

“Meet Nehemiah”
Nehemiah 1
July 26, 2020

INTRODUCTION:

Three towering figures in the history of post-exilic Israel were Queen Esther, Ezra and Nehemiah. All three ascended to high positions in the Persian Empire, and all three were willing to risk those positions, and even their own lives, for the sake of God’s people. All three showed great courage and faith. Today, we are meeting Nehemiah, leader of the effort to restore the walls of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah is the last of these three figures, and he appears on the scene in the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes, which would make it 445 B.C., 13 years after Ezra’s arrival in Jerusalem. As we have seen in our just-completed study of Ezra, Ezra was concerned with two great projects: the restoration of the temple and the restoration of God’s Law as the defining authority for Israel’s life. Now, Nehemiah is confronted with another great need in the sad condition of Jerusalem’s walls.

Nehemiah receives a visit one day from some of his fellow Israelites. They have been to Jerusalem, so he inquires of them concerning the status of life there. What he hears in their reply will change his life forever. **“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 needs a little explanation. These walls were originally destroyed by King Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. 136 years have passed since that happened. So why is Nehemiah responding as if this is recent news? It is because this news refers to something more recent, something that is reported back in Ezra 4. You may remember from our study of Ezra that it is not written chronologically, and Ezra describes something that happened during the reign of King Artaxerxes. Israel had begun rebuilding its walls when opponents living in the land wrote the king and told him that Israel’s purposes in doing so were to rebel against Persia. So they asked him to order the work to cease, and he granted the request. Israel’s enemies then took advantage of this to bring about great trouble and shame on the nation. So our book reports on the work Nehemiah will do to rebuild these walls and remove Israel’s shame.

There is always more work to do, both in ancient Israel and in the Church today. Not long after one challenge is met, it seems that another arises. Sometimes the challenge is in the form of persecution from without, and at other times it concerns more internal problems such as doctrinal or ethical decline within the church. What kind of person does God use to do the work that needs doing in the church? What kind of person can say that this world

was a better place because of his or her presence in it? Don't we all want to be that kind of person? There is an easy answer to this question of the kind of person God uses, and it is a person who prays. After all, most of this chapter contains the prayer of Nehemiah. But this gives rise to another question. "What kind of person prays?" The answer to that question is the same as the answer to the previous question of what kind of person God uses. As we meet Nehemiah in this passage, we see three qualities that are always required for a praying, useful person.

I. A Big-God Person

Nehemiah's prayer begins and ends with adoration of God. He prays, "**O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God**" (v. 5). Jesus instructs us to begin our prayers similarly—"Our Father, who art in heaven." Nehemiah believed that God, not King Artaxerxes, was in sovereign control of all things. God is God, and we are not. So when we pray to him, we must remember that he is not like a genie in a bottle, to whom we come asserting our will and asking for his aid in getting our will accomplished. Because God is God, we pray, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

There is a simple test to know whether you are a big-God person or a small-God person? Do your prayers to God leave you more peaceful or more anxious? If you are praying to a small-God, merely trying to get him to do what you want him to do, your prayers will be anxious prayers. They will be anxious because your mind is preoccupied with yourself. You will be focused on whether or not you are saying the right things to persuade God to give you what you want. You will wonder if you have behaved properly so that God will be pleased enough with your behavior to give you what you want. When you pray to a big-God, on the other hand, you are left with the peace of God. You gladly pray, "Thy will be done," because you have learned to be confident that he is both wise and good. You have learned that if he doesn't give you what you ask for, it is because he knows better what you need than you know. You believe that God always gives you what you would ask for if you knew everything he knows.

This teaches us that when we pray, our first goal should be to fill our hearts with this attitude of the greatness of God. He is God, and we are not. I note that Nehemiah was helped in this by remembering the idea of the covenant. The great God to whom he prays "**keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments**" (v. 5). You don't have to read very far in the Bible to realize how pervasive this idea of covenants are in describing God's relationship to his people.

