

REBUILDING A HOPE-FILLED FUTURE FROM THE RUBBLE OF YOUR PRESENT CIRCUMSTANCES - Studies In Nehemiah - Part one

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NEHEMIAH AND THE STORY OF THE BIBLE

I've long held the conviction that every Christian should be able to give the story of the whole Bible in satellite view. What is this whole book, the Bible, about? We all talk about how important it is to us. We owe it to people to be able to give a summary of its central message.

Let's do a quick overview of some OT history to set the stage for the events of Nehemiah's life. We're going to race through most of the whole OT in about 10 minutes:

About 2200 BC - God calls Abraham** - He tells him to leave his people and his home land and to step out in faithful obedience. God is going to do something special with Abraham. He's going to create a people out of whom He will raise up a Messiah. ***He's going to begin His rescue mission for mankind.

***Through Abraham come Isaac and then Jacob.**

1950 BC - Jacob has twelve sons. *These become the foundation for the twelve tribes of Israel. The plans for the nation begin to take shape.

***NOTE** - at the end of Abraham's life God tells him that His people are going to go down into Egyptian captivity.

About 1900 BC - Israel enters 425 years of Egyptian captivity.** The nation grows from about 70 who enter Egypt, to over 2 million during that time. This growth prompts the ***Pharaoh to order the extermination of each male child born.

***Amram and Jochebed protect Moses from being killed.** They place baby Moses into a reed basket. Moses is found and raised in the aristocracy of Egyptian society

***1450 BC - Moses leads Israel out of Egypt.** God demonstrated His power as He sends the plagues on Egypt and parts the Red Sea.

Then Joshua leads Israel into the Promised Land.** The people want a king like the surrounding nations. The age of the kings begins with ***Saul. Eventually Saul is told by Samuel that his kingdom will be torn from his hand and split in two.

1000 BC - The age of the kings over a united Israel comes to a close with *David and Solomon.

950 BC - Solomon's son Rehoboam comes to the throne.** As prophesied, the kingdom splits between north and south. The northern kingdom becomes ***Israel and the southern kingdom becomes ***Judah.*** Jeroboam rules over Israel and causes Israel to sin by setting up idol worship to keep the people from going south to worship in Jerusalem.

***723 BC - Israel is taken captive by Assyria**

***600 BC - Judah is taken captive by Babylon**

523 BC - King Darius of the Persian empire takes Babylon captive. *This is the stuff of Daniel's dreams while Judah was still in Babylonian captivity. Persia becomes the leading world power. King Darius is succeeded by ***King Cyrus.*** Very significantly, Isaiah prophesied many years earlier that God would raise up a man - ***specifically named Cyrus*** - and use him to free His people:

Isaiah 44:24-28 - "Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: "I am the Lord, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, [25] who frustrates the signs of liars and makes fools of diviners, who turns wise men back and makes their knowledge foolish, [26] who confirms the word of his servant and fulfills the counsel of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, 'She shall be inhabited,' and of the cities of Judah, 'They shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins'; [27] who says to the deep, 'Be dry; I will dry up your rivers'; [28] who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose'; saying of Jerusalem, 'She shall be built,' and of the temple, 'Your foundation shall be laid.' "

***521 BC - Cyrus agrees to let Zerubabel take 50,000 Jews back down to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple.**

***470 BC - Ezra leads another group to Jerusalem to finish the task of rebuilding.**

***445 BC - Nehemiah rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem.**

I wanted to look at all of that background to show the ***kind of situation Nehemiah entered.*** He comes into a situation full of ***rubble and brokenness.*** Things have been left unrepaired. The walls - ***structures that represented defence and protection - the structures that supported and defined the shape of the entire city*** - were broken and piled up in mounds of garbage.

The walls represented ***strength.*** The walls ***gave the city its future.*** The walls filled the people with ***confidence and hope and security.*** Without the

walls the city had none of those things.

How do you go about rebuilding broken things? That's what this series is all about. And how can Nehemiah succeed where others had failed? Those are pretty important questions. Look at our world today! It is marked by **brokenness**. Broken homes. Broken marriages. Broken promises. Broken dreams.

Cut it any way you want, **much of life today has to do with learning to work with broken things**. Very few of us get to live our lives by our first choices. Most of life is coping with things that don't go exactly the way you would like.

How can broken walls be rebuilt? How can the future be made secure and rich when we all come to the Lord with circumstances that seem to offer so little to work with?

