

What do you do when you've experienced a great comeback? That's not a rhetorical question- this is audience participation time. What do you do when you experience a great comeback? Once everything's been said and done and the victory is won, what do we do? We celebrate, right? No matter what the comeback consisted of, once it's complete it's time to celebrate. If you've recovered from a terrible illness, once you're well again it's time to celebrate. If you found a job after being unemployed, it's time to celebrate. If you achieved that weight-loss goal it's time to put on those clothes you've been waiting to wear and celebrate.

In 2013 the Boston Redsox completed an impressive comeback. In 2012 they finished in last place- 26 games behind the Yankees, which means they went from worst to first in the span of a year and reached the World Series.. In the days leading up to the final home stand of that series, a very generous friend gave Harbor's staff tickets to game six. Because of their generosity, John, Jed and I were there at game six when the Redsox won the 2013 World Series!

Oh man that was a fun night. Elation. Reveling. Shouting for joy. Jumping up and down. Heart racing. Perma-grin on our faces. I'll never forget it. When we left Fenway park that night the streets were filled with people celebrating. As we walked to Kenmore square I couldn't imagine getting on the T and heading home (never mind that the crowds were so thick it would have been impossible), I wanted drink it all in and experience every last moment. I walked from Kenmore down Boylston all the way to Boston Common. I was surrounded everywhere I looked by a celebration. It was amazing.

No one needs an instruction manual for a moment like that. No one needs to take a class to learn what to do. When the comeback is complete we celebrate! But how do you complete a spiritual comeback? What do you do when you've made the decision to return to God? What do you do when He allows you to step out of the ruins of a broken life back into the shelter of His arms? That's what we're going to learn today.

We are in the middle of a yearlong series of messages taking us through the Bible from cover to cover (Garden to City 2016). We believe that it's within God's story that we find the meaning and purpose for our own stories. The point of all this is to learn what Scripture teaches us about God. In these pages we learn about our Creator and we discover His great love for us- how He designed us to be- and who we are in Him.

Today we wrap up another section of this journey. How do you complete a spiritual comeback? I think we can learn a lot from the way Israel responds here in the final chapters of the book of Nehemiah. When we began this series four weeks ago, Nehemiah along with most of the people of Israel were living in exile in Persia. Jerusalem, their hometown, was in ruins and the great wall which once protected the city had been torn down. Over the last few weeks we watched as Nehemiah prayed to God for the ability to return home and repair what had been broken. God allows that to happen. Despite the huge logistical challenge they faced, and even with opposition from enemies and his own countrymen, Nehemiah leads the people and they complete the project. We read about it in chapter 6.

15 So on October 2 the wall was finished—just fifty-two days after we had begun. **16** When our enemies and the surrounding nations heard about it, they were frightened and humiliated. They realized this work had been done with the help of our God.

Amazingly, it took them less than 60 days to finish the work. In less than two months their circumstances have shifted from living in constant worry of attack- always looking over a shoulder and never feeling safe- to living secure and confident within those great walls of protection.

Please note that this is not simply a comeback involving bricks and mortar. It's not just the physical

wall of Jerusalem that has been reconstructed. In the midst of all the rebuilding, the people experience a spiritual re-awakening too. They return to God, which is even more significant than the achievement of repairing broken walls, but please pay very close attention to the way that they celebrate their comeback.

First they reflected on what had been overcome. (Nehemiah 8)

1 all the people assembled with a unified purpose at the square just inside the Water Gate. They asked Ezra the scribe to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had given for Israel to obey. 2 So on October 8 Ezra the priest brought the Book of the Law before the assembly, which included the men and women and all the children old enough to understand. 3 He faced the square just inside the Water Gate from early morning until noon and read aloud to everyone who could understand. All the people listened closely to the Book of the Law.

