

NEHEMIAH, THE MAN OF GOD

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Key verse 1:4

“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.”

The Jewish people were once slaves in Egypt, but God rescued them by raising up a leader Moses who brought about their deliverance and led them until they found their home in the promised land. Through the years, they developed from a group of tribes into one nation under king Saul, and later under king David who completely unified them into a formidable nation. Later on, the nation divided into 2 kingdoms, the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Over time the two kingdoms drifted away from God, and were eventually captured and exiled by the Assyrians and Babylonians. They were scattered across the empire in order to integrate them with other people. But according to God’s promise, they were to return to Israel after a period of 70 years. King Cyrus of the Persian empire began allowing some of them to return. And so a group of about 50,000 returned under the leadership of the priest Zerubbabel, who began rebuilding the temple of God in the city of Jerusalem. After the project of the temple rebuilding was completed, Ezra the prophet joined the returned exiles and dedicated the temple and reinstated the laws of God by which the people were to live. 12 years later Nehemiah led another small team of exiles back to Jerusalem with the purpose of rebuilding the broken walls of the city of Jerusalem.

We need a history lesson in order to explain all that has happened from the time of the first exiles who returned to Jerusalem to the time of Nehemiah’s return. But as much as Ezra’s return had marked the rebuilding of the temple, Nehemiah’s return had marked the rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls. What’s so special about rebuilding the temple and rebuilding the walls? To the people of God, the temple and the city walls were everything. The temple was the very heart beat of their souls for it was the place of worship. And the city walls housed the temple and gave the city its unique character as the city of God. Nehemiah’s return and the consequent rebuilding of the city walls of Jerusalem brought back hope to the people. The rebuilding of the city walls is so wonderfully refreshing and so deeply meaningful that we will have to make that journey together from Sunday to

Sunday in order to learn what it is all about, and how we can apply these teachings into our own lives and church as God's people. For now we need to take a look at the beginning chapter of this book which sets the course for the journey God would have us take as we study this great book.

The book of Nehemiah is about restoration. Its about revival. Its about rebuilding— rebuilding of broken walls, and broken hopes and dreams, as well as rebuilding of broken lives. Its about making a new start when everything seems to have been lost and all hope gone. Its about courage in the face of danger. Its about pain and sorrow not giving birth to despair and resignation, but of giving birth to a vision. But its also about a man who loved God and cared about others.

Its about a man who used his position not to advance himself but to advance the kingdom of God. Nehemiah knew who he was. He knew that he was not a man of high ranking position and power in the Persian empire, but that he was in essence first a child and servant of God. And Nehemiah also knew what he wanted to do with his life; he wanted to rebuild what was broken to God and to others. And he's not alone. There are many Nehemiahs in the Christian world who are in every way what Nehemiah was, each building the walls of Jerusalem in one way or another. Of course there are countless others, who don't know who they are, and don't know what they want from life. And even if they knew what they wanted, it would be all for their own benefit and hardly anything for God nor for others. It is not often that we ask ourselves the questions of "Who am I", and "what do I want to do with my life"? These are important questions to ask myself once in a while. And I had better have an answer that conforms with the New Testament message. This is Nehemiah's story then, the story of a man who knew who he was and who knew what God wanted him to do in his life.

So who was this Nehemiah and what made him the man that he was? The book tells us all about him. But we will discover him chapter by chapter. In this first chapter, we get a glimpse of some of his attributes as a man. So who was this Nehemiah?

I. NEHEMIAH WAS A MAN OF GENUINE CONCERN.

Read verse 1-3. "The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about

Jerusalem. They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." If you would look at verse 11, the last part, you will see that Nehemiah was no ordinary citizen in the land of exile of the Jewish people, his ancestors. He was born in exile. He was either the son of one of the nobles of the Israelite people, or risen to nobility by being of exceptional intelligence and ability. For he had now risen to the position of cup bearer to the King of Persia. Not a minor position in the political structure of the Persia, but one of the most trusted and closest attendants to the King himself. History tells us that men in such a position have everything that a man wants to live securely and to be happy in life. Such men and women are sheltered from the events of life which harass the common people and make them miserable in the insecurity of day to day survival. Nehemiah was cup bearer! He had everything that life could offer.

But he was different from those who were in such high positions of life. He did not ignore the suffering of his people. He was especially concerned about the exiles who had returned to the promised land and had settled in the city of Jerusalem. He must have eagerly awaited any news about them. He wanted to know if they had settled well. If the people had returned to the worship of God at the temple. If their lives were in danger or if they were well provided for. When the Lord Jesus taught us prayer, he taught us to pray like this: "give us each day our daily bread." It was to help us concern ourselves with the wellbeing of our brothers and sisters. Most people are not concerned about anything except their own lives and family. Especially Christians today don't care much of what is happening to God's people and the church of the living God, neither around them nor around the world. They never ask. They never concern themselves with what others are suffering. What their needs may be. What their prayer topics are. But that is not the Christian way. The Christian way teaches us that "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others." (Philippians 2:4) Nehemiah was a man of genuine concern. He cared about the city, the church and the people who had returned to do the work of God. We too must be concerned about my brother, my coworker, my fellow Christians, my church.

