

Nehemiah: Walking by Faith in a Hostile World

Chapter One

Introduction

- From Jason's introduction of Nehemiah, we learned that although our bibles present Nehemiah as a 'standalone' book, in the Hebrew manuscripts Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one composition. That is why at the end of the lesson last week, he encouraged you all to read through both books, so that you could grasp the flow of its historical narrative and see how they share a similar backdrop, audience, and themes.
 - Probably the most significant theme in both books is God sovereignly working out his redemptive purposes in his own perfect timing and through responsible human agents, even those we would consider 'unlikely' (like Cyrus, and Artaxerxes).
 - Another theme—the written Word of God, which was the foundation for the re-establishment of worship and holy living. It is a moving force in both books, as are the written documents by those who opposed God's works and the kings who responded to them.
 - Another theme—both books present long lists of names, to show that it was not only the famous leaders who were called to do God's bidding and kingdom work, but all the covenant people of God. Everyone had a part in advancing God's purposes.
- So, let's get started...by reading Nehemiah 1:1-11
- As Nehemiah begins, we see that the story line of Ezra continues, although we jump forward thirteen years – which is still in the reign of King Artaxerxes, who had been on the throne in the latter chapters of Ezra and will in fact remain on the throne for some time to come.

- Nothing is known about Nehemiah's background apart from what is found in the book itself. He comes to us at the top of his profession as the king's cupbearer without us knowing the stages of him rising to this high position and place of influence.

- We're in a place called Susa. Most of your translations are going to have footnotes with an alternative reading 'the fortified city.' It was not the capital of Babylon nor the capital of the empire, but the winter residence of the Persian kings.
 - It is perhaps one of the most ancient cities in the world, located about 150 miles east of the Tigris River, about 250 miles west of Babylon, on the edge of the border of Iran.
 - It had been captured by Cyrus just about the time when the first wave of exiles had returned to Jerusalem—which is now in Nehemiah's time a hundred years in the past.
 - It's a huge city and the palace itself, where Nehemiah served the king, was situated on some mountains overlooked a river. The palace itself was huge, 70-80 feet high, with 72 columns—a wonderful place to winter. This was Nehemiah's domain, where he was cupbearer for King Artaxerxes.

- Nehemiah the king's cupbearer—a phenomenally important job. What Persian kings feared most was being poisoned. Therefore, they would find someone trustworthy beyond a doubt—and to this man, the king would entrust his very life. Nehemiah was chosen as that person.
 - Take note that Nehemiah was a Jew. Imagine that! Imagine entrusting your life to someone you have conquered! It says something about how the Jews took to exile. (Jere. 29:4-7)
 - The Jews in exile were acquiescent and law-abiding. They did not respond to their exile by forming militia groups bent on making life as difficult as possible for their masters—in this case the Persians.

- It says to us an enormous amount about Nehemiah's character and integrity. Here, at the beginning, Nehemiah appears as one of the most admirable men imaginable. We have a glimpse of Christlikeness in Nehemiah's demeanor; godliness demonstrated in flesh and blood in a Persian court.
- Though later on in the story we catch a glimpse of the temperamental side of Nehemiah's character when he pulled out the hair of this certain individual because he was so angry, we have presented to us in the beginning a godly man and a man of PRAYER. In fact, it's the one feature that stands out and shine above all his other good character traits.
- Let's look first at the 'setting for prayer' (v. 2)

“...that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them, concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.”

 - Hanani. Scholars vacillate. He may just be a brother in the sense that he is a fellow Jew. But he may also be his true blood brother because of something that is later said in chapter 7.
 - What is interesting is that Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem, but his heart was still burdened for the Lord's work of restoring his people and the city. He embraces the sentiment of the psalmist in exile – Ps. 137:1-6.
 - Despite not having ever been there, Nehemiah asks all kinds of questions.
 - Application: We Christians should be like that. We should reflect the burden of Nehemiah's heart. There should be nothing more important than the state of the Kingdom of God.

- What did he hear? Bad news. “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.” (v. 3)
- This reference to the walls being burn down and gates destroyed by fire is most likely not referring to when Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem in 587BC, 120-140 years in the past. It most likely is referring to something that emerges in Ezra, chapter 4—something that took place in between Ezra and Nehemiah. The work on the walls and some of the gates had begun, but it had stopped by King Artaxerxes.
- When the copy of King Artaxerxes’ letter was read, it wasn’t read in the timeframe of Ezra 4. It was actually looking to something that took place around 450, just a few years before what takes place in the first chapter of Nehemiah.
- So, what they were ceasing from was not working on the temple, because it had already been completed in 515BC. Eighteen years after the initial return under Cyrus in 538BC, temple reconstruction was complete. Sometime between the close of Ezra and the opening of Nehemiah, the work on the rebuilding of the city walls had evidently begun and then stopped and been destroyed again.
- Understandably in the eyes of the Persians rebuilding the temple was one thing; building defensive walls was quite another. King Artaxerxes and his people must have wondered: who were the Jews defending themselves against? The Persians, perhaps? For the King, there was only one thing to do: stop the building of the walls.
- Nehemiah was in a tough position. His heart was heavy. As the king’s cupbearer, he couldn’t take a week off. He had to stay put and do the king’s bidding, looking the part, playing the role.
- His trustworthiness was unquestionable. But if he were to suddenly begin advocating for the city of Jerusalem and the rebuilding of the

city's walls AGAINST the king's expressed orders, his position could well be deemed as threatening and his life brought to a swift end!

