

Nehemiah: Passion For Change

Nehemiah 1:1-2:8

Bryn MacPhail / June 19, 2011

Who is Nehemiah? The first chapter of the book bearing his name provides many important details, framing for us the context at hand, and describing the man at the centre of activity.

From the names and dates referenced in the early verses of chapter 1 we are able to determine that the year is 446 BC, and that Nehemiah, a Jewish man, is residing in one of the Persian capitals (1:1). A man named Artaxerxes is king of the Persian Empire, and Nehemiah is his cupbearer (1:11).

Beyond sampling and serving the wine to the king, we can't say for sure what else a cupbearer was responsible for. We can say, however, that the cupbearer earned his position not so much by demonstrating expertise with wine, but by showing himself to be honourable and extremely loyal.

Nehemiah's livelihood depended upon his service within the Persian Empire, but we see here how his thoughts often returned to his homeland.

At the outset of this book we have Nehemiah inquiring about the state of Jerusalem, and the condition of his fellow countrymen living there.

Any of us who have lived away from home, can relate to Nehemiah's keen interest. We're naturally curious about what we have left behind.

As you know, this is new territory for me, but my curiosity can be easily satisfied by a quick look at my *facebook* news feed, or by watching Canadian news on channel 8.

Nehemiah, on the other hand, had to arrange personal meetings in order to get an update on the home-front.

The grim report Nehemiah receives is recorded for us in verse three, **"The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire."**

The most precious icons and monuments of Nehemiah's homeland have been destroyed. Conceivably, many of his friends and family have been killed.

He is nearly 800 miles from home when he receives this news. We are not surprised to read Nehemiah's response in verse 4, **"I sat down and wept and mourned for days"**.

Many of us can relate to that grief. At the death of a loved one; at the breakdown of a close personal relationship; we weep and we mourn.

We can identify with Nehemiah's initial response of grief. But what about with his subsequent response? Nehemiah not only wept and mourned, but *he also fasted and prayed*.

What I also find inspiring about Nehemiah's response is his determination to act upon his prayer.

So you see, there are three levels to Nehemiah's response to tragedy. His first response is grief, his second response is prayer, and his third response is action.

In short, Nehemiah models for us a balanced response to suffering, where we also learn something about the intersection of God's sovereignty and human responsibility.

This is an important principle to bear in mind given that Christians are prone to move between two extremes.

The first extreme rightly identifies that God is sovereign, and does not need our help. But, the first extreme wrongly concludes that, since God is sovereign, we should not bother God with our petty requests.

The thinking is that God will do whatever He wants to do, regardless of whether or not we pray or engage in activity.

If this was Nehemiah's theology, we would have seen a very different response to the report from his countrymen. If this was Nehemiah's theology, I imagine his response to have sounded something like this:

‘Well, this is indeed a setback, but don’t be too alarmed; God will set things right before too long. Let’s just get on with business here in the Persian capital. Besides, I need to prepare the king’s 4pm cabernet sauvignon. Let’s not fret about Jerusalem, God will fix things there when He is good and ready.’

Friends, it is right for us to regard God as sovereign, but we err if we allow such a conviction to slip into a kind of fatalism, or determinism, that suggests that our involvement is inconsequential.

Nehemiah did not shrug his shoulders and say, ‘God will do what He will do’—no—Nehemiah wept, he prayed, and then he prepared to participate in the restoration of Jerusalem.

The second extreme rightly identifies that prayer is necessary, and that prayer changes things. But, this second extreme errs in suggesting that everything hinges on our prayers.

If this was Nehemiah’s theology, I imagine his response to sound something like this: ‘Oh, this is all our fault! If we had only prayed harder for the protection of our people, Jerusalem would not be in such a mess. It’s not too late; we can fix this if we pray hard enough; God will do as we ask.’

In this view, God is no longer sovereign; we become sovereign, and our prayers serve to coax God into doing that which He might otherwise be reluctant to do.

Nehemiah's example is different. We see in Nehemiah's prayer, and we see in the nature of his interaction with King Artaxerxes, a man who regards God as both, utterly sovereign, *and* as willing to assist, and respond to, human action.

We do not have to read too many verses in chapter two before we gain assurance that God has looked favourably upon Nehemiah's prayer.

But if we note the reference to the month of Nisan in 2:1, we are able to determine that three months have passed since the recorded prayer of Nehemiah.

