

## Getting Started

### Nehemiah 1

A local TV talk-show host asked a paramedic: “What was your most unusual 911 call?” “Recently,” the paramedic began, “we got a call from that big white church on 11th and Walnut. During the service, an elderly man passed out in a pew. The usher could find no pulse and there was no noticeable breathing.”

The interviewer followed-up, “That would certainly be distracting and troublesome for the church people. But how was it medically challenging for a paramedic?”

Said the paramedic, “We carried out four guys before we found the dead one.”

Churches go through seasons of spiritual ebb and flow. The greatest revivals in history have always been preceded by periods of spiritual drought, apathy and sin, in which the church at large seems to be asleep while many of its members seem no different than the unbelievers around them. But then, the Spirit begins to stir in small groups and individuals who become sensitive to their barren conditions and in repentance begin to yearn for a movement of God.

Nehemiah lived during such a period. This Jew comfortably served a foreign king in a foreign land while many of his fellow Jews had struggled for years to reestablish the ransacked city of Jerusalem to its former glory. But Jerusalem had no walls. They had been destroyed over a century earlier and they had never been rebuilt. This made Jerusalem a perilous place to live and a laughingstock to the neighboring enemies of God’s people. The story of Nehemiah is the story of God awakening a passion in one man’s heart that would eventually spell spiritual renewal for the whole nation.

## I. Burdened by a Plight (1-4a)

### A. How Had Jerusalem Arrived at Such a Sorry State?

The history of the Jewish nation began when God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees. God cared for His chosen nation through the age of the patriarchs, four centuries of slavery in Egypt, the Exodus out of Egypt, forty years of wandering in the desert and into the early days in the Promised Land. Israel, as the nation was known, was not always faithful to God. But, God was faithful in His love for His people. He would discipline them, thus driving them to recurring seasons of repentance. When they did repent, He would restore to them His hand of blessing.

Under King David, Israel became a world power. Under Solomon, the nation peaked, but also began to decline because of the pagan influences Solomon introduced. After Solomon’s death, ten of the twelve tribes of Israel were ripped away from his heirs because of his unfaithfulness. These tribes retained the name Israel and became a sovereign nation under a new line of kings with a new capital called Samaria. Because of God’s promise to David, two tribes remained under Davidic rule and became known as Judah. Jerusalem remained the capital city of Judah.

In 722 BC, the Assyrian Empire killed or carried away most of the populous of the Israel, the northernmost kingdom, and repopulated the land with foreigners that intermarried with the few Israelites that remained. This ethnically impure people would come to be known as Samaritans.

In 586 BC, the Babylonian Empire killed many in the southern kingdom of Judah and took many others into captivity in Babylon. During this period of captivity, these exiled citizens of Judah became known as Jews. Typically, they prospered in captivity. Some advised the Babylonian nobles. Many others were free to engage in commerce and became wealthy. While the Jews were still captives, the Empire of the Medes and the Persians overcame that of the Babylonians. God would move the heart of a Persian king to release the Jews and allow them to return to their homeland.

<sup>22</sup>In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

<sup>23</sup>"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you-- may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up." - 2 Chronicles 36:22, 23

In the first year of Cyrus, a man named Zerubbabel led a group of Jews back to Jerusalem to resettle. They planted their fields and built homes for themselves, but they got sidetracked from building the temple. God sent the prophets Haggai and Zechariah to reignite that project, and the temple was completed. About 80 years later, in the seventh year of one King Artaxerxes, Ezra, a priest, returned to restore the worship practices of the nation according to the Law of Moses.

Another thirteen years passed. Artaxerxes was in his twentieth year as king of the Medes and the Persians. His Jewish cupbearer, a man named Nehemiah, is now horrified to learn that even after nearly a century back in the land, the city of Jerusalem still has no walls.

<sup>1</sup>The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, <sup>2</sup>Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup>They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

<sup>4</sup>When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven ...

## **B. What Was So Distressing about a City without Walls?**

Any ancient city without walls was limited in its ability to ward off its enemies. Arthur Penrhyn Stanley wrote: "In those days, rather one may say in those countries of disorder, a city without locked gates and lofty walls was no city at all." But, for Jerusalem, there was even more at stake than mere security. To this day, the Jews are passionately devoted to importance of Jerusalem.

