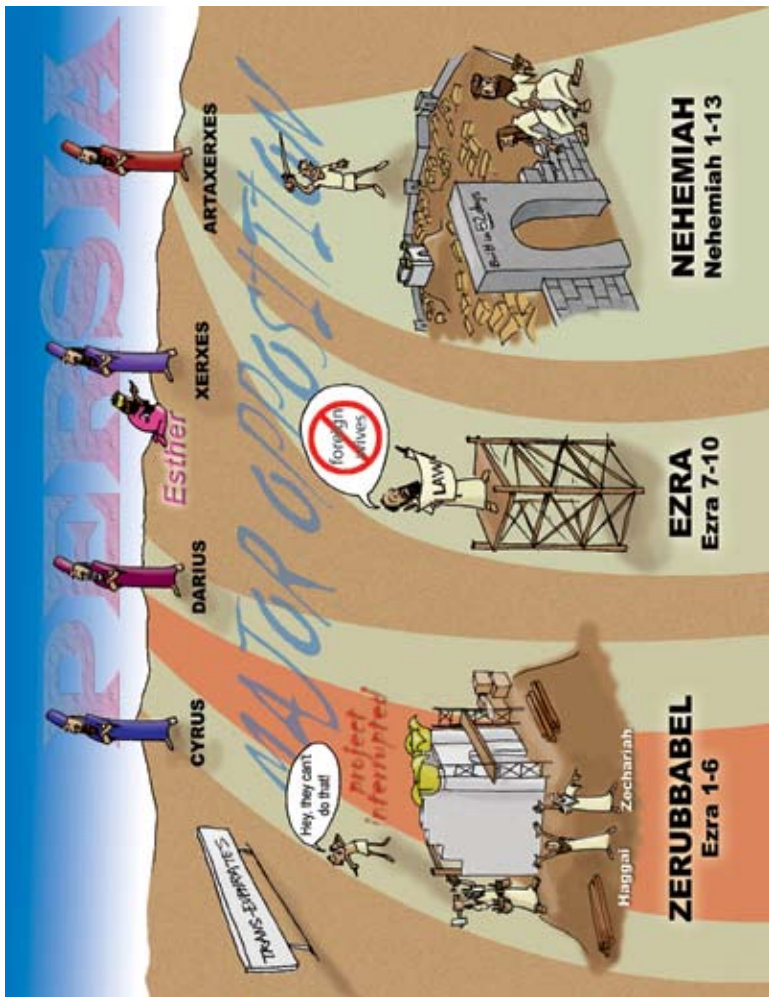


Ezra- Nehemiah



Monday: Ezra 1-5

Tuesday: Ezra 6-10

Wednesday: Nehemiah 1-5

Thursday: Nehemiah 6-8

Friday: Nehemiah 9-13

Introduction

This week we jump over the 70-year chasm called the Exile and land in the period of Israel's history called The Restoration. After the Babylonians were defeated by the Persian Empire, the tides changed for the Jewish people living in Exile. Under the permission of the Persian king, three separate waves of people returned to the city of Jerusalem to begin rebuilding that holy place. These three waves were led by three men: Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. While the kingdom of Judah was never fully established with a truly autonomous king, this restoration was vitally important for God's redemptive plan. In order for the Messiah to come to save His people, the Temple had to be rebuilt. Under the political leadership of the pagan, Persian Empire, God began paving the way for His Son, Jesus, to enter the world and establish His throne eternally.

Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6)

The first leader to return to Jerusalem was Zerubbabel. King Cyrus issued a decree that Zerubbabel was to receive free passage through the region known as the Trans-Euphrates, and full cooperation from the governors over the various areas through which he must travel.

Relatively speaking, only a handful of Jewish people chose to make the long journey back to Jerusalem. This is understandable, since the journey was a 900 mile trek on foot or camel back, across rough terrain, and through potentially hostile people groups.

Due to interference from the surrounding people, Zerubbabel was forced to stop construction on the Temple for a long period of time. Through the encouragement and teaching of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and with the backing of King Darius, Zerubbabel completed the construction of the second Temple.

