

Through the Power

I Corinthians 1:18-31; Nehemiah 2

Millions of Americans find themselves facing the greatest struggles of their lives today, squeezed financially by rising energy costs and costs of living, unemployment, changes in the housing market, and drastically reduced interest rates on retirement and savings accounts. Mainline churches are experiencing decline and struggling to find their new paths. In addition, a new presidential administration means more change is on the way, and no one is certain where the change will lead. It adds up to a shocking new way of life: for many people this could be called, “Lean Times.”

Naturally, “lean times” might apply to some other areas of life, too. Relationships can hit hard times, grief can leave a person in emotional ruins, and disease can attack with the fury of an armed enemy. The faith challenge is simple. If you face “lean times,” you’d better have a good foundation on which you can “lean.” Scriptures tells us that we are made strong in our weakness. Time and time again, scripture points us to those who become stronger when they are forced to lean upon their relationship with Jesus Christ to weather the lean times in their lives. He’ll thrive in tough times. She’ll find victory, even in an atmosphere of loss. Ezra and Nehemiah provide the biblical background for these times in their lives. Facing far more difficult circumstances, they lead others to a point of great success – in their work, in their national identity, and in their new understanding of faith.

Danny Cox, a former jet pilot turned business leader, tells his readers in *Seize the Day* that when jet fighters were first invented, they "flew much faster than their propeller predecessors. So, pilot ejection became a more sophisticated process. Theoretically, of course, all a pilot needed to do was push a button, clear the plane, then roll forward out of the seat so the parachute would open. But there was a problem that popped up during testing. Some pilots, instead of letting go, would keep a grip on the seat. The parachute would remain trapped between the seat and the pilot's back. This forced engineers back to the drawing board to find a solution. Cox writes: The new design called for a two-inch webbed strap. One end attached to the front edge of the seat, under the pilot. The other end attached to an electronic take-up reel behind the headrest. Two seconds after ejection, the electronic take-up reel would immediately take up the slack, and force the pilot forward out of his seat, thus freeing the parachute. The pilots needed that device to launch them out of their seats. They could not hold on to their place of comfort. Holding on would lead to their deaths. The same is true for us. We cannot hold on to "what has been" but must be willing to trust in the power of Christ.

In this 2nd Chapter of Nehemiah, we see a servant of the King, being called by God to move from his place of comfort, to rebuild the city of his ancestors. As Nehemiah prepared to rally Jerusalem, he gives us some more practical instruction of how to thrive in tough times. Nehemiah receives permission from the king to travel to Jerusalem for the purpose of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem, and then he carefully and prayerfully prepares for the work.

I. Make an accurate assessment of your situation.

Without the facts, there can be no good decision. If you’re going to thrive in a tough situation,

you must look honestly at your situation. A financial planner will help a person in crisis first by understanding every expense, every debt, and every source of income. A career coach will survey where a client is before recommending a career change. For relationships in crisis, an accurate assessment of existing problems is needed before improvements can be made. Until the current situation is accurately portrayed, until we understand exactly how “lean” the times are, there will be no thriving.

However, all things are relative and the perspective is very important when assessing the situation. One company held an inter-office softball game held every year between the marketing and support staff. And one year, the support staff whipped the marketing department soundly. The marketing department was taking the heat for losing the annual game, taking it on the chin. So, someone in marketing, a spin doctor, published a “news report” on the company’s bulletin board, after the game ... "The marketing department is pleased to announce that we came in second place in the recent softball season, after losing but one game all year. The support department, however, had a rather dismal season, winning only one game."

Whether it’s about softball, or about something a little more important, you need an accurate assessment of things. Nehemiah got that done, giving his report quickly, and accurately.

"You see the trouble we are in," he told the people, "Jerusalem lies in ruins and its gates have been burned with fire. (Nehemiah 1:17)

II. Cast the vision for success.

2:17 Then I said to them, "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." 18 I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work."

