

“Build Again” (A Nehemiah Series)

Welcome People (RHC APP - Thank you for Faithful Giving)

“Praying through Pain”

Nehemiah 1

It can feel like our world is in ruin. After the last two years of a global pandemic, most all of us, from individuals, businesses, schools, and also churches, we are all ready for a reset.

We’re ready to move forward and build again!

This story has unfolded in a variety of ways throughout human history. The people of Israel hit their lowest point in a millennium when they found themselves conquered, captured, and exiled after the Fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

And yet, the faithful, in spite of their affliction and oppression, did not stop looking to God. Lamentations 3:21-23 was penned after the Fall of Jerusalem. “But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

Hear God asking your soul this question today: “Did the sun rise?” Then hope remains on the horizon!

We’re going to look at their story of hope, but their story of hope starts with a lesson in...

Nehemiah 1 (text displayed)

The Point: Building again begins with heartfelt prayer.

Introduction to Nehemiah

The Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament combine Ezra and Nehemiah into one book. They both concern the challenges facing the exiles who returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian and Persian captivity. (Ezra appears in Nehemiah 8 & 12).

- **Author: Nehemiah (primarily)**
 - Verse 1 begins, “The words of Nehemiah.” Nehemiah means, “The Lord comforts.”
 - The first seven chapters, half of 12, and all of 13 are written in the first person. We attribute authorship *primarily* to Nehemiah, because editors likely combined some of Nehemiah’s memoirs with other historical documents.
- **Setting: Persian Empire (445-430 BC)**
 - Verses 1 also tells us these events took place in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes’ reign in two places: Susa, the winter capital of the Persians, and Jerusalem, the royal city of Israel.
 - The Israelites had been captured and exiled, first by the Assyrians in 722 BC and then by the Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar in around 600 BC.

- In 539 BC, the Persian King, Cyrus the Great, conquered Babylon and enacted policies allowing many exiles to return home and worship their God. (See Ezra 1:2-4)
- Israel suffered under economic hardship from their oppressors and spiritual crisis from their own lack of faithfulness to God. That is why the first major theme of the book concerns.

- **Themes:**

- **Covenant renewal between God and his people**
 - Above everything, the Book of Nehemiah addresses God's relationship with Israel.
 - This is highlighted throughout Nehemiah, including chapter 1 but made very explicit in chapters 8-13 as Ezra and Nehemiah teach from the Torah. Only secondarily, should we see....
- **God's people rebuild the wall around Jerusalem** (which takes up the focus of chapters 1-7).
 - Ancient cities erected walls to fortify themselves against their enemies. They were a literal and symbolic picture of a city's strength.
 - Over 140 years had passed since the Babylonians ransacked Jerusalem (see 2 Kings 25), and over 90 years since the first exiles returned under Cyrus' decree.
 - Verse 3 says the physical and spiritual condition of Israel put them "in great trouble and shame." One OT Scholar says the word trouble, or distress, "is perhaps the strongest word in the Hebrew language that depicts danger, disaster, calamity, or misery. It basically describes a condition detrimental to life." Shame "depicts reproach, disgrace, scorn, insult, contempt, and threat." But...
- **God mercifully protects and empowers his people.**
 - God's grace allowed them to finish the work and draw near to him.
 - Though many pastors and scholars view Nehemiah as a book on leadership. it primarily serves as a...

- **Purpose: Call to the returned exiles to covenant faithfulness.**

The burden of Israel's physical and spiritual condition moved Nehemiah to prayer and action! Nehemiah 1:4-11 is the longest of Nehemiah's nine prayers recorded in the Book.

As we examine his prayer, we will see five insights to guide us as we learn to pray through our pain.

1. Praise God for his character and work. (1:4-6)

Verse 4 captures the gravity of Nehemiah's response. He sat down and wept and mourned for days (See Ezra 9:4-5; 10:1). That's how this news hit his soul. He sat for days and fasted!