Ezra (Ezra 7-10)

After the reign of King Xerxes had come and gone and the story of Queen Esther unfolded, in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes, a wise teacher of the Law, named Ezra, went to Jerusalem. When he arrived he found that the people, since the time of the rebuilding of the Temple had slipped into the same old problems and had begun intermarrying with their pagan neighbors. Through Ezra's direct teaching and confrontation of sin the city was purged and recommitted to God's ways.

Nehemiah (he gets his own book)

In the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah, the king's cupbearer, felt compelled to go to Jerusalem and fortify its walls in order to protect it from its hostile neighbors.

In the story of Nehemiah we see a wonderful example of how the Kingdom of God should work.

In Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday's devotionals we are going to explore the 11 lessons learned from Nehemiah that will teach us how we should approach the task of building the Kingdom of God in our lives today.

The 11 Lessons are:

1. Count the Cost
2. Work in Community
3. Expect Opposition
4. Lead as a Servant
5. Stay Focused
6. Teach Well
7. Celebrate God's Goodness
8. Remember and Repent
9. Bring Offerings to God
10. Support the Spiritual Leaders
11. Stay on Guard

Monday: When Plans Get Interrupted

Ezra 4

How did the people living near Jerusalem respond when they heard that the Jews had returned to rebuild the temple? (vv. 1-5)

What accusation was made against the people of Jerusalem? (vv.12-16)

What happened to the building project? (v. 24)

Food for thought:

It can be very frustrating to begin a big project just to have it stopped against your will. Perhaps you have experienced this. You know how it goes. You commit emotionally to a project and you work on the planning process for a long time. Already you have invested a great deal of mental, physical, and emotional energy into it before any real work has begun. You are anticipating the big day to begin, and then, wham! Something happens that pulls the plug on the deal. How do you feel in that moment? What if the plug-pulling was due to one individual who was responsible for destroying all your plans? How do you feel toward that person? Now, add into the mix the idea that the project was a “God-project”; something that you were convinced was from God and for God. And yet, it gets confounded by some sort of interference.

This scenario can happen in all walks of life. You may have planned to go to school, but then a close relative gets ill and you have to care for them instead of enrolling. You want to have a child, but the test continues to stick that ugly straight line in your face. You have people make promises to contribute to a project, and, in the last minute, they bail.

There is one common thread in all of these scenarios... they are disappointing. When these setbacks hit, it is easy to begin a downward spiral of doubt and despair. We can begin to question whether God is really supportive of us, or if He is really there at all. We can be tempted to withdraw into ourselves and vow that we will never risk and never trust again.

This must have been how Zerubbabel felt when he was rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem. He began

his journey full of high hopes and expectations for doing a great thing for God in the holy city. After all, he carried in his hand the papers from the supreme king himself, assuring him safe passage and full cooperation from the local authorities surrounding Jerusalem.

Unfortunately, the further you travel on a 900 mile journey away from the capital city, the less powerful a piece of paper becomes. The fact was that in the 70 years since the citizens of Jerusalem had been led off to exile, the Canaanites had moved into the region and become quite comfortable. From the Canaanite perspective this land was their land and the Jews had been the oppressive invaders that had swept in and took it from them under the leadership of Joshua centuries before. They rejoiced when Babylon destroyed this city. The last thing they would ever want was for it to be rebuilt.

So, as Zerubbabel entered into the region surrounding Jerusalem with just a handful of people, he was entering into a very hostile situation in which a written edict from an emperor 900 miles away would mean very little. The project came against such fierce, vindictive opposition, that it shut down for 14 years. It was not until two prophets named Haggai and Zechariah came on the scene to encourage Zerubbabel and the people that the project was resumed and completed.

Here are a couple observations that may help us today:

- 1. Sometimes even God's projects get interrupted and temporarily shut down.** It is dangerous to judge God's blessing and His will on a purely circumstantial basis. Just because a plan didn't work the first time, it does not

necessarily mean it was not the right plan. Sometimes we may have the right project, but the wrong timing.