Casting a vision is critically important. You might have to cast it for yourself. You might be required to cast the vision for a team at work, or for your church. You make an accurate assessment of where you are, and you come up with a plan. If you follow Nehemiah’s plan, you’ll wait, you’ll pray, you’ll start where you are, and you’ll seize the moment. At the right moment, however, there must be a vision cast if people are going to have any chance of achieving a future goal. Maybe rising prices are affecting your team at work. Prices are up, but your budget hasn’t changed. Casting a vision might include cutbacks, new budget requests, or a creative solution to a new problem. Economic downturns might mean drastic change for your family. In the midst of disappointment, an accurate vision of future joy can be the difference in whether or not your family thrives in lean times. Or maybe it’s a new call on your life for ministry. To get to where you believe God wants you to go, you’ll have to make the accurate assessment of where you are, where you need to be, what tools you’ll need to arrive at the proper destination ... all of it.

And after you’ve understood your own purpose, you’ll need to cast your vision to the people around you. Maybe that’s a spouse; Or parents; Or other family members. Maybe it’ll be friends who become your prayer partners. Whatever it is, casting the vision is incredibly important. Without a vision, says one of the more famous verses in the Bible, the people will perish. (Proverbs 29:18, KJV)

With a vision, anything is possible. Remember Walt Disney? He was one of the most visionary people in American history, making ground-breaking movies, taking animation to never-imagined levels of use, and ... of course ... creating Disneyland in California, and the massive Disney World, just outside Orlando. Today Disney World occupies 47 square miles, an area about the size of San Francisco!

When Disney World first opened, Mrs. Walt Disney was asked to speak at the Grand Opening, since Walt had died. She was introduced by a man who said, "Mrs. Disney, I just wish Walt could have seen this." Hearing his remark, Mrs. Disney stood up and said, "He did." That was her speech, and she sat down. And the world remembers that through his incredible ability to dream the dream ... and cast the vision ... Walt Disney had already enjoyed Disney World, though he wasn't even alive when the gates opened for the first time.

To accomplish his vision, Nehemiah had to be the constant encourager. He ran into enemies and "nay-Sayers." Sanballat the Horonite, and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard what Nehemiah wanted to do, and they began mocking and ridiculing the earliest workers. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?" (2:19). The fear factor became a part of the story. The enemies of Nehemiah threw the king's title into the conversation, implying that the work of Nehemiah's people could get them into serious, serious trouble. But Nehemiah steps up to the plate, right there. "The God of heaven will give us success," Nehemiah said (2:20). "We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."

It might have been a long time since the folks in Jerusalem had seen someone stand up to the mockers. It might have been a long time since they'd been identified as those who belonged to God, or those who had a right to Jerusalem. But they heard Nehemiah make the claim, and they were encouraged literally, by his courage.

Every church needs encouragers. Every marriage needs encouragement. Every student, every teacher, every worker needs to hear a constant message of encouragement. In lean times, the last thing we need is discouragement.

A young man in London wanted to be a writer but the cards seemed stacked against him. He had only four years of school and his father was in jail because he couldn't pay his debts. Just to survive the pain of hunger, he got a job pasting labels on bottles in a rat infested warehouse. He slept in an attic with two other boys from the slums. With such little confidence in himself and his ability to write, he secretly slipped out and mailed his first manuscript in the middle of the night so nobody would laugh at his dream. That manuscript, along with countless others, was rejected. Finally, one story was accepted. He wasn't paid anything but the editor praised him for his writing. That one little compliment caused him to wander aimlessly through the streets with tears rolling down his cheeks. That editor's compliment inspired him to continue and improve. It also led to a brilliant career for Charles Dickens. If we weren't so stingy with compliments, we might see a lot more people blossom like Dickens.

We must have encouragement if we're to make it in any phase of life, including the life of our church.

Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem were soon off and running on a 52-day stretch that proved to be harder than any of them had ever anticipated. These were the leanest of the lean times, when the weeks started rolling back and they weren't raising food for their families, they weren't taking care of the bills, when they weren't getting all the things done that were on their "things-to-do" list at work, or at home. They really, really got discouraged. But Nehemiah was there, and he kept them on course. One by one, each gate was up and finished. Block by block, each stone was back in place on the wall. They stayed the course because Nehemiah stayed the course. And that got the job done.

