We come to the end of the sermon series “Amazing Things Can Happen…” Today is the eleventh and last message.

In the last couple of months, we have learned many significant lessons from the book of Nehemiah: Amazing Things Can Happen when we pray, when we plan, when we work together, when we overcome antagonism, when we stop strife, when we stay steadfast, when we welcome joy, when we confess, when we are committed, and with thanksgiving. Today’s message is “Amazing Things Can Happen Despite Us.”

Now, we arrive at this final chapter after journeying alongside Nehemiah, Ezra, and the people of God in Jerusalem. In the previous chapters, the walls of the city are finished and all the gates are in place. People are coming back to the city to live there and rebuild it. The Temple is fully functional. So far, we have witnessed a miraculous rebuilding of the city and the people.

We finished the last message learning about the revival that was taking place with people honoring God with jubilant thanksgiving and worship. They were so happy and loud that “The joy of Jerusalem was heard far away.” (12:43) Everyone knew they were celebrating, and everything seemed to point out to a great and bright future for them, but they regressed.

After everything they had accomplished, all the trauma and opposition they had endured, finally, they have their homes back, and things are looking up great, only to backslide.

Can you believe it? Backslide means, “To relapse into bad habits, behavior, or undesirable activities.”

Have you ever done that? You got a great life going on. Things are looking positive at your school or job. You are in a good place with God, in your relationships, and in your personal wellness. It did not come easy. It was a difficult journey of ups and downs, missing opportunities, and overcoming challenges. All the struggles seemed to be in the past, you said your prayers, you worked hard, but somehow, you get back to the things you were just saved from and squander all the wellness, peace, success, and goodness because you went back to the old ways.

Are we insane? It is often said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result.

This world is crazy and drives us nuts sometimes. But my guess is that more often than not, we are responsible for our madness when we keep putting ourselves in places, situations, and relationships we were just saved from because we don’t belong there. Yet, there we go, straight to pain and suffering. This is what happened in Nehemiah 13, which is madness.

If you recall, in chapter 10, the people made four vows: they committed to obey God’s Word, they vowed to keep holy relationships, they promised to keep the Sabbath, and they agreed to support the work of the Temple.

Nevertheless, some 10-12 years later, they had broken every one of their commitments. They made these vows in the first place because they realized they had failed to live up to the people they were called to be. Yet, here we are again, with broken and empty promises.

This how it happened, chapter 13,

While this was taking place I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of King Artaxerxes of Babylon I went to the king. After some time I asked leave of the king and returned to Jerusalem. I then discovered the wrong that Eliashib had done on behalf of Tobiah, preparing a room for him in the courts of the house of God. And I was very angry, and I threw all the household furniture of Tobiah out of the room. (6-8)

Here is some context. After completing the wall, Nehemiah left Jerusalem and returned to his duties in the Persian court serving the king. He was gone from Jerusalem for anywhere from 10 to 12 years. While in Jerusalem, he dealt with the enemies, organized the people, rebuilt the wall, set up the infrastructure for the repopulated city, and led a great celebration of dedication.

However, chapter 13 records what Nehemiah discovered when he returned: the enemy using the Temple as his permanent residence.

Can you believe this? Tobiah was one of the individuals who was attacking and mocking them to make them stop the rebuilding of the wall. But now, he is dwelling inside the Temple, like a king. He had been an enemy of God and a thorn in Nehemiah’s side. Nehemiah dealt with him many times before and ensured that he was never allowed inside the walls.

Eliashib had been entrusted with a privileged responsibility, but he misused his authority. This was ­an offense against God and a betrayal against the Levites and the people. In verse 7, Nehemiah called it “an evil thing.”

This made Nehemiah very angry, and rightly so. This was not only about Tobiah being an enemy and making the Temple his home, but more about the priest Eliashib failing to maintain the dignity of the house of God and his own.

Nehemiah was deeply grieved because it made him question the lasting value of the spiritual revival he witnessed when last in Jerusalem. It was like it did not happen.

How is that for backsliding? God had delivered them from people like Tobiah and gave them back their homes, but now they were making their bed with him.

Furthermore, as I mentioned before, they broke each vow they made. As Nehemiah learned more about how things were going, it says that,

“I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them.” (10)

“In those days I saw in Judah people treading wine presses on the sabbath.” (15)

“In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.” (23)

Not only was the house of God taken by the enemy as a personal residence, but it was forsaken by the people too. They stopped contributing to the work of the Temple so much that the Levites and singers had to go back to the fields to make a living.