Bible scholars now realize that Israel borrowed the idea of covenants from treaties that were common in the second millennium B.C. These were treaties between a more powerful king, referred to as a suzerain, and a lesser king,

called a vassal. These treaties included a statement of what the suzerain would do for the vassal, which usually consisted of coming to his defense in the event of attack or invasion by some other tribe or nation. It also included stipulations required of the vassal, which primarily meant paying tribute, or taxes, to the suzerain. Then it would conclude with a series of blessings upon the vassal for his faithfulness to the treaty and curses for his unfaithfulness. Such unfaithfulness might include no longer paying the agreed upon taxes or forming an alliance with another suzerain. It is not hard to see how this applies to Israel. God enters into a covenant with them in which he is the suzerain. He makes many promises to them. He will be their God and their helper. In return, he asks them to be faithful to him.

That is the idea that Nehemiah refers to in his prayer. And he acknowledges that Israel has been an unfaithful vassal. They have sinned by forming alliances with other gods. God had pronounced a curse should this happen. They would lose their land and be scattered throughout the world. But then God spoke another promise as part of this covenant, a promise that Nehemiah calls to mind here, **“If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost part of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there”** (v. 8-9, see Deut. 4:25-31; 30:1-10).

So what does all this have to do with us? First, to pray to a big God means to have confidence that he will be truthful to his promises. Nehemiah here is throwing up to God the things he has promised and then asks him to be faithful to those promises. He will certainly do so. So our prayers are not contingent on our merits, but on God’s. The prelude at last week’s worship service was John Newton’s hymn, “Approach, My Soul, the Mercy Seat.” One line of that hymn says, “Be thou my shield and hiding place, that, sheltered near thy side, I may my fierce accuser face, and tell him thou has died.” Our fierce accuser is Satan, and we respond to him simply by referencing the faithfulness of God in sending Jesus to die for us. We say, “Satan, you are right in your accusation. I am guilty. But God has said that Jesus’ death has paid for that sin, and so you will have to take the matter up with him.”

A second implication of this idea of the covenant refers to something we are going to do toward the end of today’s service. In the Lord’s Supper, Jesus uses covenantal language. When we partake of the cup, Jesus says, **“This cup is the new covenant in my blood”** (Luke 22:20). As we’ve already seen, the Bible’s use of the idea of covenant has some remarkable similarities to second millennium BC treaties. But here is one remarkable departure. These treaties were often ratified by taking an animal and cutting it in half and separating the animal parts into two lines. Then the vassal would be made to walk between the parts, signifying that the same would happen to him if he violated the terms of the covenant. And then the two parties would roast the animal parts

and enjoy a feast together. We first get an idea that God's covenant with Israel would be different than this when this same ceremony was conducted between Abraham and God with one significant difference. Instead of Abraham, God's vassal, walking between the cut apart animal, God himself walked between them. And now Jesus, using this covenantal language in the institution of the Lord's Supper, says that this cup is the new covenant in his blood. He is saying that he is the one who is being sacrificed as a covenant breaker. This is the God to whom we pray. God uses people who dare to believe that he is so big that he even forgives sin, and that such forgiveness is grounded in an ironclad covenant and God's faithfulness to keep his end of the bargain. Covenant breakers have been punished already in Jesus.

II. A Humble Person

God not only uses "big-God people," but also humble people. We see the humility of Nehemiah here in three ways. First, he doesn't mention his high position until the end of the chapter, and only then because it is necessary for the development of the story. We don't discover until the last verse of the chapter that Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king. This was a position of honor, prestige and wealth. The cupbearer would be a person with the complete trust of the king. His job, as you are probably aware, was to sample the king's food before the king ate it, in order to protect the king from assassination attempts through poisoning. This was, apparently, the preferred way to assassinate a king in this day. So Nehemiah would be in frequent contact with the king, and that's why he is at Susa at this time. Susa was the winter palace of the Persian kings. Nehemiah identifies himself at the beginning of the chapter simply as one of God's people, when he calls Hanani "**one of my brothers**" (v. 2). To Nehemiah, it was far more significant to be one of the brothers than to be cupbearer to the king.

