah didn't just hope things would get better he defined the problem. You see the walls of Jerusalem had been broken down for nearly a 150 years. No one was rebuilding them. No doubt you've tried something for years and you've not been successful. As much as you don't want to admit it perhaps your marriage isn't where it needs to be. For some of you, you never thought a substance would have so much control over your life. All of us have things we need to deal with and some of them are long term problems. **You've got to define the problem.** Here's the deal you cannot defeat what you do not define. Call it out make it clear this is the problem. Then one day just like when I read in the book of Nehemiah you turn the page and you read we must rebuild the wall. From this point forward things are going to be different because until then it was a nation in disgrace but now there's a man that stands up by faith to put hope in action. Who knows how long you've been stuck with this issue. But God by his power helps you to turn the page of your life. You turn the page and you realize I need to pursue my spouse. You turn the page and you realize that you struggle with looking at inappropriate images and videos. You can't stop. You decide you're going to put filters on every connected online device that you have. You turn the page and say for the first time in my life I'm going to attend church on a regular basis and make it a priority for me. I'm going to engage in God's word on a daily basis. This has gone on long enough. I'm on a new page now. God by his power helps me to turn the page of my life. You see sometimes things can be so bad painful, rocky, and unstable for so long that it becomes our new normal. We don't realize that we are in great trouble, in ruins, even in disgrace. The walls of our lives have been broken down. We're vulnerable and at risk. Our spiritual enemy can come in at any time and attack us.

But be encouraged. It's through our greatest and largest problems that we can bring God the greatest glory. How do you put hope in action? Number one you have to define the problem.

**Number two:** To put hope in action you must diligently seek God. Nehemiah did this in chapter 1:4 *When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven.*

You see there's a reality of sadness here when you read this verse to see how he sits down to cry and then he kneels to pray. The moment he defined the problem - Jerusalem is in great trouble and disgrace what did he do? He diligently took it to the one that could help him. When you have a vision to do something in your life you're going to need the God of Heaven to help you.

Lets imagine that you have been subject to really abusive behaviour, or been made redundant or something really difficult. You are hurt and angry. You want to lash out but, somehow that

just makes it worse. You struggle to forgive and the person never apologises or seeks forgiveness. It is so easy to get trapped in bitterness and unforgiveness.

Sometimes we need to realise that *forgiveness involves giving up the hope of a better past*. All this time being bitter was about wishing the past was different but the past isn't going to change. We have to extend forgiveness and in doing that we experience freedom. Me choosing to forgive is not for the sake of the other person, it's for me. Because when you're bitter, when you're unforgiving that shows in your character. That affects people around you. Through seeking God our character is changed.

We say enough is enough. I refuse to allow this to happen again. You're determining that this is the problem. You're seeking God for his help and his power to make the changes in your life. When Nehemiah starts to pray and fast after hearing the news that the walls of Jerusalem were down he came to the point of action. He spoke to the king to get permission to go and rebuild the wall and how God gave him favour to do all of that. Now it would have been easy for a Nehemiah to think when he heard the news that's terrible. Then even go onto Facebook and write a detailed post complaining about the walls being broken down and then going on with his life. I mean he wasn't a mason or a builder. He was a professional drinker.

Just think how doubt would flood into his mind that he could not accomplish this great work. No doubt you can connect with that. Maybe you've thought, "Well I could try it again "but I'll fail again. "I don't have what it takes. "I'm not qualified to do this." That's why it is imperative that we diligently seek God *because God does not always call the equipped*. Hear me out this is so important – *he does not always call the equipped, but he always equips those that he calls*.

The only way we know we are called is by diligently seeking him. Nehemiah diligently sought God and took ownership of the problem so that he could also own the solution with God's help.

Think about your current habits. What is one change you could make today that would put you on the path that God has called and intended for you? Imagine what you could do for the kingdom if you were physically healthier. Imagine who you could bless and how you could not only honour God by giving the tithe and be generous, giving above that in offerings. If your relationship with Christ was stronger imagine how much bolder you could be with your witness. When we realize that we can do all things through Christ who gives us strength that is when our life begins to change. How do we put hope in action?

