

Faithful in Prayer; Nehemiah 1:1-11

***Introduction**

Do you have a book of the Bible that you love? One that stands out above the rest. Why? As you dove into the book did the reasons for your interest in it change? Did your love for it grow as you immersed yourself in the truths God gave you in it. That, for me, is the book of Nehemiah.

From the beginning I was struck by the adventure that lays within these pages. I was struck by the man, Nehemiah, and his cohorts as they work together at a mission only God could accomplish. If you want to get your boys interested in reading the Bible you should definitely start here. We have a construction project. We have a night time recon. We see the men defending their families at the tip of the sword. We have no less than Gods word boldly proclaimed among the people! But in the end, as I read and studied this book one thing stood out to me that caused me to love it more for a different reason than just what we see on the surface. What we will see as we dig through this book is a God who never fails to keep his word, but is faithful and trustworthy at every turn. In fact, the very thing that seems to keep his people going in horribly bad times is his faithfulness. He is a God who does exactly what he says. He is faithful.

Prayer: Lets pray before we get into the word.

***Nehemiah's Place and Time**

Now, if we were going through an epistle, or letter, like the book of Philemon I would set up the background and such for you before we get into the text. However, Nehemiah is a little different. It's more of a narrative/memoir and you'll get all of the back ground info you need as we go along. So don't be nervous.

Here we go. Look down at your Bibles and read with me, if you will, verses one through three.

1The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital,
2that 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. 3And they said to me, "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."

Every good story needs a setup. You need to know where you are and why you are there. This is exactly what these first few verses in Nehemiah do. Some of the commentators I read started off by giving away the cliff-hanger at the end of the chapter. I want you to feel the tension as we go along. You are not allowed to read the last verse yet...you didn't did you?

The first thing we see is the author's name, "Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah". We recognize Nehemiah as the author because that's what it says. He also mentions that he is "the son of Hacaliah". This seems to be just a designator for the rest of the book since we'll have another Nehemiah show up later. He goes on, "Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital". If you are anything like me your thinking to yourself, "I don't recall seeing the month of Chislev on my calendar and I have never been to Susa...ever. Well, no worries, think of it like this. It's around November/December time frame in the year 446BC. Nehemiah is in the city of Susa, which is the winter residence of all the important people in the Persian empire. So as you can see the people of God are still coming out of captivity. It's the modern day city of Shush in Iran. This is also where Eshter was which explains why in the Veggie Tales movie about Esther, Mordecai gets so offended when he is "shushed". That's brilliant. Even if you don't get that right now, it's brilliant.

So here's Nehemiah, wintering in Susa when his brother, Hanania, comes in with a few other dudes from Judah come in. We see at the end of verse two that Nehemiah is concerned about God's people and the city of Jerusalem, so he asks how they are. And here's where God really launches into the fray that is Nehemiah's life. We see in verse three that the exiles are in "great trouble and shame" and that Jerusalem is not fairing much better-it's wall is "broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire". Something horrible has happened. We don't know much about city walls nowadays, but we do know that when they are destroyed...bad things happen to those behind them. For you kids...just think of it as a force field. What happens when your force field is down? Bad things, right? Why are the people in this great trouble and shame? How has the wall been broken down, how did the gates get burned! Who did this?! We'll have answers to all of these questions in a moment, but for now lets look at Nehemiah's response to the news.

***Nehemiah's Response**

Nehemiah responds in two ways. Look down at verse 4.

4As 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.

First, his response is physical. He hears the words and he sits and weeps. I know, I know, we are all against running on our emotions and

we don't want our emotions to rule our theology, but don't make the mistake of swinging the pendulum to the extreme other side where you are afraid to express them at all. God gave you emotions, they are good. It's okay to feel. In fact, if you feel nothing when you should be weeping and mourning...you might want to re-investigate what role your emotions should play in life. Nehemiah, is devastated by this news and the devastation shows in his countenance - the way he looks.