We also see his humility in his perseverance in simply doing his daily duty. If we pay attention to the time markers of this chapter and the next, we learn that four months passed between Nehemiah's visitors from Judah in chapter 1 and his request of Artaxerxes in chapter 2. Nehemiah, as we know from the text, was vexed by the report he heard of Jerusalem. In such a situation, we sometimes just want to do something, anything really. But the way of humility is often just to get out of bed the next day and do what God has called you to do. Just be faithful. God can handle the big things.

And then we see his humility in his confession of sin. He confessed "**the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned**" (v. 6). Like Ezra before him, Nehemiah didn't see the sin of others and say, "I'm glad I'm not like that." Rather, he asked "How am I like that?" and concluded that the same heart of sin he had seen in others was also in him. Jesus said something very important about this. He

said that before attempting to get the speck out of our brother's eye, we should get the log out of our own (Matt. 7:3). So Jesus is saying that if you try to help others with their sin before you've seen the vastness of your own sin, you will end up just doing a lot of damage. You will be like a blind eye surgeon. It is humble people who are able to help others, not judgmental people.

III. A Person of Bold Faith

Finally, Nehemiah exhibits strong faith. We see it in his perseverance in prayer. Verse 4 says that he wept and mourned for days and continued fasting and praying. We saw previously that this lasted for four months. He knew God was his only hope of doing anything about this bad situation in Jerusalem he had been told of, so he kept coming to God in prayer and waited on him. He waited for a door to open to bring up this matter with the king, and it took four months for it to happen.

We also see his faith in his courage. Remember that it was Artaxerxes himself who had ordered the work stoppage on Jerusalem's walls (Ezra 4). Nehemiah's request could possibly have been interpreted as lobbying against the king's wishes, something that could have led to his death. He reminds us of Queen Esther, who also risked her own life in appearing before an earlier Persian king.

And then we see his faith in his willingness to make the welfare of God's people a higher priority than preserving his own comforts and position. Nehemiah wasn't pulled off the street and made cupbearer. It had likely taken him years to work up to this position, one which he is now willing to lose for the sake of God's people. This brings up a humbling application question. Which is more important to you, the health and welfare of the church, or the health and welfare of your own career or business?

CONCLUSION:

Nehemiah was the kind of person God can use to bring about much good. He reminds us of someone else, doesn't he? Our Lord Jesus excelled in all the ways we have just outlined. For the sake of God's people, he was willing to give up his high position, one that surpassed Nehemiah's in every way. He gave up the glory of heaven for the sake of his people. Nehemiah was willing to die for his people, but Jesus actually died. But good has come to us all by that death. A home of everlasting joy with God is now ours. And as we face the troubles of our own day, we are called to follow Nehemiah and, more importantly, our Lord Jesus. We follow him into trust in God, humility and death to self.

Small Group Discussion Questions Nehemiah 1

1. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah detail three great projects: the rebuilding of the temple, the restoration of the Law and the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. It seems that there's always work that needs doing in the church. What is the work you think is most needed in today's church?
2. Nehemiah fasted and prayed for four months before he brought up this matter with King Artaxerxes. Why do you think it took so long?
3. We can see in his prayer that Nehemiah was a "big-God person." One of the applications of that is that he appealed to God on the basis of God's covenantal promises. Which promises from God are most important for you in your life right now to appeal to God with?
4. One aspect of Nehemiah's humility was his confession of sin. He didn't merely confess Israel's sin, but his own as well. According to Matthew 7:3, why is it important that we see our own sin before attempting to help others? Matthew 7:3-5 says, "Why do you see the speck that is in your brother's eye, but do not notice the log that is in your own eye?... You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your brother's eye."
5. Nehemiah was also faithful in doing his duty as cupbearer. For four months, he wept and mourned for the state of things in Jerusalem. But then every day he simply got out of bed and did his duty. Do you see any application of that in your life?
6. For the sake of his people, Nehemiah was willing to give up his position of influence, power and prestige. Jesus gave up heaven for the sake of God's people. We are called to follow Jesus in all things, including in this area of loving people by willing to die to self. What application might that have in your life?