Fasting involves forsaking food in order to seek God and his work in our lives. Fasting enhances prayer. When we fast, we are saying, "God you are more important than food. I desire you and your ways more than what this world has to offer! Beginning on March 2, we are going to begin a season of prayer and fasting for God's empowering work among us.

Nehemiah's prayer begins in verse 5.

- He prays: "O LORD." All Caps... YHWH. "I AM." The self-existent, self-sufficient, independent God.

- He addresses God as the “God of heaven” (cf. Ezra 1:2; 5:12) and the “great and awesome God,” describing his nature and power among all nations! This is why we often hear the biblical refrain: “There is none like you.”
- Nehemiah then recounts the great and awesome ways of God.
 - He “keeps covenant.” God related to people through covenant. Covenant refers to a relationship based on mutual promises of commitment.
 - He “[keeps] steadfast love with those who love and keep his commandments.” The Hebrew word for “steadfast love” is *chesed*. It is an incredibly loaded term that refers to God’s kindness, mercy, and compassion. It captures the loyal love God has for his people. He always loves, always does what he says he will do!
 - In Exodus 34:6, God proclaimed his name to Moses: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness...”

These opening words teach us two things about prayer:

1. We must know the God to whom we pray. You want your prayer life to grow? Get to know God. Know his names. Know his character. Know his attributes. Know his works. “What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us.” - A.W. Tozer
2. Prayer should most often begin with praise. If not communicated verbally, praise should reflect the posture of our hearts. How could we truly see God and not be moved to praise his holy name! Worship starts with seeing.

T: But know this: when we see God’s perfections, we will see our imperfections. That’s why we must...

2. Confess (y)our sins in light of God’s holiness. (1:6-7)

Nehemiah asks God to listen to his prayer and respond favorably with the figures of speech: “let your ear be attentive and your eyes, open.” Again we see his urgency, praying before God “day and night for the people of Israel.”

But notice how he begins his confession in verses 6-7. Nehemiah begins “confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. . . WE have acted corrupted.”

WE hear that and say, “My sin is my problem. Your sin is your problem.” But Nehemiah is saying: “Our sin is our problem and my problem!”

It is interesting how “WE” use the word, “WE.”

- Just yesterday, Marsha and I were discussing seeing someone we missed during Christmas (Thank you, Omicron), and said to Marsha: “Did WE get her anything?”
- Even after acknowledging the seeming improper plurality of that pronoun, we were talking about 20 minutes later about having some friends over after church and said: “WE could do something real simple for lunch.”

- Now listen, I can't cook like Marsha. I cook on occasion. I could be worse, but the point is "WE" weren't going to be teaming up on lunch. "WE" did not team up on the Christmas gift, but I had NO TROUBLE inserting myself into her effort.

Western individualism loves taking communal credit. Western individualism hates recognizing communal failure.

After the death of George Floyd, as the world took a closer look at systemic racism, how many times did white people say or think (myself included): "I love black people. I have black friends. I didn't own slaves. I didn't go to segregated schools. No card-carrying members of the KKK in my family."

What we were really saying is: "I'm not a racist. Therefore, I have no responsibility for racism," which fails to recognize systemic issues and our communal responsibility!

We're Christians! Genesis 3 tells us that brokenness effects every area of society, not just human hearts and the work of righting those wrongs should be a community effort.

This relates to what Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Wrote from a Birmingham jail: "I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

Nehemiah does not discount individual responsibility ("Even I and my house have sinned"), but recognizes how God has placed us in a mutuality of relationships ("We have acted *very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules you commanded your servant Moses.*" (All interchangeable terms referring to the laws in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy).

"Tanner, that was Nehemiah, I follow Jesus." Oh right, the Son of God, who taught us to pray: "Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us."

T: Confess your sin. Confess our sin in light of God's holiness. Then, #3

3. Pray the promises of God's Word. (1:8-9)

Nehemiah begins making requests in verse 8. He asks God to move based on what he has already promised to do! He asks God to remember what he said to the people in Deuteronomy 28

Before Israel crossed the Jordan River and entered the Promised Land, God gave them his law a second time and warned them of serious consequences if they failed to walk in his ways.