8 They read from the Book of the Law of God and clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage.

9 Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were interpreting for the people said to them, "Don't mourn or weep on such a day as this! For today is a sacred day before the Lord your God." For the people had all been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

The people were weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. Think about that for a moment. God's people have just completed a monumental undertaking. The amount of work they've completed is astonishing. This is a time for jubilation if ever there was one, but instead, the people are moved to tears. Why?

If you've ever been through a traumatic experience- something where the stakes are life & death- then you know what's happening here. After everything is resolved there is a tide of emotion that breaks over you. You've been living on adrenaline and fear and worry, and when that time has passed, once the dust has settled, there comes a moment of recognition. "That was so scary!" "What we just went through- we came that close!" You begin to replay the experience in your mind. You begin to see just how serious the situation was. You reflect.

I think that's what's happening here for God's people. They've been scattered to the winds. They've been living in fear. They've been so far from God for so long, that now, hearing from His word, in the context of that experience, it hits them right in the heart. They're moved. They begin to understand that all that time spent adrift and broken and cut off from God- it did not have to be that way. God had warned them- repeatedly- that if they chose to step out on Him, if they chose to place their faith in anything outside of Him, there would be consequences. As they listen to the word of God spoken over them, they are forced to examine the waywardness of their own hearts. They strayed from Him. Spiritual adultery. That's what they had committed.

Have you been there? Have you ever come face to face with the consequences of your own waywardness? Have you ever had that moment of reflection where you realize that the path you've taken with your life, was actually taking you further away from God?

Israel has that moment, collectively, as a nation, but they don't remain in that place. The next thing we see them do is really important. They repent. (Chapter 9)

On October 31 the people assembled again, and this time they fasted and dressed in burlap and sprinkled dust on their heads. 2 Those of Israelite descent separated themselves from all foreigners as they confessed their own sins and the sins of their ancestors. 3 They remained standing in place for three hours while the Book of the Law of the Lord their God was read aloud to them. Then for three more hours they confessed

their sins and worshiped the Lord their God. 4 The Levites—(Jeshua, Bani, Kadmiel, Shebaniah, Bunni, Sherebiah, Bani, and Kenani)—stood on the stairway of the Levites and cried out to the Lord their God with loud voices.

38*The people responded, “In view of all this, we are making a solemn promise and putting it in writing. On this sealed document are the names of our leaders and Levites and priests.”*

What is repentance?

Scripture teaches us that repentance is a significant, personal, life-changing decision. Repentance is characterized by:

- an understanding of the seriousness of sin (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:1-3)
- a deep desire to be forgiven (Psalm 51:1-3; Hebrews 9:14)
- and a determined commitment to change behavior and thoughts.

Jesus’ gospel message includes a call to repentance, which leads to a change in direction—turning from our own pursuits to obedience and seeking God’s Kingdom.

Rejoice/Celebrate

Two choirs were formed and they marched in opposite directions around the wall.

Nehemiah 12

43*Many sacrifices were offered on that joyous day, for God had given the people cause for great joy. The women and children also participated in the celebration, and the joy of the people of Jerusalem could be heard far away.*

Nehemiah 8:

10*And Nehemiah continued, “Go and celebrate with a feast of rich foods and sweet drinks, and share gifts of food with people who have nothing prepared. This is a sacred day before our Lord. Don’t be dejected and sad, for the joy of the Lord is your strength!”*

Jesus is the reason our comeback is possible

-He completed the greatest comeback of all time (resurrection)

1Corinthians 15:

Let me now remind you, dear brothers and sisters, of the Good News I preached to you before. You welcomed it then, and you still stand firm in it. 2 It is this Good News that saves you if you continue to believe the message I told you—

3*I passed on to you what was most important and what had also been passed on to me. Christ died for our sins, just as the Scriptures said. 4 He was buried, and he was raised from the dead on the third day, just as the Scriptures said.*

Israel’s comeback in the book of Nehemiah should provide us all with a great example of how to return to God, but let me say this, it pales in comparison with the comeback that is available to us today.

