

## **Introduction**

I'd like to begin this morning with an observation. Life is a marathon not a sprint. Most things in life, the worthwhile things at least, aren't quick and easy. They're long and hard.

You know what I'm talking about because you've experienced it. You have to lose 75 pounds. It's a marathon not a sprint. You need physical therapy. It's a marathon not a sprint. You try to build a successful business. It's a marathon not a sprint. You decide to get a college degree. It's a marathon not a sprint. You want to get out of debt. It's a marathon not a sprint. You desire to be physically fit. It's a marathon not a sprint. And on it goes.

There's no doubt about it. Life is a marathon not a sprint and the passage I read this morning, Nehemiah 3:1-8, tells us the best way to run it. It's "by the inch" and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

## **Rebuilding the Walls of Jerusalem**

In 587 BC, the Babylonians totally destroyed the city of Jerusalem, including its walls, and exiled a large portion of the Jewish population into foreign lands. About 50 years later, the Persians conquered the Babylonians. Their king, Cyrus, then allowed the Jews to return home to Judah. The events in Nehemiah took place approximately 100 years after that. Nehemiah was a Jew who had attained a high position in the Persian government, as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes. According to chapter 1, he heard the devastating news one day that Jerusalem's walls hadn't been rebuilt. So, he left Persia, went to Jerusalem, and led the Jews in rebuilding them.

Now, this task that Nehemiah took on was a formidable one. On the one hand, several enemies tried to sabotage the rebuilding efforts. On the other hand, there was the sheer magnitude of the work itself. The vast walls of Jerusalem were a shambles and the Jews had only the primitive tools of antiquity with which to rebuild them.

It was a daunting challenge and chapter 3 reveals how Nehemiah met it. This chapter is a catalogue of largely forgotten names and places. It shows an extraordinary feat of organization and concerted action. It's clear what Nehemiah did. He assigned to a large number of individuals and groups their own gate or small section of wall to rebuild. The verses I read, 1 through 8, are a sampling of that.

I'd summarize it this way. Looked at as a whole, rebuilding the gates and walls was simply overwhelming. But section by section, the Jews were able to rebuild them. With exemplary patience, each individual and group did their own small part until the gates and walls were finally completed. They rebuilt them, in other words, inch by inch.

### **Inch by Inch**

That's the story and there's a moral to it. How the Jews rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem, we should live our lives – inch by inch. Life is a marathon not a sprint. Because it is, the best way to run it is an inch at a time. Evangelist Earl Bailey said it well, "Life is hard by the yard but a cinch by the inch." He's right as our own life experiences tells us he is.

A lot of things in life are hard by the yard. Looked at in their entirety, they appear far too long or hard to ever accomplish or do. I can't lose 75 pounds, get through four years of college, pay off my debt, paint my whole house, and so on. Life is discouraging, hard, by the yard.

But it's a cinch by the inch. Two men were having a conversation. "I'm hungry enough to eat an elephant," the first man declared. "How could you possibly eat an elephant?" the second asked. Most of you know the reply, "One bite at a time." That's the way we should live our lives – one bite, one inch, at a time. Robert Schuller writes that "Inch by inch, anything's a cinch," and that's almost always true.

When something in your life looks insurmountable, break it down into its component parts. Take one small part or step and accomplish it. Then move on to the next small part or step and accomplish it. Do that patiently enough for a long enough period of time and you'll be shocked

at the things you can accomplish or do.

I heard a man give a weight loss testimony on TV. He had physical problems and his physician told him that he had to lose 75 pounds. "There's no way," he initially told the doctor but then decided to do the best he could. So he lost a pound. That didn't seem so bad and he lost another pound. That didn't seem so bad either and he lost still another pound. And so on it went until he lost all 75 of the pounds that he was supposed to. When asked how he did it, he answered: "I didn't lose 75 pounds. I knew I couldn't do that. I just lost one pound – 75 times."

That testimony illustrates our best strategy for living our lives. We should live them inch by inch, section by section, pound by pound, block by block, semester by semester, customer by customer, paragraph by paragraph, verse by verse, and so on. That's exactly how I got through law school, for instance. I took it one inch, one semester, at a time.

It's urgent that everyone does that, especially those of us who follow Jesus. I say that because so many aspects of our lives with Him are marathons not sprints. So, we need to approach them inch by inch. Let's take a look at three of the most significant of those.

### **Knowing the Bible**

The first is knowing the Bible. It's a fact that the vast majority of professing Christians don't know the Bible as they should. There are several reasons for that, the principal one of which is probably this. It's so intimidating and big! Look at my Bible, which isn't a study Bible. It has no notes in it. It contains 1,942 pages of text. That's a lot of text, 1,942 pages. The result is that Christians simply throw up their hands in despair. There's no way, they think, that they can know that much material. As one frustrated Christian told me: "It'd be a challenge for me to read a 50 page book. So how could I ever read the Bible?"

