

How to Handle a Promotion

Nehemiah 5:14-19 and Psalm 75:5-7

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Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

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In case you missed it, we dedicated new Bibles last Sunday morning in worship.

The Bibles, as I explained, were a gift from a member of this church who noticed that our old ones were showing signs of significant wear and tear, and the decision to dedicate them – close to the 500th anniversary of the Reformation – was an acknowledgement that both Luther and Zwingli made the Bible available in the language of the people.

If you came along last Sunday afternoon on the Reformation walk, which I thought was very interesting and informative, you saw one of the three remaining copies of Zwingli's translation, which – and I didn't know this before last Sunday – which was completed five years or so before Luther's translation.

And not that they were competing with each other, but interestingly they had this same goal in mind.

Putting a Bible in your hand – a Bible you can read and study and understand – is an extraordinary thing, and it's not to be taken for granted. And as I said last week, it's one of the reasons we celebrate the Protestant Reformation.

If you still have your Bible in hand, I invite you to do something that would not have been possible 500 years ago. Please turn to the Book of Psalms.

For the second reading today, we are going to hear just three verses, but these are verses having to do with God's providence. They are a reminder that all of our successes and our promotions and our advancements in life come – ultimately – from God. And since they come from God, they carry some responsibilities. Listen to these words.

⁵ Do not lift your horns against heaven;

do not speak so defiantly.”

⁶ No one from the east or the west

or from the desert can exalt themselves.

⁷ It is God who judges:

He brings one down, he exalts another.

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Dear friends of Jesus Christ,

Today, after taking a week off to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, we are back to the story of Nehemiah, and – just so you know – we are nearing the conclusion of that story.

Most of the struggle in the story is now over. The wounds are the fresh, of course, the critics are still critics, feelings are raw, but success is in sight. Nothing at this point is going to prevent the completion of the wall around Jerusalem, which Nehemiah came all the way from Persia to build.

And so, the focus of the story is already turning to what happens next. Now that the wall is built – or nearly built – now that Jerusalem once again looks like a city, instead of the ruins that the armies of Babylon left behind, what happens next?

I want to mention something this morning that I have hinted at in previous sermons, and I am somewhat surprised that no one has wanted to debate this with me.

Several times, since the series began in early September, I have called Nehemiah “**a type of Christ.**” Do you remember hearing me say that? What I said is that Nehemiah points us forward to the New Testament. He *foreshadows*, you might say, what the Christ will be and what we should be looking for.

The temptation is strong today, among Christian people, to discount the Old Testament, to treat it as though it is somehow secondary to the New Testament.

And you should know that there is nothing new about this view. It was one of the earliest heresies in the early church.

As early as 140 AD, a little more than a hundred years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, a teacher named Marcion, son of a Christian bishop in what is now Turkey, dismissed the Old Testament (as well as the God of the Old Testament) as being inferior to the New Testament.

Marcion – I think this is interesting – developed his own Bible. It’s always a warning sign when you pick and choose which books to include and which ones to exclude. Marcion’s Bible consisted of parts of Luke’s gospel and ten letters of Paul. That was his sacred text.

And Marcion – we shouldn’t be surprised to hear this – Marcion developed quite a large following. It just seemed so obvious to some people that the God of the Old Testament was violent and full of judgment and so on, while the God of the New Testament was merciful and gracious and forgiving.

You have heard this argument before, I’m sure. Maybe without hearing Marcion’s name attached.

But the early church quickly responded to Marcion and said, “**No, no, no – there is a unity to God’s revelation, there is no distinction between the God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament. In fact, the Old Testament points us forward to the New Testament. The New Testament is a completion,**” they said, “**a completion of what is promised in the Old Testament.**”

And so, there have been people over the years who have developed this idea further, and they have said that there are, in fact, “**types of Christ**” to be found in the Old Testament.

One of them is Jonah. After three days in the belly of the fish – I think you know how the story goes – Jonah is deposited on land to announce God’s mercy to the nations.

The manna in the wilderness has been called a **“type of Christ.”** Daily, God’s people were offered this free gift which sustained them and nourished them through long years in the wilderness.