Second, his response is spiritual. He tells us he continued. Stop. Did you see that. He didn't fall down on his knees in prayer at the mention of these bad things. He was already there! Prayer is his heart attitude before God. This is who Nehemiah is. He is in ongoing fellowship with the God of heaven. When he hears bad news he just continues to do what he's always been doing. Can you imagine what this story might read like if it were written in our day with people like us. There would be counselors, supposed men of god, telling Nehemiah that it's okay to be mad at God for what you perceive to be a slight. I mean surely your allowed to work this out on your own time frame, right?! NO! This is not what the Bible shows us as Godly character. In fact, we'll see here in a moment that Nehemiah is quite sure he, and the Jews, deserve all that has come to them including trouble, shame and everything else. God is RIGHT, because he is God. Not because we like what he does. How far we have moved from a humble contrite spirit before God like the one Nehemiah is showing us here.

You might wonder what he was praying...good, God's about to tell us.

Look down at your bible in verse five.

***Nehemiah's Prayer**

5And I said, "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,

Nehemiah starts out his prayer in a way we see throughout scripture. He starts out proclaiming who God is and what he is like. Do your prayers start this way? Do they? Or, do you burst into the throne room of Heaven sliding on your knees - skidding to a halt just before the God of the Universe, whom you barely notice, to rattle-off the sick people in your life that you would like Him to heal, ask for more money than what He has provided you with because frankly it's not lasting until the end of the month as you would like it to even though by most of the world's standards you are beyond wealthy, only to wrap up with the traditional "in Jesus Name" that you cannot for the life of you understand why you say, but just seems so important.

Nehemiah is not that way. We'll see as we move through this first chapter just how Nehemiah thinks of God, but for now just realize

what he's said. "O Lord God of Heaven" This is not the god set neatly between the other gods on the shelf of your worship center - packed tightly between the incense and statues paying homage to any and all gods that might be listening. No, this is the Lord of Nehemiah's life. He is bowed in submission to this Lord. And he sees with the eyes of faith that the one he is addressing is the God of the universe! He is bowed in submission to the Lord yes, but it's not just him. This is "the God of heaven", the one to whom all will bend the knee and confess. Nehemiah does not take this privilege of praying lightly. He is serious. He prays as if his life depends on it.

***Confession**

He continues on in verse six

6 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.

7 We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

Nehemiah asks the sovereign God of the universe to listen to him. THINK ABOUT THAT! When you come to this God, he is not just a cool concept. He is the ruler of all and all he need do is stop thinking about you for you to stop existing. Nehemiah believes he is listening. He believes that he will listen and that he will look upon him in favor. Why? Because he knows this God. Remember, his is a lifestyle of prayer and word. Now I don't know how it all worked out, but clearly Nehemiah knows the book of Daniel. His prayer sound just like the ninth chapter of Daniel and he comes to God with the same confidence Daniel had.

If you weren't here when Pastor Russ preached on Danieal 9 I recommend you go back and read/listen to the sermon. It helps fill out the picture of Nehemiah's heart.

He moves from this request for the ear of God straight to confession of sin. Not only the sins of the people, but his sins as well. And like Daniel he seems to take the sins of the people as his own to confess. We do this now - confessing others sins. This was a different time and place. Just know that it's okay for him. He agrees with God about what the people have done and he sees that God's hand was in their being taken into captivity and his hand will be in whatever he has for Nehemiah himself.

As a side note. I wonder if Daniel and Nehemiah could ever have

imagined a savior to come that would not just confess the peoples sin as his, but actually take them upon himself? Did they have any sense of the goodness of God as revealed in Christ?!

Moving on to verse eight we see...

*** God's Faithfulness to his promise**

8Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,
9 but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.

Remember when I told you we'd get to the part about who and why the people were in trouble and shame and the walls were down and the gates burned...here we are.

Nehemiah is references some other passages and I like to read you two small parts of them.

The first is from Deuteronomy (28:58-59, 64);

58 "If you are not careful to do all the words of this law that are written in this book, that you may fear this glorious and awesome name, the LORD your God, 59 then the LORD will bring on you and your offspring extraordinary afflictions, afflictions severe and lasting, and sicknesses grievous and lasting.

64 "And the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and there you shall serve other gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your fathers have known.