Number one you define the problem.  
Number two you diligently seek God.

**Number three:** To put hope into action you must do the work.

You've got to do the work. Year after year January's come and go. We find ourselves in the same place year after year after year. What we need to realize is all that God wants to do in any area of our lives will be limited by the work that we are unwilling to do. Whatever you're thinking about the problem in your life you've thought about it before. I mean let's be honest. You've thought about it before. You know what the problem is. I know what my problems are. We've even come up with solutions on how to solve those things. But you know what the difference is between good intentions and actually changing - it's doing the work with God's help. This is where the real change happens because you can join a gym. You can even hire a trainer but when your alarm goes off at 5:00 a.m. in the morning you've got a decision to make. You either turn it off, roll over in bed and stay in the same rut you've been

in for years or at that moment you ask God to help you. Because in our weakness we are made strong through him. You roll out of bed and you change your life. You have to declare this coming year will be different. We're not talking about a New Year's resolution that's going to be dead by January 15th.

We're talking about putting hope in action empowered by God to change the trajectory of our lives. You're on a new page now. Next year can be different than every year.

It's not a New Year's resolution. It's putting hope in action. Nehemiah did this when he got to Jerusalem. You see he personally inspected the wall to see the extent of the damage. Then he gathered all the leaders together, the nobles, the priests, the officials. This is what he said to them. We pick it up in Nehemiah 2:17-18 *Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, so that we may no longer suffer disgrace." <sup>18</sup> I told them that the hand of my God had been gracious upon me, and also the words that the king had spoken to me. Then they said, "Let us start building!" So they committed themselves to the common good.*

Now the good news is you're going to do the work. But the great news is you're not going to do it alone. God is with you, his power is there to help you. Others can and should be a part of that process as well. But don't think for a minute that your great work, that your hope in action,

goes without opposition. You need to anticipate it, you got to expect it. Nehemiah experienced this through Sanballat and Tobiah. They constantly ridiculed him. They said things like, "Do you really think you're going to rebuild the wall with stones from a garbage heap?" They even said, "If a fox was to run across that wall it would crumble and fall down." But I love Nehemiah's resolute, steadfast mindset Ch 6:2-4 *Sanballat and Geshem sent to me, saying, "Come and let us meet together in one of the villages in the plain of Ono." But they intended to do me harm. <sup>3</sup> So I sent messengers to them, saying, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down. Why should the work stop while I leave it to come down to you?" <sup>4</sup> They sent to me four times in this way, and I answered them in the same manner.*

All of us will face resistance: You'll hear that voice say, "What do you think you're doing? "If something doesn't go just the way you want "you will always fly off the handle. "Do you really think you'll be able to "control your anger and temper "when you've struggled with it your whole life?" When you face resistance, when you hear that voice, you just need to shake it off by bringing the situation to God.

Remember you don't just have hope. You have hope in action, inspired by God, received by diligently seeking Him and looking for his guidance and his help. As you do the work become resolute in your determination. In Nehemiah's case the results stunned and shocked everyone watching.

The wall that had been in ruins for nearly a 150 years the wall that everyone said would never be rebuilt was rebuilt and completed in only 52 days. God did much more than anything that they could imagine or expect. He can do the same for you. When you define the problem; when you diligently seek him; when you do the work God will turn the page of your life.

In these next few weeks as we approach 2019 here are some things to think about: What tangible steps will you take? Do you need accountability like a mentor or a trainer? Do you need to join a study group - I'll answer that question for you. Yes, everybody needs people to learn with and from. Do you need to learn how to share your faith or pray?

Go back to the very beginning: This year I hope to...

Know that God and we as a church are here with you to help you put hope in action.  
What do we do?  
We define the problem. We diligently seek God. Then we do the work.