

Nehemiah Ch 1:1-11

Nehemiah is a book that countless *generations* have surveyed for *inspiration* and insight as to what it means to *be*, or what God desires *in* godly leaders. And it's our prayer that whatever God would have us to glean, or take *in* and be challenged *by* or changed *through* that we might have ears to hear that as well. Having just come through the book of Ezra we don't need much background information, you're pretty well up to speed with what's going on. The nation was released from captivity out of Babylon, some 50,000 Jews returned to rebuild the temple and the city, they got started, the enemy got in there and put a temporary stop to it, years went by and God began to move again in the hearts of His people to finish His work. And he did that by using Haggai and Zechariah to employ His word, and the people allowed the word of God to serve as proper motivation and make for practical application and they began the work again, the temple was finished and as they had the ceremonial dedication, man there was a great celebration.

Nearly 60 yrs go by (Somewhere in there the book of Esther takes place) and then Ezra himself enters the equation, he's excited to get to Jerusalem, gets there with another 2,000 or so Jews only to find them in total disarray once again spiritually speaking. They'd married pagan women, given their daughters to pagan sons and Ezra was devastated, speechless and stunned, he just began to weep, to mourn, to fast and pray, long story short the nation repented, made right where they'd wronged and that's how the book of Ezra closes.

The Book of Nehemiah picks up on the heels of Ezra some 12-15 yrs later, Artaxerxes is on the throne, who would've been the step son of Queen Esther, Artaxerxes dad took Esther as his wife, so it's kind of an interesting historical circle that's all taking place during these books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, they were all somewhat contemporaries, with in a generation or so of each other, Ezra and Nehemiah overlapping one another. And as we come into the book of Nehemiah we realize that the temple has been built, but the walls are still depleted, they're in ruins, just rubble which obviously translates into trouble for Jerusalem. No walls, no defense, it's open season on your city, walls were vital for a city's survival/stability/success and security. And Nehemiah is going to emerge as a leader right up there in the ranks of the likes of Moses, Joshua, Samuel, and David, just an outstanding uncompromising godly leader.

Vs1-3

Now there are a few things here that we want to draw out, one thing we note about Nehemiah is that although he excelled at leadership, keeping written records wasn't his forte. Let me rephrase that, he gives us all the necessary information, but not necessarily in a palatable order. For instance he identifies himself in vs 1, and he tells us who his father is so as to distinguish himself from other Nehemiahs that may be written about (beyond that we know nothing of his father). But then he tells us that it's the month of Chislev (which is fine, to you and me that means December) but then he tells us that it's the 20th yr... The 20th yr of what?

At this point we don't know, now later on he'll tell us that he's referencing the reign of King Artaxerxes, but as for now we're sort of left guessing. Having said that, because he tells us in ch 2 to what he's referencing, that lets us know exactly what point in history we're speaking of here because this particular Artaxerxes ruled Persia from 464-423 B.C. so 20 yrs into his reign in their 9th month puts us in Dec 444 B.C.

He also tells us that he's in Shushan the citadel meaning that he was in the palace of the King of Persia, but we don't know *why* he's there, or what he's doing there.

We just get the idea that he must've been a man of some form of importance, or prominence having access *to* or even living *in* the palace like this. Later on in vs 11 we'll read where he identifies himself as the king's cupbearer. Now originally the cupbearer was simply the man who tasted the king's wine to make sure it wasn't poisoned, but the office actually wound up becoming quite dignified because it was one that was continually in the king's presence, at the king's table, he held the king's confidence and in certain instances may even act as an advisor to the king, so the king's cupbearer was actually an office that wielded incredible influence. And the fact that he being a Jew held such a high position in this foreign land of captivity should tell us a few things about his character. Remember when they were 1st taken into captivity we read in Daniel where, "*...the king instructed Ashpenaz, the master of his eunuchs, to bring some of the children of Israel and some of the king's descendants and some of the nobles, young men in whom there was no blemish, but good-looking, gifted in all wisdom, possessing knowledge and quick to understand, who had ability to serve in the king's palace, and whom they might teach the language and literature of the Chaldeans.*" Dan 1:3-4. And of course that's how Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego were selected, but no doubt Nehemiah was selected in like manner, probably a good looking guy, gifted in wisdom, possessing knowledge, quick learner and all. And so he's serving in the king's palace.