And then – though there are several others – maybe the most famous example of all is Melchizedek, who was both king and high priest, and in many ways exactly was what we claim about Jesus himself.

So, what I would like you to see is that Nehemiah fits in this category. He was not God. And in spite of how good he appears in the book that bears his name, he was not perfect.

But ... it’s important to see characteristics in him that point us forward to Christ. In Nehemiah we can see what was later clearly visible in the person of Christ. And today the characteristic that I want to spend some time thinking about is how he handled success.

In the verses you heard today from chapter 5, we learn that Nehemiah – this man who was not even born in the land, who was raised in the capital of another country – had somehow won the hearts and minds of his people and had been appointed their governor.

He oversaw the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem in just 52 days, he handled some tough logistical problems, he took on fierce (and unfair) criticism, he handled labor disputes, and (in the chapter we looked at a couple of weeks ago) he even spoke bluntly to the rich and told them that they weren’t keeping the law of Moses, because of the interest rates their charged. Very courageous!

And then, in the verses we heard today, we find that Nehemiah is now the governor of Judah. So, a remarkable advancement in a very short period of time. A success story, not so unlike the story of Joseph, who has also been called a **“type of Christ.”**

In case you’re wondering what successes Jesus had during his ministry – and that would be a fair question since things were not going terribly well for him toward the end of his life – I want to remind you that Jesus enjoyed some extraordinary popularity in his early days in Galilee.

Thousands of people – we’re talking about a region where the population was actually quite small – thousands of people came to hear him speak. For a brief time he was a celebrity. His family worried about him and about his health.

“What you are doing is not good,” they said. **“You will wear yourself out.”**

One time, in a sermon, I asked you why Jesus didn’t set up a healing ministry in Capernaum, his adopted hometown. It’s a lovely lakeside village, a nice place to retire. Jesus could have married and had children and grandchildren and lived to a ripe old age.

He could have been the most famous and beloved person in his hometown and probably in all of Galilee. They would have named the healing clinic after him.

But he didn’t do that. And the question is, Why not?

You might ask the same question about Nehemiah. Why didn’t he leverage his success into something more? Why didn’t he find a way to monetize his success? Surely there must have been a way to exploit his sudden popularity. Why didn’t he do that?

That's what I want to spend a few minutes talking about this morning. How was Nehemiah able to handle success so well, so skilfully, where others seem to fall apart?

You may not have thought about this before, but more people struggle with success than with adversity.

I would go so far as to say that, in the face of adversity, we often see people at their best. Not always, of course, but quite often when people are faced with difficult circumstances, when their lives are turned upside, when dreams are dashed, we see the best in them. We find character and faith that we didn't know they had.

Most people, when confronted with adversity, rise to the occasion and demonstrate courage and endurance and faithfulness and much more. It's why we sometimes say to them, **"Oh, you're such an inspiration to me."**

People who are going through tough times don't really want to be inspirations for us, but often they are. They teach us what real faith looks like. If you want a hero to admire, find someone who is going through a terrible time and yet who trusts that God is going to see him or her through this time.

Do you know something? Just the opposite seems to happen in the face of success. Most people seem to fall part. People seem to be the most susceptible to temptation and corruption and sin – call it whatever you want – when they are at the top, when everything is going their way.

In his book *The Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis (and if you've never read this, it's worth your time) imagines a senior devil talking to a junior devil – actually, his nephew – named Wormwood.

And the senior devil is giving advice about the best way to derail the life of a good person. So, Screwtape says, **"Prosperity knits a man to the world. He feels that he is finding his place in it, while really it is finding its place in him."**

It's really a wonderful and scary insight.

Charles Swindoll, whose book on Nehemiah is the inspiration for this sermon series, says that **"the private life of the promoted leader is under the constant attack of the devil."**

To put that another way, the more you have, the more success that is coming your way, the more temptation you are going to face, the more opportunities you are going to have to make a complete mess of your life.

I'm sure you have seen the statistics about lottery winners.

According to multiple studies – and I think it's interesting how thoroughly this has been studied over the years – but according to the studies, about 70 percent of all lottery winners end up going broke and filing for bankruptcy.