2. **Expect opposition.** In the church we are trying to build the Kingdom of God - the temple - in our hearts and our community, and the enemy doesn't like it. Do you think that Satan is going to sit around and say, "Oh look, Suzy is getting her heart right with God and is starting to build an authentic space of worship in her heart for Him? Isn't that nice. I wish her well." No way. He has invested too much time in tearing down the first temple and sending you into the exile of sin for you to waltz in and clean everything up. He's going to get on the horn with every evil force that has surrounded your heart before and say, "Give her all you got, boys. Hit her with fear, doubt, loneliness, confusion, temptation, false accusation, miscommunication, fatigue, and busy-ness, whatever we know to be her weak spots. We've got to shut her down."
3. **Hold everything with open hands.** The only way to make it through a project is to realize that it is God's project and not yours. As soon as you invest your sense of self-worth in a project you have set yourself up for defeat. Before God can really use you in a project of any kind, He first needs to purge you of the need to have it. If you want to be successful in work, you need to die to that. If you want to have a child, you need to be willing to live without one. If you want to do something great, you need to be willing to be "nothing."

4. **Lean on God's truth and His community to keep up your strength.** In chapter 5 we see that it was the teaching of Haggai and Zechariah that inspired Zerubbabel to get back into the game and defy the opposition. These two men of God helped the people focus on the truth of God and the power and purpose of the Temple in the grand scheme of life. They re-sparked the vision in the hearts of the city. Not only did they speak the words of truth and hope, they also rolled up their sleeves and helped in the work itself. In our church, we need to be relentlessly devoted to saturating our minds with the truth of God's word and passionately committed to being a support network for each other during the good and the bad times.

5. **Ultimately, we need to trust in the sovereignty of God.** When Zerubbabel was motivated to get back into the game they petitioned King Darius to research the archives of King Cyrus and see if he had, in fact, authorized this project. King Darius discovered that he had, and resumed the project in full force, binding the opposition with fear of death to stay away from the project. God will bring about His will. We need to remember that if it is God's project it will get done, and it will get done in His timing and in His way. Our job is to not worry, but to simply follow and obey.

Tuesday: Foreign Wives

Ezra 9:1-10:17

What condition was the nation in when Ezra showed up? (9:1-2)

What was Ezra's response to this situation? (9:3-4)

Rephrase Ezra's prayer in your own words. (9:5-15)

In 10:1-17...

What was Ezra's proposed solution to the problem?

What was the reaction of the people?

Food for thought:

Today we revisit a recurring theme in our journey through the Old Testament. Back in Deuteronomy 7, Moses warned the people,

“Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD’s anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.”

In the book of Judges this problem got the people caught up in a cycle of pain that ended up in their acquiescing to establishing a king over Israel. The kings stumbled in this area, and due to Solomon’s gross violation of this directive, ultimately led the people into exile.

Now, in Ezra, the people are returning from that very exile. The Jerusalem in which they live still lies in a pile of rubble as a visual testimony to the destruction that intermarriage can bring. And yet, they did it again.

Why? Why was marrying foreign wives such a powerful temptation? There are a few reasons why the men of Israel may have found themselves seemingly helpless against the women of Canaan.

☀ **Sexual temptation.** The Canaanite worship was very sensual and sexual. It was ancient world erotica. It pulled upon the animal-like nature that can be so easily ignited in the heart of a male. Perhaps this was their equivalent to the struggle with pornography that plagues so many Christian men today.

☀ **Political Fear.** In the ancient world marriage was more about politics than it was about love and

romance. Perhaps the newly returned men of Jerusalem realized how vulnerable they were to attack, since they were living in a broken down city with no walls and no army. Perhaps they felt that the only way that they could protect themselves and be safe would be to make “politically correct” alliances through marriage. Today we are constantly tempted to do the same thing. The ways of God stand in stark contrast to the value system of our contemporary culture. When we make a stand for things like morality, the sanctity of life, and the sacredness of marriage we will be singled out as a threat to society, and perhaps persecuted. It would be much easier and safer to “marry” into the culturally accepted ways of thinking, and, in so doing, insure the safety of our children.

Whatever the cause, the effect was the same; disastrous.

Ezra was a priest and a teacher of the Law that was sent by God to confront the people and nip this downward cycle in the bud.

Notice the progression of events that Ezra went through when he confronted the people.

1. **He wept.** He was truly broken and grieved over the sin. This demonstrates a tender heart, which is vital when taking on confrontation.
2. **He first brought his own baggage to the Lord.** Ezra poured out his heart to God in a gut-wrenching, soul-searching session in which he confessed his own sin as well as the sin of the people. As Jesus taught us, we must remove the plank from our own eye before we endeavor to remove the speck from another's.