Rabbi Lionel Blue tells the following parable: "It was announced in Tel Aviv that God was going to send a tidal wave, 30 feet high, over the city because of its sins.

"Muslims went to their mosques to pray for a speedy translation to the paradise of the prophet.

"Catholics went to their churches to pray for the intercession of the saints.

"The Jews went to the synagogues and prayed, 'Lord God, it's going to be difficult living under 30 feet of water!'"

City walls were an issue of status, strength, importance and purity, and Jerusalem was not just any old city. She was Judah's royal city. In the days of Solomon, dignitaries from around the world came there. She was the home of the temple. In the imaginations of the Jews, Jerusalem was the most important city in the world. This, of course, made the enemies of the Jews chuckle.

The fact that Jerusalem had no walls was not news. They had been torn down for over a century. Yet, when Hanani, Nehemiah's brother, spoke of the matter, he spoke of "great trouble and disgrace." Why had they tolerated the condition for so long? A few attempts had been made to rebuild the walls, but the workers were usually intimidated by hostile neighbors into abandoning the project. Perhaps, it was in the aftermath of one of these short-lived efforts that Hanani delivered his message. Perhaps, the urgency of the matter had never been lost on a minority of the citizens that seemed too small to affect the apathy of the many or to encourage them through their fears. Nehemiah was distressed over the danger and the shame of an unprotected Jerusalem.

### **C. What Has an Ancient City without Walls to Do with Us?**

In this day of terrorism and modern warfare, a wall around a city sounds useless. But, recognize that Jerusalem was the city of *JEHOVAH*. Today, wherever Christians are in community with one another, they are God's community, and there are certain strongholds that keep us safe as well.

Historically, the Christian Church is very protective of the Lords' Supper. While I appreciate that, I also hear things from time to time that I cannot process biblically. For instance, in the church I grew up in, I would often hear some elder give a communion meditation that exalted the table above anything else that happened in the service. I also noticed a few people who would take communion and leave before the sermon. Without identifying that which was singularly most important, the church in Jerusalem participated in at least four things that were very important.

<sup>42</sup>They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. – Acts 2:42

The apostles taught the Word of God, which is our authority for faith and life. Any church that is not a teaching church is a crippled church, and any believer who does not hunger for God's Word is a vulnerable believer. The spirit fellowship of believers is our lifeline. Any church that does not place a high premium on living out faith in community is a crippled church, and any believer who thinks he can prosper as a Christian in isolation is a vulnerable believer. The Lord's Supper is a declaration of unity for a church and a declaration of intimacy and communion with God for every believer. Any church that does not attend to this regularly is a crippled church, and any believer who does not attend to this regularly is a crippled believer. Prayer is how we seek direction, perspective, courage and power from God Himself. A church that prays little is a crippled church just as a believer who relies little on prayer is a vulnerable believer.

The early believers came together to devote themselves to "the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." If any community of Christians does not place a high premium on all four of these, they are living with broken walls. The thought of a Jerusalem without walls distressed Nehemiah deeply. Distress can quickly turn to despair, but God used the situation to awaken a great cause in Nehemiah's heart. A church that needs her spiritual walls strengthened is an evidence of lives that need their spiritual walls strengthened. But, they also represent one of the grandest causes that any group of people can embrace.

## II. Beginning with a Prayer (4b-11)

... <sup>5</sup>Then I said:

"O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, <sup>6</sup>let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. <sup>7</sup>We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

<sup>8</sup>"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, <sup>9</sup>but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

<sup>10</sup>"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. <sup>11</sup>O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."

I was cupbearer to the king.

### A. More Things Were Out of Nehemiah's Hands than Were in Them

Nehemiah was deeply moved by the plight of Jerusalem and he even considered that he might be God's man to do something about it. But, feeling and sympathy toward a need do not by themselves constitute the call of God upon a life. There must be giftedness, something that will become evident as we continue to look at Nehemiah as a leader. But, there also must be the hand of God upon a project to accomplish that which we are powerless to address alone.