Now since the Jews have been officially released for some time, he no doubt could've returned sooner and I don't presume to understand the circumstances that surrounded his decision to stay. But I do know that it proved to be something that God would use having the right guy in the right place at the right time to accomplish His will. Just as God had Joseph in Egypt, Daniel in Babylon, and Esther there a generation before God will place His people *where* they need to be *when* they need to be there to accomplish His work.

But what I would have you notice is that for Nehemiah this day began as an ordinary day, just like any other day, but it's a day that would change his life forever. You've heard it before, how that large doors so often swing on small hinges, it was just another day that Moses was out taking care of the sheep and God called him to be His prophet, and deliver the nation of Israel, it was just an ordinary day when David was out shepherding his father's flocks when God anointed him king over the nation. It was just another day in the life of a crew of fishermen when Jesus called Peter, Andrew, James and John, and taught them what it meant to be fishers of men.

What's my point, pay attention in your everyday ordinary life because you just don't know what a day holds in store what God may want to speak to you, or work into or through you in what would've otherwise been a commonplace conversation, or the same ol' work situation. This was just another day in the life of Nehemiah cupbearer to the king, and the primary plan of God for his life was about to come crashing down on him, consuming him, compelling him, and it all hinged on a question, a concern, his compassion for his people.

See it there in vs 2, his brother comes walking in (literally) Hanani was his brother, who'd been *in* Judah for some reason and had returned *from* Judah. And so in common conversation probably with regards to his trip Nehemiah asks him concerning the Jews and concerning Jerusalem. And that question started the dominos falling that would ultimately resolve in Nehemiah's calling. He was concerned, curious in a compassionate sort of way for the state of his people, of God's holy city Jerusalem. You see, what's your concern, your compassion, what is it that spurs your interest, that you care for and are especially considerate *of*? I don't presume to know the heart of God for you, but it could be that God is preparing you, persuading you, calling you to that area of concern in your life, could be that there's a reason you're concerned for it, because God is might be calling you to it.

If it concerns you to see what may at times seem to be an overwhelmed children's ministry, perhaps God's calling you to be involved, if it concerns you to see cups laying around, or bulletins left in the seats after services, maybe God's calling you to be apart of the cleaning ministry, or if the inner city ministry stirs up your compassion, perhaps God's leading you in that direction, and I realize that those are in house examples, but you get the idea. God's call *upon* him began with a concern *with in* him regarding the condition of the people and of the city. Today we hear the phrase, "Ask me if I care" but *care* and God's *call* are hand in glove, if you don't care about something, than that's definitely not God's call upon your life. There's a big difference between genuine concern and idle curiosity, Nehemiah was genuinely concerned.

I would imagine he anticipated *good* news, Ezra had been down there seeking to whip things into shape, of course that was at least 12-15 yrs ago, but you get the sense that he expected a good report. But instead he got the words, "Survivors, distress and disgrace" or reproach, now you start off by calling a people "Survivors" you're already casting negative light that way. "What do you mean, 'survivors?'" Far from a great nation living there, there was but a remnant who were struggling to survive, and rather than a magnificent city, Jerusalem was in shambles and where there'd once been great glory, now there was great reproach. Now compound that with the fact that the walls are also broken down and the city gates have been burned down. Which as I said a minute ago means that they were virtually, practically defenseless and were incredibly vulnerable to enemy attack, unwalled cities lived in constant stress and tension, worried about your wife or your children, never knowing when the enemy would attack or come in and brutalize, capitalize on that state of weakness.