3. He demonstrated, rather than condemned.

There is an old saying that more is caught than taught. Had Ezra rushed out and spewed forth venomous, attacking accusations against the people, he would have probably met with great resistance. Instead, he publicly went to the Temple and poured out his heart to God in confession and repentance. This is what the people needed to do, so he did it himself and allowed people to observe. Through their observation of this authentic outpouring they were convicted and fell on their faces as well.

4. He was not afraid to take decisive action.

Once the people's hearts were on board, Ezra was not afraid to speak the truth boldly and make no compromises. The wives had to go. He made a plan for the purging, and was not afraid to enforce the plan. Many times in our churches we are good about verbalizing regret and pseudo-repentance, but we are afraid to actually implement a plan to eradicate and area of sin in our lives. We would rather talk about getting rid of it on Sunday when we are together, and then roll around with it all week. We need to take courage and support one another to send away our "foreign wives."

In what ways have you married into the destructive patterns of our world. Are you willing to send them away? It is important that every person in our church has at least one person with whom they can be "mutual Ezras" and hold each other accountable to do more than talk about repentance, but to actually move away from the destructive patterns that still hold onto our hearts.

Wednesday: Kingdom Building - Lessons 1-4

Today we are going to start a three day mini-series that will walk us through the 11 Kingdom building lessons found in Nehemiah. We will be drawing an analogy between Nehemiah's project of rebuilding the walls around the city of Jerusalem and our endeavor to build the authentic Kingdom of God in our hearts and our community.

Lesson 1: Count the Cost

Nehemiah 2:11-18

In this passage Nehemiah takes a midnight survey of the damage. When he was back in Persia he had only heard reports about the ruined condition of the city. Now, before he would make a public proclamation and commit himself to take on this project, he needed to know what he was getting into. Not only was he going to be leading a large construction project - which was a big enough task in itself - he was also going to be leading the people into a political struggle as the building of the walls would no doubt raise opposition from nearby enemies.

Jesus told us that, to be His disciple, we must count the cost as well (Luke 14:25-27). Entering into and dwelling in the Kingdom of God is not an easy task. It will require sacrifice and commitment through good times and extremely difficult times. It is not for the weak of heart or the wishy-washy. To be a follower of Jesus is an all or nothing thing. Jesus promised that He would provide the strength we need, but He did not say it would be a walk in the park. Each one of us needs to take a ride around the city wall of our heart and our church and ask, "Am I

ready to go the distance with this project, even when it seems like everything is against me?"

Lesson 2: Work in Community

Nehemiah 3

As you read through chapter three notice how the project was divided up. Each section of the wall was assigned to a different family unit. This is a beautiful picture of how the church should function. The task of creating space for God to do His work in our lives and spheres of influence is far too great a task for any one person or a small "discipleship" committee. It is the task of the church itself and if each family unit would take on the full responsibility of their own piece of the wall, then, collectively, we will have a cohesive, solid, well-built space where God can do amazing things. The key here is to realize that every person -- from the oldest to the youngest, from the most brilliant to the simplest, from the most talented to the most basic -- has a part that they can play in the collective spiritual formation of a church community. It is our job to discover which piece of the wall each family should take and then, joyfully jump into the job of building it.

Lesson 3: Expect Opposition

Nehemiah 4

Here we can refer back to Monday's devotional. Anytime we try to do something that will bring honor and glory to God, we are going to run up against fierce opposition. Spiritual warfare is alive and well and takes on many different forms. For some it will come through the physical political entities that will try to squelch any type of organized God-honoring systems. For others it will come through dissension amongst the ranks, with Christian brothers and

sisters fighting with each other and not being able to reconcile. For others it will be a battle with sinful temptations that drag you away from your first love and take you away from the collective project.

Whatever the enemy may be, be assured that the community will be attacked on several fronts. We need to stay tied together. Notice what Nehemiah did. He divided the population in half. While the enemy plotted, Nehemiah prayed and posted. He had half the people working while the other half stood guard over their back. He told them to work and watch, they were to grunt and guard, and they were challenged to build and beware.

In Christian community this emphasizes the need for two important things.