That is astonishing.

Most of the statistics I found come from the U.S., but similar results are found around the world. Only 55 percent of lottery winners – this is fascinating – only 55 percent of lottery winners report that they are happier as a result of having won a vast sum of money.

Here's a good one – though there was a lot to choose from, as you can imagine – in 9 out of 10 situations, this new family wealth, gained through winning a lottery, is gone by the third generation. It's as though it never happened.

At my last church an older couple asked me to come to their home one day, and they were not very forthcoming on the telephone about the purpose of the visit. They just said that it was urgent.

So, I drove over, and after exchanging pleasantries for a few minutes, the wife blurted out that she had won the lottery – not the mega-millions jackpot, but one of the lesser games, the kind that receive less publicity, which is why I hadn't seen their names or photos in the news.

I didn't know anything about their financial situation, but it never seemed to me that they were struggling. They had a beautiful home, and financially speaking they seemed to be fine.

The wife said to me that she bought these tickets every week out of habit more than anything.

But ... with the jackpot came sudden responsibility.

Questions they never had to think about were suddenly pressing on them. They found themselves hiring lawyers and financial advisors, a whole team of advisors. And suddenly they wished they had never played the game, a comment I did not expect hear!

Instead of being happier, they were suddenly feeling stressed and pressured in a way they did not want to be at this point in their lives.

Since you are going to ask me at the door what happened and why they wanted to see me, I should tell you that they set up a special fund at the church, like our congregational care fund, and they also set up funds for the university educations of their grandchildren. And with what was left over, they were going to take a cruise, though (I have to say) they didn't seem terribly excited about any of it.

And just so I don't pick on lottery winners alone, let me say something about professional athletes. When I was growing up, I wanted so badly to be good at sports. No one tried harder to catch the eye of the coach than I did. I was always standing where he could see me. I wanted so badly to play baseball for the Detroit Tigers.

And do you know something? According to the research, I should be so thankful that I had to find another career.

78 percent of professional football players and 60 percent of professional basketball players go bankrupt within five years after leaving their sport.

And of course you could argue that many of them grew up in poverty, so they were unprepared to deal with the sudden wealth and fame and celebrity.

But based on what I know, based on my ministry over the years, I would say that making bad choices at a time of success happens to people from every income level.

There is something about wealth and celebrity and success – even the relatively minor success of a promotion, which is what happens in our story for today – there is something about all of those things that sets us up for a fall. And not a small one, either, but often a big one, often a spectacular one.

Do you want to know when you are most vulnerable to making a mess of your life, when you are most likely to squander everything that is precious to you? It's when things in your life are going really well.

When David, king of Israel, was on his way up, nothing could stop him. It was only after he built his palace and decided that he didn't have to go to war anymore that his thinking changed. It was at the top when he found himself wanting to cash in.

So, here's the point in the story where it becomes important that Nehemiah was a **"type of Christ."**

Why didn't Nehemiah turn out like so many lottery winners and professional athletes, like so many people we have known over the years?

Can you guess?

This is terribly important. And if you can't guess what I am about to say, I hope you listen very carefully, because this word of advice and caution and warning may be the only thing that keeps you from wasting everything that God has given to you.

Nehemiah, like Jesus, like so many other people of faith who have gone before us, did not lose sight of what he had come to do, the purpose of his life. God had saved him and rescued him and set him aside for a special purpose, just as God has saved you and rescued you and set you aside for a special purpose.

What kept Nehemiah focussed was the same thing that kept Jesus focussed – and I hope the same thing that keeps all of us focussed – namely, that we live our lives with a purpose that is larger than ourselves, larger than our own happiness, larger than our bank accounts and retirement savings.

We recognize that with prosperity comes more responsibility, not less.

Let me put it this way: if your life has purpose, then it will have meaning. And if your life has meaning, if you remember where your success has come from and who has made your prosperity possible, then you will not be susceptible to all of the temptations that inevitably come with money and success and power and achievement.

Let me ask you, What keeps you from throwing it all away? What keeps you from squandering everything that God has given you?

That would be a good question to ponder in your quiet time in the coming week.