And the second of from Leviticus (26:33);

33 And I will scatter you among the nations, and I will unsheathe the sword after you, and your land shall be a desolation, and your cities shall be a waste

So, who is it that brought this calamity upon the people and the city? Yes, God. He certainly used people, but this is not the result of any person. This is God! Did God fulfill his promise to Israel? Did he do exactly what he said he would do? Oh, yes. He is a faithful God. He will do what he says. Do you take the warnings of Scripture lightly. God sits powerful and mighty on his throne and he will do all that he says. For some of you, that should be the worst news of your life. For some of you this is truly your best life now and all that awaits you in the next life is an eternal existence without Christ, in Hell!

God has promised you this and he will keep his promise. Don't think the warm soft fuzzy light at the end of the tunnel awaits you. Your relatives might be there, but it will not be a happy homecoming. Did any of the folks who told you it would be this way promise it would be so. Do any of them have the ability to keep that promise? Don't stop listening because the truth is hard. Listen harder! Cause there's more.

But praise be to God it doesn't end there. Nehemiah goes on and we here some of the sweetest words in all of scripture,

He says in Leviticus (26:40-42),

40 "But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, 41 so that I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies—if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, 42 then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land.

And once again in Deuteronomy (4:29-31),

29 But from there you will seek the LORD your God and you will find him, if you search after him with all your heart and with all your soul. 30 When you are in tribulation, and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the LORD your God and obey his voice. 31 For the LORD your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that he swore to them.

That's it! That's what Nehemiah lives on. The faithfulness of GOD! The faithful one in these prayers is not Nehemiah. It is the God of the universe and Nehemiah rests all of his hope for himself and his people on this faithful, merciful, covenant remembering God!

And then he brings things to a close like this - verse 10

***Closing**

10 They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to 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."

Nehemiah brings his prayer to a close buy again showing that his confidence is not in himself or in the goodness of the people, but in God. God has chosen these to be his people. He has redeemed them by his power and strong hand. This very fact is key to what Nehemiah is going to have to do in the future. He must never trust in his power or his strong hand, but must always work for, trust in, and fear the name of the Lord.

And then he ends his prayer with this, "give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man". Success? Mercy in the site of this man. What man? Look down at the next line.

Now I was cup bearer to the king.

Ah ha! Now we see the other part of the tension for Nehemiah. Not only are God's people in a hard spot, and God's place lay in ruin, but he has a rather important job. The Cup bearer in Nehemiah's time was way up there on the social later. It's wasn't unheard of back then to include your cup bearer in the royal paintings. These guys were not just run of the mill servants. They performed an important duty. Do you remember in Genesis when Joseph interpreted the dreams of the Pharaoh's cup bearer and baker-two positions of importance in Pharaoh's household. You remember what happened to the baker. Oh yeah, he was beheaded. I can only assume that if the cup bearer had messed up in like fashion things would not have gone well for him either. So Nehemiah needs to get this right. More, God needs to be with him. If his faithful God is not part of this upcoming conversation...things could go badly. Nehemiah, in whatever he is about to do in chapter two, has trusted his faithful God with his life!

Have you?

***Our Response**

I mean, we've seen what Nehemiah is up against. His family, his people are a mess. His earthly home is wrecked. But he can see the end of the exile. He can see home. Can you?

For the believers...

1. When trouble strikes, what do you do?

Is is the bent of your heart to run to the Lord, the God of Heaven and praise him as the awesome God that he is? Or is that the last thing on the list - after you've exhausted all other avenues?

2. Do you confess your sin as the serious offense to God that it is? Or do you just casually run in and tell God your sorry for messing up?

3. Do you believe that God will bring to pass the things he has

promised?

Or like many, do you continue on in your sin because you believe it will get you what you want eventually. And surely God would not chasten you...I mean, your life is pretty tough. What with all of those sinners around you.

For those who do not believe in Jesus...

What will you do? Will you trust your life to the savior today?

God has promised that if you repent, turn from your sin, and believe, that God has sent his son, that he lived a perfect life, that he took the punishment for your sin on the cross and was raised from the dead three days later that you can be saved from the Hell we talked about earlier. So far, you have chosen Hell. God has made promises and you have taken sides. Come today and believe the promise of eternal life in Christ. Don't wait.

God is faithful, he will fulfill his promises.

Sources

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