1. **We must be in accountability relationships with one another.** Each person needs to have one other person (at least) watching their back against an enemy assault.
2. **We must be in constant prayer for one another.** Intercessory prayer is the greatest tool against the enemy that we have for our community.

Lesson 4: Lead as Servants

Nehemiah 5

As the leader of Jerusalem, Nehemiah inherited a huge problem. The governors who were before him had taken advantage of their political position and had lorded it over the poor. They espoused a policy that made the rich richer and the poor poorer. Nehemiah knew that, in God's economy, there is no place for social stratification. In order to help the poor and needy to become a healthy, contributing

members of the working community, he voluntarily denied himself the special treatment that the previous leaders had enjoyed.

Nehemiah saw his role as a leader as that of a servant. God had placed him in leadership for the good of the people, not for self-indulgence. If our communities are going to be healthy and authentically building the Kingdom of God, then our leaders need to have servant hearts. Also, our “wealthy” need to be willing to help those in need in order to bring every person into a place where they can be a vital, contributing factor to the health and growth of the community.

Thursday: Kingdom Building - Lessons 5-7

Lesson 5: Stay Focused

Nehemiah 8:1-6

The actual building of the walls of Jerusalem took a mere, miraculous 52 days. When the walls were finished, Nehemiah made a very important decision. He invited Ezra to stand before all the people and read the book of the Law.

Why did he do that? Shouldn't they have had a really big party and congratulated themselves on a job well done?

Nehemiah knew that the biggest temptation of the human being is to become distracted. The people could have easily become distracted and believed that it was just a block wall that they were building to protect a city. Wrong. They were building so much more. The process of building the wall was just one vehicle through which God could teach them how to build what they were really building, which was the Kingdom of God. So, Nehemiah quickly brought them back into focus by having Ezra read the Law. This was to say, "Don't forget, people, this is about God and your heart. Love Him with all your heart. Do all you do for Him, and then you will know peace."

We can be easily distracted by the "stuff" of being the church. We can create meetings and have job descriptions and start ministries. Before you know it we are running wild and not taking time to create space for God in our heart and community. Let's always stay focused on our relationship with God and with each other as the primary purpose for which we work.

Lesson 6: Teach Well

Nehemiah 8:8

In this single verse we are exposed to a fundamental aspect of the Kingdom of God. There is a great need for solid teaching. God has revealed Himself to us through an object means called the scripture. Yet there is a great gap that exists between the pages and the people. It was true in Ezra's day and in ours. For Ezra, he was reading a book that was 1,000 years earlier in Hebrew, to a group of contemporaries that spoke Aramaic. While the revelation contained in the book of Moses was 100% accurate, it was not 100% accessible to the average citizen. In v. 8 we see the three duties of the teacher in the Kingdom of God.

1. **Stick to the book.** Ezra was not afraid to simply read the Law to the people, because he knew that, even if they didn't get it all, these were the living words of God. In our teaching we need to not be distracted by trendy or topical fads in preaching. Even though the New Testament was written 2,000 years ago, in a different culture, and in a different language, we need to make sure that we are teaching the people in our church what the Bible says because we believe the Bible is God's Living Word.
2. **Make it clear.** Since the Bible is an ancient text written in a foreign language, it is vitally important the we use the most accurate and accessible means to make the words of scripture clear. That is why we need to be aware of good, contemporary translations, Bible Dictionaries, Atlases, Handbooks, etc. There are many tools that are readily accessible to us to make the message of the Bible very clear to us. Our teaching must not be too lofty

to lose people or too muddy to obscure things and confuse people. We must speak clearly, using the best means of communication -- oral, visual, auditory, technological, and kinesthetic -- to transfer the information of the Bible to our people.

- 3. Make it relevant.** v. 8 says that they gave it meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. The people to whom Moses wrote the Law and the world in which they lived was very different. The context had changed dramatically. Now, the people of God were under the political rule of the Persian empire, and were reduced to living in one city in what was, at the time of Moses' writing, still the "Promised Land." How were the people of the restoration to make sense out of the Law in light of their circumstances? Ezra and the teachers did the important work of bridging the gap of time, language, and culture so that the people of God could grasp the timeless truths of God's word and apply it to their lives in that moment. The same task exists for our teaching. We live a vastly different world than did Jesus and His disciples. The challenge of the teacher is to be able to preserve the purity of the Biblical message and present it in a way that relates and connects to the contemporary mind.