Nehemiah was distressed, but he was also 800 miles away in Susa, the capital of the Medo-Persian Empire in a day when 800 miles was a journey of several months. Of course, miles can be overcome given enough tenacity. I drove over 2800 miles last week. But distance was not Nehemiah's only problem. Nehemiah had a job, and it was a pretty important job. He was the cupbearer for Artaxerxes. A cupbearer tasted the king's food and wine. That way, if an attempt was made to poison the king, you just had to get a new cupbearer rather than a new king.

But, replacing a good cupbearer was more trouble than one might think at first. They often had other duties such as safe-keeping the king's signet ring and overseeing the royal accountants. A cupbearer had to be on top of court etiquette. He had to be a wine expert. He had to be good-looking and positive. He had to be wise and trustworthy because he was a close advisor to the king. Nehemiah was probably just about as important and high-ranking of a Jew as there was.

Now, he wanted to venture off to a distant land to build an ancient wall, but that wasn't his call. And, even if the king let him go, who is to say that Nehemiah's enthusiasm would be warmly received by the Jews in Jerusalem who may have been too apathetic, too comfortable or too fearful to undertake such a massive project as a city wall. Prayer was Nehemiah's only recourse.

### B. Nehemiah's Model Prayer

Nehemiah began by addressing *JEHOVAH*, God of heaven. “God of heaven” seems to have been a Persian title for the one great God. *JEHOVAH* (or LORD) identifies that one great God as the covenant God of Israel. Nehemiah speaks of God Who keeps His “covenant of love.” This word for love means steadfast love, a love that endures through thick and thin. Nehemiah is acknowledging the faithfulness of God that survives in spite of the faithlessness of His people.

Nehemiah confesses his own sins, those of his family as well as those of the whole nation. The natural impulse of a “do-gooder” with a cause might be to judge the old-timers for never making a priority of building Jerusalem’s walls. Instead, he looks beyond them to the sin of his own ancestors that brought God’s judgment on the city in the first place. And, he confesses his own sins. Who knows? Perhaps his cushy position had found him battling with materialism, pride or spiritual indifference? We are natural blame-placers, but if we truly want to be a part of any work in which the holy God of heaven is leading, we must first see ourselves as the sinners we are.

Finally, Nehemiah appeals to God’s promises and the covenant love He has for His people. “We have sinned and You have scattered us, just as You said You would. But now, we are returning to You and we are committing ourselves to obey Your voice. Gather us to Yourself!”

### **C. Nehemiah’s Single Petition**

Nehemiah could not do a thing to pursue the passion of his heart until God made it possible. So he prayed the only petition he could pray that would not be premature: “Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.” The king must allow Nehemiah to go.

This series that I have entitled “*Building Together*” was precipitated by a message I shared with you two weeks ago based on the parable of the growing seed.

<sup>26</sup>...“This is what the kingdom of God is like. A man scatters seed on the ground. <sup>27</sup>Night and day, whether he sleeps or gets up, the seed sprouts and grows, though he does not know how. <sup>28</sup>All by itself the soil produces grain – first the stalk, then the head, then the full kernel in the head. <sup>29</sup>As soon as the grain is ripe, he puts the sickle to it, because the harvest has come.” – Mark 4:26-29

There are contributions we can make to build the church, but the power to make things grow is God’s domain. Our task is to figure out what we can do and what only God can do so that we do not strive to build in our own strength that which will never endure into eternity anyway. I also shared with you that the Pastoral Team is engaging a resource that has identified eight common denominators of thousands of healthy churches that have been studied world-wide. They are:

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| <b>1) Empowering Leadership</b>   | <b>5) Inspiring Worship Service</b> |
| <b>2) Gift-Oriented Ministry</b>  | <b>6) Holistic Small Groups</b>     |
| <b>3) Passionate Spirituality</b> | <b>7) Need-oriented Evangelism</b>  |
| <b>4) Functional Structures</b>   | <b>8) Loving Relationships</b>      |

This direction would hold no fascination for me if I did not believe that these eight common denominators were also solid biblical principles. That’s what drew me to Nehemiah. I don’t know that we will see all eight of these common denominators, but we will see many of them.

Those eight qualities reflect things that we might be able to affect through programming, teaching and practice. Today, we have considered things that only God can do. Only He can awaken great causes in human hearts, and only He can empower His people to do the work.