And you begin to see the importance of having walls established around the Jerusalem of your heart, those things in place that make for your protection, not apathetically giving the enemy access to the inner recesses of your life and heart. That wall of prayer that Paul speaks of in the book of Philippians, the shield of faith and the breastplate of righteousness that he speaks of in Eph, that will safeguard you from the enemy onslaught. If the internet makes for a breach in the wall, cancel your service, if hanging out in a certain environment with your buds or your girlfriends makes for a breach in your commitment to Christ, wall it up, don't go there are be apart of that circle anymore. Because when the enemy finds a gap in the wall, he'll pour through it like a flood and seek to destroy your life. You'll find yourself fighting just to survive, but God has more for you than to merely survive, He doesn't even want us to settle for conquering the wiles of the wicked one. Remember when Paul was writing to the Romans about various things that he'd been subjected to and he said, "*Yet in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.*" Rom 8:37 But that's not where these guys are at right now, they're on the survival side, if you find yourself just fighting to survive ask the Lord to show you where perhaps there's been breach in the wall. Perhaps your prayer life lies in shambles, maybe the wall of the word of God has been broken down because you just haven't had time to dedicate to God's Word, could it be that the defense of good godly fellowship has been somewhat lacking and because of that you've found yourself more open to the "world" around you. Notice how Nehemiah responds to this news.

Vs4

Weeping, mourning, fasting, and praying, now that sounds strangely familiar doesn't it? Remember last week when we were studying Ezra, and when *he* heard of how the people had let down their guard personally, intermingling and marrying with pagans openly, he tore his garment, plucked out some of his hair and beard and sat down astonished.

He began to weep and to mourn, and to fast, and to pray, as you study the word you're going to find a common thread woven throughout the lives of the type of people God uses. They're people of compassion, who have a concern for the lives of others, because that's the heart of God, others oriented, like Ezra, Nehemiah could've said, "Too bad so sad for them, things would be different if they'd just get it through their heads to follow the Lord, obey His Word, be true to His purpose for their lives." But neither of them did that, they themselves had done nothing wrong, and had led lives in accordance with God's word, but seeing and hearing of others who were floundering and failing in their walk with God broke their hearts, they led intercessory/other's oriented kinda lives. And you could go down the list, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Joseph, the majority of the prophets with the exception perhaps of Jonah, Paul, and of course Jesus, they all led lives that were generally consumed with the welfare and well being of others. Their lives were spent caring *for* and looking out *after* others, Nehemiah would be no different, it's like he saw the people there as sheep with out a shepherd, and just like the Lord he's being moved with compassion for them. We've spoken before of the fact that before we're greatly *used* we have to be greatly *broken*, before does a work *with* Nehemiah He begins this deep work of brokenness *in* Nehemiah.

Another pattern you'll find predominant in the lives of the people God uses is that of prayer, God uses people of prayer. We mentioned it Sunday, Jesus was a Man of prayer (what more needs to be said regarding our need to be a people of prayer) Paul was a man of prayer, read the Psalms/2nd Sam 7 tell me David wasn't a man of prayer, Samuel/Moses, they were men of prayer. Nehemiah was a man of prayer, we need to be a people of prayer, weeping with those who weep, fasting, praying, seeking the heart of God for the people of God. Leadership demands prayer, we'll find Nehemiah praying all the time, if your vision is so big that only God can accomplish it, than prayer is imperative, if you *don't* need prayer to accomplish your vision, than let me challenge you, your vision isn't big enough. God uses people of prayer, people of absolute understanding of their dependence upon Him and need to be on their faces *before* Him.

Vs5-7

What's coming into focus here? Nehemiah's pride and arrogance? No, his humility, remember that collective identity we spoke of last week that we seen in Ezra's life as well. Here it is in Nehemiah, "We have acted very corruptly against You, we haven't kept the commandments, or the statutes, or the ordinances which You commanded Moses." Nehemiah hadn't done anything wrong personally, but he recognizes the guilt of his nation collectively of which he's apart of, it's guilt by association. It's a "We're all in this thing together" type mentality, rather than a Pharisaic attitude that stresses the wrong of others and the righteousness of myself, that's called pride. Nehemiah gets down to the nitty gritty, we've sinned, I've sinned, my father's house has sinned, he's not making excuses for it, just casting himself upon the mercy of God regarding it. God uses men/women of humility, and humility will plainly and openly confess sin *to* the Lord in seeking the forgiveness *of* the Lord.

