

Don't Stop Half Way

- ✖ Many Christians give up before they ever reach their full potential. You can find grace to finish the journey.

God is the Good Potter. I am most often the Not-So-Good Clay. My job is to spin and to stay put in the center of the wheel.

The Potter's job is to design. Sometimes I don't appreciate how fast the Potter spins me, or how tightly His skillful hands force my shape.

I forget that the Potter likes to use two hands and in my opinion a few too many external instruments along the way to help carve me into His beauty. But my job is to remain willing for Him to make the passionate transfer of heart and mind from potter to clay.

In order for me to alter my shape and become something more, motion is essential. It's impossible for idle clay to change.

The same holds true for dry clay. It tends to shatter rather than mold, so the Potter finds ways for the clay to remain moist. Once the shape is found by the Potter, He must trade moisture for fire in order to retain the shape He has created. Fire is the only agent that makes me permanent.

I find an eerie similarity between the process of being shaped on the potter's wheel and the process Nehemiah went through in rebuilding Jerusalem's wall (see Neh. 2:1-6:15). Like Ezekiel's bones, soon Nehemiah's "stones" would be rattling and reorganizing themselves into something new.

At first glance, however, there was no way Nehemiah could see where his initial midnight survey was leading.

"Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me; I told no one what my God had put in my heart to do at Jerusalem. ... And I went out by night ... and viewed the walls of Jerusalem which

were broken down and its gates which were burned with fire” (Neh. 2:12-13, NKJV).

All Nehemiah could see was the broken walls. All he could do was weep for the lost dignity of Israel. He pleaded for the cause of rebirth.

The once glorious walls that surrounded the city of Jerusalem were both the fortress and the splendor of Israel. Now they lay like lost ruins, the result of Nebuchadnezzar’s militias and their systematic destruction some 162 years earlier. With great pleasure Nebuchadnezzar had pillaged the instruments of Israel’s praise, signaling the start of a 70-year captivity.

Once their captivity was over, King Cyrus granted Israel the freedom to return and rebuild. But as the years passed there was no discernable improvement.

The broken walls remained broken. After 94 years the best that could be said about the wall was that the rubble had been rearranged.

By the time Nehemiah was kicking about the misplaced rocks, most in Jerusalem had lost their focus and the memory of why God had brought their ancestors home. The dream was officially abandoned. In other words, incompleteness was the new way of life.

That is, until Nehemiah arrived. Consumed with holy despair and a burning desire for change, the Lord filled Nehemiah with new ideas on how to finally rebuild the wall—prophetic new paradigms that would produce progress after nearly a century of marginal results.

As Nehemiah rallied his troops and began to make progress, it became apparent to Nehemiah’s enemies that this was more than wishful thinking. Threatened and angered, Sanballat and Tobiah attacked the Jews emotionally, financially and physically.

“So we built the wall, and the entire wall was joined together up to half its height, for the people had a mind to work. Now it happened, when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the walls of Jerusalem were being restored and the gaps were beginning to be closed, that they became very angry” (Neh. 4:6-7).

Sanballat became Israel’s official sandpaper, rubbing raw open wounds on the workforce—not with shackles, but with searing words.

A steady volley of demoralizing commentary could be heard above the construction.

“‘What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they fortify themselves? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they complete it in a day? Will they revive the stones from the heaps of rubbish—stones that are burned?’” (Neh. 4:2).

It didn’t stop there.

“‘Whatever they build, if even a fox goes up on it, he will break down their stone wall’” (v. 3).

It was at this point that Nehemiah and the many who joined him in the renewed dream of Israel faced an all-too-common crucifix of life.

“Then Judah said, ‘The strength of the laborers is failing, and there is so much rubbish that we are not able to build the wall’” (4:10).

In other words, the halfway point was the end of the line for Nehemiah. He was spent.

They had tried, sincerely tried, all of them. But it was over. It was the best shot anyone had taken in 94 years.

Zerubbabel? Ezra? Both great leaders. Neither of them had made the kind of progress Nehemiah made. But now, at the end of the

day, Nehemiah was nothing more than a failure like them.

It's a frightening thing to wake up one day and feel as if you've spent your whole heart but arrived only halfway. We all will face at some point the "half-finished wall" and realize we have nothing more to give—one day when the hard truth of gaps and deficits presents its brutal reality, when we see more openings in our life story than completions and more partial closures than finished promises.

When these gaps of unfinished ideas and promises combine with a demoralized state of mind they can create an overwhelming sense of defeat for the believer. Not only do we feel a lack of material to get the job finished, but also we've lost our vision for fulfillment.

Like Nehemiah, maybe your life was energized by a dream. Even though others had failed in the same course of action, something inside said: This time it can be different. I can do this. I can build or rebuild this into something better.