1) THE FIRST STEP IN REBUILDING IS DRIVING BACK THE RESISTANCE TO ONGOING PRAYER

Nehemiah 1:1-4 - "The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachabiah. Now it happened in the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital, [2] that 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. [3] And 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." [4] As 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."

Notice especially those last few sentences - "As 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." This is tough praying. Praying in brokenness requires a commitment to prayer with little emotional fuel. It's prayer with no feeling for God in it - at least at first.

This first step must have been a difficult one for Nehemiah. As you read this book you'll find him to be a **man of action**. He makes decisions. He commands armies and work forces. He is both sharp and aggressive. He likes to move fast.

Look again at that **fourth verse** - "As 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." There is no delight in this prayer. And prayer **feels** more effective when we sense delight in it. But sometimes prayer is most effective when it simply reflects the circumstances that birth it.

You **can't solve the problem until you feel the weight of the problem**. The first step isn't to rebuild the wall. **The first step is to weep because the walls are down**. In other words, it's not enough to **recognize that there is a problem**. To really be used by God you must **personally feel the weight of the need in your own heart**.

Notice the words of that fourth verse. **Notice the verbs**. Nehemiah "sat down", "wept", "mourned", "fasting", "praying". Here you have the secret of why many church-goers today don't pursue holiness with zeal and passion. We certainly have enough **rules**. We certainly sing enough **songs** about holiness. We like the **idea** of holiness. But we don't very frequently take the **time** - "waiting on God" - we used to call it - first of all **feeling the weight and burden of unholiness**. Only a fresh revelation of **unholiness brings a fresh zeal for holiness**.

For how long did he do this? Verse 4 simply says "for days". But there are other clues in the text. He did this from the month of **Kislev** (1:1) to the month of **Nisan** (2:1). And that's about **five months!** Think about it. Nehemiah mourned and wept and prayed and fasted for about five months!

How easy it is to take a totally different approach to brokenness: "**The walls are down! Who's responsible for this anyway? What were those other 50,000 Jews doing about this situation? Find out who's to blame. Organize a work crew! Draft some drawings! Prepare some preliminary budgets! Get the buckets and some mortar!**"

No. It looked like **nothing** was happening for five months. Why waste the time? Why not just start building? Dependence upon God - real, deep dependence on God - isn't born in a hurry. We don't naturally lean into God when caught in the rubble of our own sins. It takes a certain time-shift to desert our own pride and rebellion and self-pity. It could easily take five months for Nehemiah to learn it's not his own strength that will get the walls up. And unless the Lord builds the house, those who labour, labour in vain.

2) BRING YOUR HEART TO GOD WITH FULL CONFIDENCE IN HIS LOVE AND HIS POWER

Here's what it takes five months for Nehemiah to learn to say from his heart:

Nehemiah 1:5 - "And 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....'"

What a wonderful example of how to face a crisis! This is not just a weak, panicky shriek for help. There's great wisdom here. This is going to be a big job. It will take long term strength and commitment. And the key to Nehemiah's success is easily missed. Notice, he's not just looking for a **solution to his problem**. Those five months of tear-filled praying have changed the direction of his heart.

"Lord, we don't even begin with the **walls** at all. Let's start with **You** - Your might, Your faithfulness and Your love! I may not have the

whole picture right now. There are things I don't fully realize right now. But I'm going to start with what I am sure of. And God, I'm very sure of You!"

3) **AS HE THINKS OF GOD'S COMMANDS(5) HE THINKS OF THE PEOPLE'S SIN(6)**

Nehemiah 1:5-6 - "And 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, [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.'"

There is very profound insight here. I want to take some time with it.

Any Jew would mourn about the broken down walls. Nobody likes to live with brokenness in any area of life. It's easy to mourn when the walls are down. Christian get serious about God all the time when their own stubbornness and rebellion have put them in a rotten place in life.

But Nehemiah is coming with an entirely different kind of confession. All the people know the walls are down. ***Nehemiah leads the people to see why the walls are down!*** Don't just cry about the ***walls. Repent of the sin that brought the walls down.*** Until this process is thought through - until the real ***source*** of the problem is rooted up and forsaken - any repair job on the walls will only be a temporary solution.