This is an important detail for all of us who expect God to instantly move mountains when we pray. Even if we can cite a Scriptural promise, assuring us that God will positively answer our prayer, the testimony of Scripture is that God answers our prayer at a time, and in a manner, that pleases Him.

Again, the reason for this has to do with the fact that God is sovereign, and that prayer is not the equivalent to a magical incantation producing instantaneous results.

Approximately three months after hearing the news of the desperate situation in Jerusalem, we have recorded for us an encounter between King Artaxerxes and Nehemiah.

The king inquires about the reason for Nehemiah's sombre disposition, and Nehemiah's response is as follows: "**Why should my face not be**

sad when the city, the place of my father's tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?"

Apparently sympathetic to Nehemiah's plight, the king asks, "**What would you request?**" (2:4). What follows the king's question to Nehemiah is striking, and profound. Rather than immediately answer the king, we read, "**So I prayed to the God of heaven.**"

Here Nehemiah is before the king of the Persian Empire; he has already admitted to the reader, in verse two, that he is "**very much afraid**", and yet he pauses to pray.

It was probably not a long prayer; the king probably did not even notice the pause, but it was long enough for Nehemiah to call upon the God of the universe for help.

Though it has been many years since my time in grade school, I vividly remember a comment that was a staple on my report cards. More than one of my teachers, in the comment section of my report card would write, 'Bryn needs to think before he speaks.'

Strong words, wouldn't you say? Perhaps that is why I labour for so many hours before ascending this pulpit; I remain mindful of the rebuke, 'Think before you speak.'

Well, Nehemiah does one better: *He prays before he speaks*. How many of us can say this? Too often, we think of prayer exclusively in terms of

setting aside scheduled times to converse with God. This is not the model of prayer demonstrated by Nehemiah.

Nehemiah demonstrates that God was often on his mind, and that no time was the wrong time; no time was too short a time, to pray to God.

This would have been a silent prayer; his lips would not have moved; he would have been standing, with the cup in his hand, with his eyes open, in the presence of the king, and yet, Nehemiah prays.

Friends, think of your own context. If Nehemiah can pause to pray silently in the presence of the king of the Persian Empire, surely, there is no situation where you could say, 'I had no opportunity to pray.'

But, Nehemiah did more than just pray; he was ready to act. Nehemiah asks the king for a leave of absence in order that he might return to Jerusalem and personally oversee the rebuilding of the city (2:5).

Furthermore, Nehemiah requests letters to be written by the king, which he could present to the various governors in order to travel freely and in order to secure the supplies necessary for rebuilding (2:7, 8). And finally, we read in verse 8, **“the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was on me.”**

Do you see the intersection of human responsibility and God's sovereignty in the example of Nehemiah?

Nehemiah prays because he understands that the remedy is beyond his control. Nehemiah prays because he understands that his success depends on the good hand of the Lord being upon him.

And yet, Nehemiah understands that he is not inconsequential to this process. He does not simply pray, but he readies himself to go, and to personally participate in the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

What does this mean for us? I think it means two things. First, *we must pray*. Whatever our predicament, we need God's hand to be upon us if we are to succeed.

Secondly, *we must do more than pray*. We must be willing to personally roll up our sleeves and participate in that which we are praying for.

Are you praying for your that family member who has shunned the Christian faith? That is great. But you must also look for opportunities to present them with the Word of God, or, at least, seek to expose them to a context where they can hear the Word of God explained.

Are you praying for our Sunday School? Wonderful—but are you capable of doing more? If not personally involving yourself in the Sunday School program, are you able to write letters of encouragement to those labouring in this ministry?

Are you praying for growth in attendance at Sunday worship, and at our church events? Again, thank-you; but when was the last time you invited someone to a worship service or to one of these events?

Beloved, we must commit ourselves to a high standard of prayer. And yet, we must heed Nehemiah's example and be ready to do more than just pray. True worship should always overflow into service.

A well-known Christian leader was once approached by a minister who was complaining that he needed more 'workers' in order to adequately maintain ministry at his church.

The well-known Christian leader disagreed. 'You don't need anymore workers', he said. 'Oh yes we do', the minister protested. 'No. What you need are more worshippers, because wherever you have worshippers you will have workers. I have never met a true worshipper who was unwilling to work.'

Nehemiah was a true worshipper. How about you?