So construction on the dream began. There was real progress. Promise and potential propelled you forward, and your life felt energized. But then unexpected circumstances and unwelcome attacks became a daily occurrence.

Maybe it was a sudden lack of money, a sudden doubt in the mind, the betrayal of a trusted friend. Maybe you lost your physical energy or an old enemy rose up against you. Sometimes it is one of these. Most of the time, it's all of them.

But whatever happened, your wall now stands half-done. Worse yet, all work has stopped.

Today might be the halfway point of your marriage—a marriage you thought would be farther along and look entirely different than it does. Maybe it's the halfway point of a business dream, a ministry venture or a journey toward health.

Whatever your “wall” is, you find yourself facing the halfway point, and it seems you are out of everything you need both physically and emotionally to finish the task.

For Nehemiah, renewal came in the form of a four-part equation: shovels, swords, trumpets and families.

Nehemiah knew that the idea of a finished wall was God’s dream, not his. For that reason, living with an undone or half-finished wall was unacceptable.

God honored the restlessness in Nehemiah and unveiled a fresh and new way to get things moving again. Let’s look at God’s formula for Nehemiah and his people.

They found renewal through the shovel. “Those who built on the wall, and those who carried burdens, loaded themselves so that with one hand they worked at construction, and with the other held a weapon” (Neh. 4:17).

Nehemiah called the people back to work. Serving is at the heart of meaning and progress spiritually.

The “shovel in one hand” and “sword in the other hand” concept represents the proper balance between faith and works. Many try to shovel with both hands, but real progress requires balance.

Ask someone whose wall is half-done, someone who laid down the shovel long ago, someone who quit trying to pursue his dream, and he will tell you he has no strength left. But God is a God of new strength.

If your wall is half-done and you feel like quitting, it’s time for you to stand ready because new strength is rising.

They found renewal through the sword. “Therefore I positioned men behind the lower parts of the wall, at the openings; and I set the people according to their families, with their swords, their spears, and their bows” (Neh. 4:13).

You and I must never forget we are at war over the maturity of our souls. The greater the progress, the greater the intensity of attack.

The enemies of Nehemiah didn't fight fair. They used conspiracy. This meant a combination of several stealthlike attacks that tore at their dignity, finances, composure and unity.

But Nehemiah understood the necessity for battle readiness. He told each worker to stay engaged with readied sword in hand.

For us today this means being prepared to engage in spiritual warfare. Servanthood alone will not get your wall going again. It takes prayer and spiritual mindedness at every turn.

They found renewal through the trumpet. “‘Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us’” (Neh. 4:20).

As difficult as it may seem, when you feel like abandoning God's promises at the halfway point you must rediscover your passion for personal worship. Worship is about relationship, and relationship is about discovering refuge and refreshing from life's fires—spiritual and otherwise.

The idea of “worship” comes from two Greek words, pros and kuneo. The word pros means “to move forward.” The word kuneo means, “to kiss with a sense of awe.” Earnest worship involves both a physical action and a loving intent, both a leaning forward with the body and a reaching out with the soul to touch with both life and lyric the divine magnificence of the Father.

Nehemiah knew the people needed this collective experience of worship as a rallying point. Personal worship has nothing to do with talent or musical savvy. It has to do with the desire to be close to God.

Worship is not a Sunday event. It is, however, a daily experience of seeing God as close but always a little above the plains of pain, struggle and need.

Collective worship is God's way of drowning out the negative choirs around us. It is essential for getting past the halfway point in life.

They found renewal through family. "And I looked, and arose and said to the nobles, to the leaders, and to the rest of the people, 'Do not be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, great and awesome, and fight for your brethren, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses'" (Neh 4:14).

In one of the more stunning yet revelatory moves ever seen in Scripture, Nehemiah positions his families in the open breaches of the wall. Common sense rejects such a move. Yet Nehemiah understood the power, strength and courage that come when families grasp their covenant bonds and stand as one.

When the people were at their lowest, feeling too weak and under-resourced to move forward and finish their wall, they found in relationship with one another the inspiration to fight. When the body of Christ chooses to lose its empires and instead find its brotherhood, something miraculous happens. We become like a brick wall before our enemies.

Family is the fortress that stands strongest against the enemy. Nehemiah tapped into that strength by calling them to remember their sons and daughters as they continued to fight and build.

Something wonderful happened to Nehemiah at the halfway point. Maybe something wonderful needs to happen to you as well.

Gaps and deficits at the halfway point can look ugly and intimidating. That is why so many lose heart and quit. It's the most vulnerable point of the journey. But it is also the place where men and women find God in new and precious ways.

If you are struggling, first of all admit the struggle. Nehemiah cried out before one stone was reorganized and then had to cry out again when the wall was only half done.

The fact is, we need God for the entire journey. Even more liberating is this: God isn't after our perfectly complete walls. He's looking for something else—progress.

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