He asked and so I told him, "An inch at a time." Remember what the inch by inch strategy is. When something looks insurmountable, break it down into its component parts. Take one small part or step and

accomplish it. Then move on to the next small part or step and accomplish it and so on. That's how we should approach the Bible.

First, we break it down into its component parts. Let me ask you several questions in that regard. How many books are in the Bible? 66. How many chapters are in the Bible? 1189. How many verses are in the Bible? 31,173. How many words are in the Bible? 773,692.

Second, we take one small part and accomplish it and then move on to the next small part and accomplish it and so on. Consider this, for example. If you read and understand five verses a day, you'll cover the entire Bible in 17 years. Obviously, if you make it 10 verses a day, you'll cover it in 8½ years. Unless we don't live that long, all of us are capable of doing that.

My approach though is a different one. I approach the Bible paragraph by paragraph. I study it with commentaries, which outline each book, breaking it down into logical paragraphs. I read the verses that make up the paragraph and then what the commentary says about them, writing notes in my Bible as I do. During the past 30 years, I've studied every book of the Bible that way – paragraph by paragraph. I have with me this morning the Bible I used between the mid-70's and mid-80's. In the back, I kept a record of the books I studied that way. According to it, I studied the book of Ezekiel from 3/31/80 to 6/4/80. I mention Ezekiel because I did that same thing again this year. I started studying it paragraph by paragraph in May and finished it up in July, a week before last. Having done that twice and having read it through four or five times, I know the book well.

Does it take patience? Yes! With patience, are you able to do it? Yes! So do it. Patiently read, study, and know the Bible - inch by inch.

### **Change the World**

There's a second aspect of our lives with Jesus that we should approach inch by inch – changing the world. That's certainly our call isn't it? Jesus wants us to penetrate into our world and bring His

kingdom to it. There's a youth program that comes to Youngstown every summer to work in the inner city there. It's called *World Changers* and that's what Jesus calls us to be – world changers.

But how can we be that? Consider these statistics. There are 6,713,231,996 people in the world, 307,725,421 in the United States, and 240,420 in Mahoning County. Those are staggering numbers aren't they? How can we possibly bring God's kingdom to that many people?

I'll tell you. It's inch by inch, one person at a time. Social reformer Chuck Colson envisions just such an approach. He writes: **"You and I need to be models of reasoned compassion to our neighbors. Today the quickest way to change the way our culture thinks may seem the slowest: one person at a time, citizens transformed by the godly influence of fellow citizens."** Colson is right on the money. Instead of focusing on the world or even on our nation or county as a whole, let's focus on the specific individuals who make them up. I mean non-Christians that we ourselves know. Pray for those individuals, love them, reason with them, meet their needs, and let the light of our spirituality shine on them.

I have two unsaved people in my sphere of influence, for instance. I want them to come to Jesus and am acting that they will. I pray constantly for them, show the love of Jesus to them, and am waiting for an opportunity to tell them about Him.

Think about every one in the world who professes to follow Jesus. Now think about the unsaved people who are in their sphere of influence. How many of the 6,713,231,996 people on earth would that be? It's a large percentage I'm sure, well over 50%.

So that's the quickest and most effective way of changing our world. It's inch by inch – one person at a time.

### **Becoming Like Jesus**

There's a third aspect of our lives with Jesus that we should approach inch by inch. It's becoming like Him, also called sanctification.

Listen very carefully to what I'm going to say about that. Sanctification is process not event. Don't get me wrong. We can have one-time spiritual experiences here and there that accelerate our growth into Christlikeness. But those spiritual experiences aren't the essence of sanctification. Process is. We have to be trained in Christlikeness. That means that we do certain acts over long periods of time that allow the Holy Spirit to gradually transform us. The discipleship curriculum that we make available teaches you what those acts are.

So approach becoming like Jesus inch by inch or more accurately act by act. Learn the certain acts you need to do to become like Him and then patiently, for as long as it takes, do them.

Two weeks ago, for instance, I preached about humility and how to practice it. We do three things: refrain from pretending we are what we know we are not, refrain from presuming a favorable position for ourselves in any respect, and refrain from pushing the will of others. Since that sermon, I've done those three things 8 times that I can think of, each one making me a little more humble. I wonder how many more times I'll have to do them before the Holy Spirit can make me as humble as I should be? What if it's 500 more times or 1000 or even 10,000? It doesn't matter. Do you know why? It's because I'm pursuing humility inch by inch. I'm taking it one act, one opportunity to refrain, at a time.

So, if you aren't like Jesus in all the aspects of your life, don't despair. Be patient and commit yourself to the process of sanctification. You'll become like Him inch by inch, one act at a time, if you do.

## **Conclusion**

So that's the message of Nehemiah 3. It's one that will dramatically improve the quality of our persons and lives if we understand, believe, and apply it. Whether it's losing weight, getting a degree, getting out of debt, painting the house, knowing the Bible, changing the world, or becoming like Jesus – approach it inch by inch. Why? It's simple really. It's because life is hard by the yard but a cinch by the inch.