Lean times can feel like a desert. Now some people like the desert. But to me, driving across the deserts of the American West, for instance, is tough, tough, tough. It's hot. It's forever long. And it feels dangerous. You can't help but wonder if the car will hold up, if you're driving your family across the desert. You can't help but wonder if the air conditioning will keep up ... and maybe you remember a time when it didn't keep up. Lean times. Tough times. That's the time to stay the course. Just stay the course. Keep going in the direction God called you.

The most-sacred symbol in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, is a tree: a sprawling, shade-bearing, 80-year-old American elm. Tourists drive from miles around to see her. People pose for pictures beneath her. Arborists carefully protect her. She adorns posters and letterhead. Other trees grow larger, fuller—even greener. But not one is equally cherished. The city treasures the tree not because of her appearance, but her endurance. She endured the Oklahoma City bombing. Timothy McVeigh parked his death-laden truck only yards from her. His malice killed 168 people, wounded 850, destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, and buried the tree in rubble. No one expected it to survive. No one, in fact, gave any thought to the dusty, branch-stripped tree. But then she began to bud. Sprouts pressed through damaged bark; green leaves pushed away gray soot. Life resurrected from an acre of death. People noticed. The tree modeled the resilience the victims desired. So they gave the elm a name: the Survivor Tree. (Source: Max Lucado, *Facing Your Giants* (W Publishing Group, 2006), p. 43-44)

When Nehemiah challenged the people to rebuild the walls, the people replied, "Let us start rebuilding." And the Bible says, so they began this good work." (2:18)
They began this good work. ... They began the work. They lifted huge timbers, and massive stones. They used chisels and saws and hammers and pulleys. They worked as a team to lift stone weighing several tons. They worked from dawn to dusk, and they carried their weapons with them everywhere they went. Prepared for war, they sweated and strained and got dirty and stayed determined.

If God calls you to a heroic task, expect to work like a hero. Noah had to build an ark, and it must have taken years to complete. Moses had to deal with stress levels that would have killed most men. Abraham walked across entire nations, convinced to travel only by a dream, a vision, something mysterious he'd called his "calling." Most of the prophets were bi-vocational, and so was Paul. That means they had full-time jobs and full-time ministries. David was hardened for battle and struggle by the time he got to the throne room of Jerusalem in part because he'd worked so incredibly hard.

Jesus was a man's man, trained physically in Joseph's carpentry shop, and trained so thoroughly in spiritual matters that he was amazing the scholars by the time he was a young teen-ager. He had memorized much of the Old Testament. He had worked extremely hard. Nehemiah is a book drenched in the sweat of hard work. And if you dare ask God to answer your prayer, you might as well expect the same thing. You're going to go to work and work extremely hard.

Sometimes, you've just got to bear down and turn things around. If you want to thrive when all around you are barely surviving, you'll have to get the job done. Nehemiah might encourage you, and provide the example, but sooner or later, you'll have to bear down and do the work of thriving. As a church, we just have to make up our minds to do the hard work, but it takes us all, each one doing our part.

One evening while a man was driving down a country road, he lost control of his car and wound up in a ditch. He walked to the closest farm house and asked for help pulling the car out. The farmer said, "Sure. Let me hitch up Dusty and you'll be out in no time." A few minutes later the farmer appeared with Dusty, an old, swaybacked, almost blind mule. After Dusty was hitched to the car, the old farmer cracked the whip and said, "Pull, Buck, pull!" Nothing happened and the stranger looked around for a mule named Buck. There weren't any other mules. There was only Dusty, who wasn't moving. The farmer cracked the whip again and said, "Pull, Clyde, pull!" The stranger took another look, but there was still only one mule hitched to his car, and that mule's name wasn't "Clyde." Nothing had happened, so the farmer cracked the whip again and said, "Pull, Dusty, pull!" Dusty began to pull until finally the car was out of the ditch. The man thanked the farmer, then said, "But I'm really curious. If your mule's name is Dusty, why did you say 'Pull, Buck' and 'Pull, Clyde'? That didn't make sense!" The farmer said, "Well, you know Dusty's old and he doesn't see too good, and he doesn't have much confidence. Why, if he thought he had to do all the work himself, he'd never even try."