Do you remember what they said in chapter 10, “We make a firm agreement in writing, and on that sealed document are inscribed the names of our officials, our Levites, and our priests.”? Well, that was no more.

They also failed to keep their commitments to honor the Sabbath and not marry their children to people like Tobiah—people that wished their demise.

As we can see, the ending of the book of Nehemiah is not what we may have expected as we saw the story unfold. We would think that the last chapter of this great book would contain encouraging and compelling stories of how God’s people took their spiritual commitment to the next level. But, on the contrary, within a few years, they went spiritually flat and returned to their old ways of doing things. In other words, they failed once again.

I know we can relate to this because our good intentions and plans often fall by the wayside too. Sometimes we blatantly do what is wrong but more often we just kind of drift away, a little at a time.

Think of a flat tire, for example. Most flat tires don’t occur because of a blowout. Instead, they get flat because air leaks over time, and we don’t notice it until the car becomes difficult to steer. A flat tire causes great risk for you and those around you. It leaves you stranded, wasting precious time and energy.

The same thing happens when we backslide. It is hard to imagine we would do it willingly. But gradually, we can find ourselves drifting away from our faith and relationship with God. Sometimes we aren’t even aware of how far we have wandered until we are hurting, lost, and stranded. We may not notice it at first or don’t take it seriously, but like a flat tire, it would get us stuck at some point.

So, what is the message today? That we are terrible and hopeless? Of course not. If anything, this further proves the good news we have today: God accomplishes his purpose despite us. By “God’s purpose,” I mean our wellness, and by “despite us,” I mean our backsliding.

The apostle Paul was one that experienced and realized this human condition in himself when he said,

For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:22-25)

Paul was struggling with sin and temptation just like we do and just like the people in the book of Nehemiah did. But soon, he learned he did not have the strength in himself to overcome his brokenness, nor was God expecting him to do so. He realized that God could still use him despite himself, so he said, “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”

We can’t be saved by the rules we keep or the vows we make. They are powerless if our hearts are reluctant to obey. No, we are not saved by our power to keep rules or vows. We are not saved by any of our abilities, no matter how flashy they are (or should I say, “fleshy’?). There is only one thing that we can always count on: the grace of God through Jesus Christ. Only this grace can give us the power to overcome sin and harmful behaviors.

Do you know what the grace of God through Jesus Christ is? It is that despite us and our bad choices, God keeps showing up. If Jesus was willing to go to the cross for our transgressions and give us life, he will not give up on you because you keep stumbling.

If there is one thing the book of Nehemiah and the apostle Paul can teach us today, it is that God is not done with us; it is not over. No matter what your negative thoughts tell you or the haters say or what happens to you, it is not over.

You can mess your life completely up repeatedly, but God is not over with you. You can ruin everything, lose your way again and again, God will still be there, and you can still get your life right. Your best life is in front of you, with God, not behind you. This means we don’t have to convince God to want or have us; God already made a choice, just look at Jesus Christ and you will know the choice God made.

So, quit tripping and keep trying. Life is a process; faith is a process. We are all in a process in this life and God does not give up on us. If anything, our faith journey is a series of failures and new beginnings in which God is not through with us, and for that, we can say, “Thank you, Jesus!”

Now, what is up to us is to acknowledge our brokenness and needs and that we fall short. We need to stop pretending we don’t mess up or break our promises because if we are honest, we would confess that we don’t always follow what we know to be true, just, and kind.

So, we have two choices: we can abandon hope and keep living on a pattern of brokenness and destruction, or we trust God’s grace despite our failings and resolve to live out what Jesus teaches us. What do you choose?

There is a hymn that you may know, “Come, Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” that describes everything I have said so well. In the last verse, it says,

Oh, to grace how great a debtor  
Daily I’m constrained to be  
Let Thy goodness like a fetter  
Bind my wandering heart to Thee

Prone to wander, Lord I feel it  
Prone to leave the God I love  
Here’s my heart, oh take and seal it  
Seal it for Thy courts above

My friends, let us not let our broken past keep us from building up our future and doing what is right. Trust God’s grace, and soon you will see that Amazing Things Can Happen Despite Us.