- So, what does he do? “As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.” (v. 4)
 - Initially Nehemiah did sit down and weep and mourn, but he continued fasting and prayer without skipping a beat in the performance of his duties as cupbearer to the king.
 - For now, at least, all Nehemiah can do is pray.
 - There is this line in a song most of which most of us are familiar—from ‘What a Friend We have in Jesus’...

Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged: Take it to the Lord in prayer.

- But prayer wasn't the last resort, but the first. For Nehemiah, prayer was action!
- If you compare the dates mentioned in the opening verses of chapters 1 and 2, three and possibly five months have passed, to be understood that Nehemiah prayed continuously—“without ceasing.”
- You can see several things here. You see his patience, the stickability of prayer. He's praying not knowing, not understanding, if he is to play a role in this situation other than using him as a vehicle of prayer. So here is Nehemiah—disciplined, patient in prayer—waiting on God's timing and God's insight.
- We are often impatient when it comes to prayer, aren't we?

- Nehemiah had caught a vision of the purposes of God beyond his own sphere. At this point it wasn't clear to him God's plan for him.
- And yet, Nehemiah was disciplined in prayer, praying while going about his work. He did not give up. He did not forget his brothers and sisters in Jerusalem. His heart was engaged. He lived for others rather than himself.
- This reveals a man who had what we might call a regular quiet time, one who was in the habit of meeting with God in his word and in prayer. He was much like Daniel before him.
- This is a mark of a true child of God—to develop over time a habit of prayer. R.C. Ryle in his book 'A Call to Prayer,' says this:

I ask...whether you pray, because a habit of prayer is one of the surest marks of a true Christian. All the children of God on earth are alike in this respect. From the moment there is any life and reality about their religion, they pray. Just as the first sign of life in an infant when born into the world is the act of breathing, so the first act of men and women when they are born again is praying. This is one of the common marks of all the elect of God.

- Everything Nehemiah achieved for the Kingdom of God is based on this initial portrait of his commitment to daily prayer. Ask yourself, "Am I committed in this way?"
- Nehemiah's prayer had structure/form—a similar structure of the prayer the Lord taught his disciples: The Lord's Prayer
- Like bookends, prayer begins and ends with ADORATION

“O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep His commandments.” (v. 5)

- O LORD God of heaven is Nehemiah's favorite way of referring to God. Nehemiah knew God as transcendent in his majesty. His thought of God was high and lofty. This designation for God helped him to remember who God is and who he was. For him, it put God's friend or foe in his place.
 - These opening words of God show us that Nehemiah's mind is saturated with God, whether it be God's greatness, or faithfulness, or redemptive love—and ends in verse 11 with God, with those who “delight to fear your name.”
 - When we pray, we need to begin with God, speaking to the “God of heaven”—to our Father, who art in heaven, whose name is to be hallowed and end with “For Yours in the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.”
- Then it moves to CONFESSION (vs. 6b,7)
- “...let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.”
- Notice that it's not just Israel that sinned, but he himself had sinned. He puts himself right in there with them. He takes collective responsibility for the sins of God's people.
 - One particular sin is singled out: the people of Israel who were privileged to be called out to be God's and given the Law, disobeyed it. That was the real reason behind the mess they were now in.
- There's REPENTANCE

- As sin was the cause of trouble, so the way back to blessing is to repent of that sin, to turn from it and turn back to the Lord. Confess and forsake and enter into renewed fellowship with God and the blessings that comes from that.
- However, true repentance is certainly missing in the church today.
- We skate so closely to the grace promised in the gospel that we fall into the trap of “sin[ing] that grace may abound. For sure, grace covers all our sin, but it is God’s grace that leads us to mortify it, not to tolerate it.
- Nehemiah will have none of that. He understands all too clearly that apart from genuine, heartfelt repentance which involves forsaking confessed sin and turning back to God, there is no forgiveness. For him—and for all true saints of all ages—a forgiven life leads to a holy life.

○ The REQUEST (v. 11)

“O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

- ...in the sight of Artaxerxes, who has stopped the rebuilding work in Jerusalem.
- V. 8 – Nehemiah’s touching on God’s covenant-making and covenant-keeping nature. God had made certain promises to Moses that included the behavior and responses of His people (v. 8).
- V. 10 – Nehemiah reminds the Lord that the people are His “servants” and His “people” whom He has “redeemed by his great power and strong hand.

- The covenant between God and His people is like a marriage. He had pledged Himself to them. Nehemiah is saying, ‘You can’t abandon Your people without going back on Your Word.’”
- So, he pleads now for God’s mercy (Ex. 34:6) Nehemiah is asking in effect that he might be used in some way to help in the cause of the kingdom. How exactly this is going to happen is not clear to Nehemiah.
- But until things became clearer to Nehemiah, all he could do was wait in the spirit of the psalmist:

I waited patiently for the LORD;
 He inclined to me and heard my cry,
 He drew me up from the pit of destruction,
 Out of the miry bog,
 And set my feet upon a rock,
 Making my steps secure (Ps. 40:1-2)

- In closing – Nehemiah waited for three and possibly upward of five months, living life to the glory of God in his role as cupbearer and in a hostile world and praying all the while for God to answer his heartfelt prayer. And he does. Stay tuned...

Until then, read through Ezra and Nehemiah again. If you haven’t yet done so, do—and see how in both books the truth that rebuilding the Law of God in the hearts of God’s people and helping them become a people of prayer is in truth a spiritual life-sustaining wall that no enemy can tear down—a truth that we need to cling to and apply.