It's easy to rebuild walls. It's much more difficult to root out all rebellion and disobedience to the Lord. Search your heart deeply. Remember, Nehemiah wept before God for ***five months. Do you just want walls? Or do you want to please the Lord?***

It's not always easy to pray like this. It takes wisdom and discernment to see ***beyond the apparent problem to pin-point the real one.***

I wonder how many times I go to God with something other than the real problem. I wonder how many times I'm so quick to ***plead with God to bail me out of some jam rather than seeing what He wanted to teach me or show me about myself through the whole situation.***

I wonder how much solid rebuilding misses getting done in God's kingdom because we miss the target when we pray. ***Prayer must be tied to listening to the Holy Spirit if it is to be powerful and life changing.***

- * ***A marriage is falling apart*** - "I told you to spend more time with your wife - to devote yourself to her and love her as I love the church."
- * ***Lung cancer*** - "Years ago I told you not to smoke - that this habit would damage the temple of the Holy Spirit"
- * ***Financial trouble*** - "Why didn't you listen to me when I talked to you about honoring me with your finances in faithful stewardship"

Listen, I don't mean that God is loveless or stern or unwilling to help those who call upon Him in their time of need. That's not at all the point. The real issue is this: ***I wonder how many times those painful situations we come scrambling to Father God with could have been avoided altogether if we had been listening to God when He spoke to us years earlier, but we didn't see the relationship between heeding the voice of the Holy Spirit and the painful consequences that were going to manifest themselves farther down the road.***

And it's not even a matter of God wagging His finger at us screaming, "See, I ***told you so!*** I told you what would happen if you didn't listen to Me."

That's not it at all. God doesn't have that kind of heart. The point is, if we don't learn to trace the present brokenness of our lives ***back*** to earlier points of neglect or disobedience ***we will never gain a heart of wisdom to avoid making the same blunders again in the future.*** That's the point of making the connection between our ***present brokenness*** and our ***previous disobedience.*** God's truth always comes to set us free.

4) **WHERE DID NEHEMIAH'S DISCERNMENT COME FROM?**

Nehemiah 1:7-9 - "We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. [8] Remember 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 dispersed be under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.'"

Here's an important question: ***Why did Nehemiah pray with discernment while others didn't see what was going on?*** The answer is in these verses. In Nehemiah's prayer there are ***no less than seven direct quotes from Old Testament passages.*** The prayer is soaked in the Word. The prayer is soaked in hours of study and reverence before the revealed will of God.

We don't always see the value of Bible study immediately. The wisdom and spiritual power it brings into our lives come ***accumulatively.*** Learning is always an act of high faith.

In other words, ***Nehemiah knows what's going on now because he knows what God said then.*** He knows God's commandments. He knows the promises. He knows the conditions. He knows the stated results of both obedience and disobedience.

There is such wisdom here. This is not just some emotional maniac screaming out, ***"O God, we need your help! Revive us right now!"***

This is a man of God, who's heart and mind are full of the Word, who is being gripped by the Holy Spirit as he looks at the people and nation around him and says ***"Oh, here's where we've gone wrong. Here's the problem. O God! You've said this and we've done that! How could we have been so stubborn!"***

It's easy for a little group to band together for prayer when they have a common complaint. And it's easy to ask God to fix everything but your own heart. But Nehemiah will have none of that:

Nehemiah 1:6 - ***"...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."***

Please notice, ***Nehemiah wasn't even around when most of those sins were committed.*** But he's not going to use his prayer meeting to put himself among the spiritual elite. He's in this with all the rest of them. Can't you just hear him now? ***"What's wrong with all of this rubble and brokenness in Jerusalem, Nehemiah?" "What's wrong with Jerusalem? I am what's wrong with Jerusalem!"***

5) **THE WORK ON THE WALLS GOES WELL BECAUSE NEHEMIAH STARTS THE WHOLE PROGRAM OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT**

Waiting on God isn't wasted time - not even if you have to wait on God in humble confession for 5 months. ***As Nehemiah prays, and as he seeks God, a plan begins to form in his mind.*** The plan will make the whole building process a great success. But the actual construction didn't start with the stones and mortar. The process started on Nehemiah's knees in prayer.

Notice the process of insight here. Notice the imparting of divine wisdom. This is very different from running ahead with your latest brainwave and then asking God to bless your plans.

In the next few chapters, God will show Nehemiah dangers and hurdles and opportunities that he never even dreamed of. Nehemiah will see them all, ***not because he's more brilliant than anyone else, but because he invested his heart, his mind, and his time in the Lord's presence much earlier on.***

I'm so mindful of the caution of the Psalmist, ***"Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain who build it!"*** That's more than a beautiful sounding phrase to be read at baby dedications. It's a statement about how our lives progress from brokenness to wholeness. It captures what Nehemiah's life will model for all of us in the next few Sundays.

And it's important for all of us to learn this process because sooner or later, ***you will be rebuilding something that has broken in your world.*** And God, in His infinite mercy, wants to show us all how ***before*** that time comes.