Israel’s comeback is awesome, but it’s just a shadow in comparison with God has made available to us today. They had rebuilt city walls and a return to God’s promises, but we get to experience the grace of Christ.

Because of Jesus comeback, we get to experience a comeback victory too!

1 Corinthians 15:54b-58

“Death is swallowed up in victory.

55

O death, where is your victory?

O death, where is your sting?"

56 For sin is the sting that results in death, and the law gives sin its power. **57** But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.

58 So, my dear brothers and sisters, be strong and immovable. Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.

I had a conversation with (*) someone a couple of weeks ago and we were talking about this series. They were having trouble relating to the "Comeback" theme. Their experience was that they had accepted Christ when they were young, so they couldn't identify with the concept of coming back to God because they couldn't remember a time when they were apart. I remember thinking. Wow! That's my story too. I made the decision to be baptized when I was 9-years old. I can't remember a time when I was truly apart from God. I'm sure that's true of some of you in here today as well. If that's the case for you, it's wise for us to remember that our comeback story is not based on us choosing to follow Christ for all these years. It's based on what Christ did for us. We still need Him today just as much as did on the day we first placed our trust in Him- even if that was decades ago.

Listen, if you've already completed a comeback to God- if you can already stand and say, "I've committed my life to Christ. He's my savior and the leader of my life." I have two instructions for you today and the first is this:

Don't forget who gave you the privilege of being called a son or a daughter of God. Don't forget that you were bought with a price. Don't forget that the hope you have in Christ is not something you earned but a gracious gift. It is easy, with time, to begin to take our salvation for granted. It's easy, with time, to become self-satisfied, and even smug about our position as victors over sin and death. This is dangerous. Our victory is a shared victory. Jesus defeated sin and death when he walked out of that tomb, and He delights in sharing that victory with us, but may it never be said of us, that we took our faith for granted. Don't forget that Jesus paid a terrible price so that you could comeback to God.

My second instruction is this: If you've already completed a comeback to God, work to give others that same opportunity. In his letter to the church in Corinth, Paul says, "*Always work enthusiastically for the Lord, for you know that nothing you do for the Lord is ever useless.*" (1 Corinthians 15:58) Don't become complacent. There is work to be done. Some of us have been sitting on the sidelines for too long. It's time to involve ourselves in the comeback work that God is bringing about in the lives of people all around us. **36** When (Jesus) saw the crowds, he had compassion on them because they were confused and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. **37** He said to his disciples, "The harvest is great, but the workers are few. **38** So pray to the Lord who is in charge of the harvest; ask him to send more workers into his fields." (Matthew 9:36-38)

If you've already completed your comeback story with God, don't forget that Christ made that comeback possible and He is calling you to action, not spectatorship, so that others can have the opportunity to find their way back to Him too.

Some of you here today are still in the middle of your comeback story with God. Some of you are here, because you are searching for hope in the middle of a hopeless time. You're here because you are searching for joy in the middle of a joyless time. Maybe you're in need of love in the middle of loveless time. You're searching for God in the middle of a Godless time.

In John 10:10 (ICB) Jesus said, "I came to give life- life in all its fullness" **11** "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. **12** A hired hand will run when he sees a wolf coming. He will abandon the sheep because they don't belong to him and he isn't their shepherd. And so the wolf attacks them and scatters the flock. **13** The hired hand runs away because he's working only for the money and doesn't really care about the sheep.

14 "I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, **15** just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. (John 10:11-15 NLT)

Listen, if you're in need of a spiritual comeback, I've got great news, it's available to you. Jesus laid down His life so that you could come back to God. He loves you. He wants you to experience life in all its fullness. Grabbing on to that hope is a simple but profound process. In fact we've already been talking about what it looks like today.

- Reflecting on what's been overcome- Acknowledging your sin, your brokenness, your waywardness
- Repenting and turning to God
- Celebrating (Baptism- dying to an old way of life, buried with Jesus, resurrected to new life)

Next Steps to Completing my comeback story.