Along with that goes proper perspective, Nehemiah begins with an "Our Father which art in Heaven" kind of prayer, "You're in Heaven, I'm on earth, You're great and awesome, I'm a sinner, You keep Your word and Your covenant in Mercy, we have acted very corruptly against You." Proper perspective of who God is, and who I'm not is a healthy, humbling thing. And it's good to be reminded of who God is... Warren Wiersbe says at this point, "If you are experiencing great affliction, and are about to undertake a great work, then you need the great power, great goodness, and great mercy of a great God."

Proper perspective is essential, not only because it's humbling *to* us, but it's helpful *for* us as well in building our faith, reminding us of the fact that no matter how great the task, with God nothing will be impossible and His calling upon my life is His equipping *of* my life.

Vs8-11

You see there's that writing weakness again, "Grant me mercy in the sight of this man." What man? "Oh yeah, I was the king's cupbearer." So he's asking for favor in the sight of the king regarding the request he's about to make *before* the king. Few quick things and we're done. As for the type of people God will use, what does vs 9 and 10 reveal to us? That Nehemiah was a man of God's Word, God uses people who study His Word.

As he's praying he's quoting God's Word back to Him, "God remember You said this, now I'm calling upon You to perform this." And this is a powerful way to approach the Lord in prayer, by asking Him to remember His promises, by pleading God's promises before Him. Now sometimes it gets on my nerves when my kids come to me, "Daddy you said..." and they remind me of my word, not so with our heavenly Father, He delights in it and at times demands it before our prayers are effective. We read in Ps 81:10 "*I am the LORD your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt; Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.*" The idea there being that until you open your mouth in faith, trusting in My Word, I won't fill it. One of the ways we show a practical trust in God to fulfill His Word is to bring before Him the promises of His Word. "This is Your Word, what You said, You would do, and You are a God who keeps Your Word," and in so doing I'm saying You said it, I believe it, and I'm waiting upon You regarding it. God uses men/women of the Word.

2^{ndly} We notice that Nehemiah acknowledges that God's redeeming power has everything to do with Him, and nothing to do with us. Vs 10, "Your servants, and Your people whom You've redeemed by Your great power and Your strong hand."

Finally I would have you see the transition that is made in Nehemiah throughout the course of this ch, and that transition happens *in him* through his prayer *for them*. Our praying *for* a people has a way of preparing us to be a vessel of blessing *to* those people. He begins by crying out for them, asking God to do a work on behalf of them, and by the time he's finished (ultimately 4 months later we'll see in ch 2) he's saying, "Here am I Lord send me, I'm willing to be the vessel through which You work to accomplish Your agenda." Remember there in Matt 9 when Jesus told the 12 to pray that the Lord of the Harvest would send laborers into the field, then in ch 10 do you remember who He sent? He sent them, through prayer, they were prepared to be used of the Lord, and sent *by* the Lord into the fields of that to which He'd commission them. It began with concern, wound up as a call, Nehemiah was a man of compassion, a person of prayer, of proper perspective, humility, a man of the word, someone who was willing to allow God to work *in* him that God might work *through* him. He saw the need for practical safeguards, walls that made for security, success and stability as to the desire of God for a people's lives. And because he was willing to be used *of* God, he'd be mightily used *by* God for the rebuilding and restoration of a nation.

Prayer Points:

God teach us the meaning of "willing" to be used by you, not only in word, but in deed, in the demeanor of our lives, readying ourselves through practical purity, prayer, studying your Word, walking in humility, maintaining the proper perspective. God I pray that be there any area of the wall around my heart, or the heart of any person here that's somehow and or in someway damaged, lying in rubble or ruin, that God we'd see that, take inventory of that and do what needs to be done in order to repair it, that You would be the proper priority of our lives.