Deuteronomy 28-30

All these curses shall come upon you and pursue you and overtake you till you are destroyed, because you did not obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep his commandments and his statutes that he commanded you. . . . The Lord will bring a nation against you from far away, from the end of the earth . . . They shall besiege you in all your towns, until your high and fortified walls, in which you trusted, come down throughout all your land. And the Lord will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other." (Deuteronomy 28:45, 49, 52, 64)

Why did this happen? "It is because they abandoned the covenant of the LORD, the God of their fathers..." (29:25)

But... God also promised blessing and restoration if they returned to him!

And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the LORD your God has driven you, and return to the LORD your God, you and your children, and obey his voice in all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there he will take you. And the LORD your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. And he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. (Deut 30:1-5 ESV)

Nehemiah basis his prayer on the character of God and the Word of God. Not all of God's people are back. Not all of the fortunes have been restored.

So Nehemiah prays the promises of God's Word. God, I know you are faithful to what you've said you will do!

Get to know the promises of God. "I WILL."

- Jesus said, "whoever comes to me I WILL never cast out." (John 6:37)
- When you come to me... "I WILL give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)
- "I WILL not leave you as orphans. I WILL come to you." (John 14:18) Holy Spirit. Waves of Power.
- "I WILL come again and WILL take you to myself." (John 14:3)

T: Praise. Confess. Pray God's promises, and...

4. Seek God's power in community. (1:10-11)

I love a little insight from verse 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. . . ."

Nehemiah was not praying alone! There was a community of people praying for the favor and power of God.

The degree to which we see our 2022 Empowered Vision come to fruition will be directly effected by our corporate prayer. Not just one man's prayers, the prayer of many, many servants who delight to fear God's name...

2022 Vision Statement (Empowered)

We see a church full of people gifted by God's Spirit for the good of others. As each person's unique design is discovered, lived, and celebrated with equal excitement, we will collectively take thousands of joyful steps to serve others! Countless deeds of mercy, kindness, hospitality, healing, teaching, encouragement, and more will lead to story after story of the supernatural becoming natural and God's love going public in every corner of our church and city. Redemption Hill will be a church where everyone lives empowered everywhere!

Do you delight to fear God's name? The more you do, the more you will find yourself seeking his power through prayer.

T: Finally...

5. Let your ask move you to act. (1:10-11)

Nehemiah prayed for days, but then he said, "It is time to act!"

The final lines of his prayer say what? "Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." As we will see next week, "this man" is none other than King Artaxerxes.

Nehemiah, like Esther, was positioned uniquely to act on his prayer on behalf of the people.

Here's the point for our consideration today: prayer, if it be true, will pursue the answer with action. God, I'm asking you to do it, but I recognize the part you want me to play, empowering ME as YOU accomplish your purposes.

Speaking of prayer, Jacques Ellul, once wrote: "One cannot hold oneself in reserve, one cannot pretend to be aloof in the venture in which one is asking God to involve himself fully. . . . Whoever wrestles with God in prayer puts his whole life at stake."

There was another man who wept over the spiritual condition of God's people (Luke 19:41-44). That man put his whole life on the stake of the cross, dying that we might experience LIFE.

Conclusion:

Invite Pedro and Team...

Praying through Pain

- 1. Praise God for his character and work. (1:4-6)**
- 2. Confess (y)our sins in light of God's holiness. (1:6-7)**
- 3. Pray the promises of God's Word. (1:8-9)**
- 4. Seek God's power in community. (1:10-11)**
- 5. Let your ask move you to act. (1:10-11)**

We're entering into a new year, a new season (please God, very soon, out of the pain of this global pandemic). We are not the same church we were two years ago, and we are not yet what WE WILL BE.

Redemption Hill: It's time to build again.

Gospel. Build again.
Community. Build again.
Mission. Build again.

Pray with space.