Pray that our teachers will stay strong and undistracted. That we will commit ourselves to "rightly dividing the Word of Truth" and teaching the community in a powerful way that will unlock the gates of the Kingdom and allow the love and power of God to flow into the hearts of all the people.

Lesson 7: Celebrate God's Goodness

Nehemiah 8:9-12

Here is a wonderful overflow passage. When the people heard the Word of God and actually understood it and internalized it, then it was a natural reaction to burst into praise and worship to God. Worship is our response to the truth of God at work in our lives. One piece of evidence that God is at work in our community will be the worship response that we give to God. If our church is worshipping well, then that is a good sign that hearts are being changed.

Today's list of lessons has touched on the "meat and potatoes" of a Christ-community. To be strong and healthy we must eat well. Daily, weekly, and monthly we must feed on God's Word, worship Him, and fellowship with His people. If we will maintain a regular discipline of doing these basic things, then the space will be present for God to work in and through us.

Friday: Kingdom Building - lessons 8-11

Lesson 8: Remember and Repent

Nehemiah 9

In chapter 9, while they were in the middle of the teaching and dedication of the wall, the people were led through a recap of the history of Israel. It is very important to periodically stop and remember from where you came and the journey that you have made so far.

When we take the time to walk through our history it does two things for us:

1. It reminds us about how good God has been and leads us to worship Him.
2. It reminds us of the sin that we have battled and helps to expose us to our current weakness. This leads us to a time of repentance and reconciliation.

If you have not done so recently, take some time to map out your spiritual journey so far. Try to highlight the one or two significant things for each year. Make a note of how this process affected you. As you do it, be sensitive to the Holy Spirit and see if He exposes things in your life that need to get shored up with God's truth.

Lesson 9: Bring Offerings to God

Nehemiah 10:28-39

Once the teaching was completed the people responded in an overwhelming rededication to the ways of God. They committed to not marrying foreign wives, to not working on the Sabbath, to bringing the firstfruits, and to tithing regularly. In this passage we can see that they realized that all of life is a part of our worship to God. Everything we have belongs to God and we are to commit it all to Him.

If our church is going to be strong and healthy then each one of us needs to come to the place where we realize that our things are not our things. Our time, our possessions, our finances, none of it belongs to us. God has given it to us and He expects that we will be using it for His glory. How is your time being used this week? How are you spending your money? Is the tithe going to God, or does He get the leftovers? Are you using your skills, gifts and abilities to bring glory to Him, or are you feeding your own ego?

Lesson 10: Support the Spiritual Leaders

Nehemiah 12:44-47

Here we see that some of the people in the community had been set aside to devote their full time to the functions of the Temple; storehouse keepers, gatekeepers, singers, priests, etc. The people committed to supporting this group physically from their own resources in order to keep proper worship in the Temple functioning.

In Christian community it is appropriate to acknowledge when certain functions are necessary

and, being time-consuming necessitate financial support from the community. In 1 Timothy 5:17-18 Paul says,

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages."

Lesson 11: Stay on Guard

Nehemiah 13

When the building dedication was complete and the people had made their commitments to follow God, it was time for Nehemiah to return to Persia. 12 years later he returned to the city. What did he find? The people had begun to slack in all the areas that they had so fervently promised to uphold.

Here's the simple lesson. The Kingdom of God does not exist in emotional experiences at campfires or altar calls. The Kingdom of God exists in the day in, day out, persistent commitment of the pilgrim who is committed to the journey.

Do you remember the very first lesson? It was to count the cost. Being a community that is walking in the Kingdom of God is a wonderful experience. It is the only place that brings meaning and peace in life. Yet, it is not easy.

If we are going to be a strong and healthy community, then we need to stay on guard for the long haul. Let's not let circumstances get us down. When things are going great, let's rejoice, but let's not feed our spirits off of success. When things get rough, let's mourn, but let's not let our spirits be drained by failure or opposition. Let's let our spirits be connected to God,

and overflow into each other, day in and day out, so that the roots of our community will grow strong and deep and the fruitful overflow of who we are in Christ will be a light to all around us, drawing them into the Kingdom of God.