II. NEHEMIAH WAS A MAN OF SINCERE LOVE.

Read verse 3-4. "They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire. When I heard these

things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.” When Nehemiah was genuinely concerned with the welfare of others, his brother Hanani gave him some bad news. He reported to Nehemiah that the condition of the exiles was pathetic. They were in great trouble, and they were in disgrace as well. The walls of Jerusalem remain broken, and the gates have been burned. It was more than he could bear. So he broke down and cried. He sincerely loved the exiles mourned for them and for the city with broken walls. Some of God’s people are concerned a little over the affairs of those who belong to God’s family but not enough to affect them personally. The news affected Nehemiah personally. It was as if it had happened to him. He was a like a father mourning over the troubles of his son and daughter. Paul was a man of similar concern— a genuine concern and a sincere love for the believers. When he loved God’s people and God’s city Nehemiah took it to heart. he made it his own problem. He broke down and cried. When did we anguish over the suffering of God’s people and of the condition of God’s place? When did we mourn that the church is stagnant, not growing as it should, that the house of God is bankrupt, that his children are not growing because there is not enough love and compassion to take care of them. Nehemiah was a man who mourned the condition of his people and his church. He was a man of sincere love.

III. NEHEMIAH WAS A MAN OF FAITH AND PRAYER.

Read verses 4-11. “When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said: "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your

servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

He genuinely loved God’s people and the city of God. In his love, he could see their devastation But he was not only a man of love— but a man whose love took him one step further— he prayed. The people of God were in dire need. They were in trouble. They were disgraced, and dishonored. Their enemies around them ridiculed them, and drove them to despair. They had been so despaired that the walls of the city had still been untouched. Without walls, they were vulnerable from every side. The situation was hopeless. Nehemiah was a thousand miles away with no way to offer assistance even if he wanted to. What could he do? He did the only thing he could do— he prayed. Love if it is abstract it is useless. Love must be sincere, and when love is sincere, even the most hopeless of situations become an avenue for God to work and to heal, to change and to grow, to provide and to intervene. Love that does not pray is not love at all. Love must take us a step further to bring our concerns and the concerns of those we love before God prayer. In a sense Nehemiah was not only a man of prayer, who knew that in God nothing is impossible with God, but he was a man of faith. For faith stands to challenge even the most impossible and insoluble of situations. Jesus commanded us to love. It is not a suggestion. If we are not genuinely loving, we are not genuinely Christian. Jesus also commanded us to pray. For when we love God and we love others, there is no course for us as holy and magnanimous as that of prayer. Prayer is love in action, for love is not static but dynamic. Prayer is also faith in action, because faith believes— and therefore it prays for faith depends on God to make love work. And Nehemiah’s love drove him to pray. When was the last time we prayed in anguish over someone else’s problem— over God can do to rebuild his church.

IV. NEHEMIAH WAS A MAN OF VISION.

Nehemiah did not know what can be done for the suffering people of God. Nor did he know what can be done for the broken walls of Jerusalem. But it did not mean that God did not know what to do, nor did it mean that God did not already have a plan to solve the problem and to remedy the situation. In the book of Acts God Almighty promises this. He says: “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams.” (Acts 2:17) it was a long ago prophesy given to the prophet Joel. It matured fully when God poured out his Holy Spirit on those who confess

Jesus as Lord and Savior. But in the Old Testament, many a prophet had visions of all kinds when they closed their eyes to pray. When Nehemiah wept and fasted and prayed for the suffering people of God, and the broken walls of the city of God, God planted a vision in his heart. The vision to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Later on he confessed that God had put it in his heart what to do. We too need a vision in our hearts. We need a vision to know what God has in store for us to do in life. When a man or woman do not know who they are, they live life no different from the other people of the world. They do as the others do. They sin as others sin. They eat and drink and rejoice as others eat and drink and rejoice. When a man or woman do not know what God would have for them to do in life, they live as others live. They sin as others sin. Even if they are a professing Christian, their lives are no different than any man or woman who are confused about the meaning and purpose of their lives. But for those who pray with a genuine concern for the Gospel of our Lord, when they pray with sincere love for others, to those God pours out his holy vision in their hearts, and calls them to serve his purpose. They know what they are to do. They have a vision. Their lives are like Nehemiah's with a mission that tugs at their hearts until they have fulfilled the purpose of their lives. Let us be men and women who know who we are, and what God would have us do for his purpose.

V. NEHEMIAH WAS A MAN OF HUMILITY

Read verse 11b. "I was cupbearer to the king." He was a cup bearer to the king. It is not by chance that Nehemiah put these words at the end of his prayer instead of at the beginning. He was cup bearer. In the world, this position would be the top position in a political or social system. But in the spiritual system, being a cup bearer to the king is empty and vain. He was first a man of God. A servant in God's house. He was a brother to those who were suffering. He was a father to destitute. It takes great humility for a man or woman to know who they really are. To know who we really are, a man or woman ought to know who God is. God is the King of the heavens. He is creator and the sovereign over all things. And we are only men and women of sin and weakness. To know this is humility—the humility to come before God as a child, as a forgiven sinner, as one who loves God and is deeply indebted to his grace. When Nehemiah prayed, he did not pray as a holy man, nor as a prophet. He did not pray as the king's cup bearer. He prayed as a fellow servant in God's great and precious family. He simply prayed, asking God's favor. We have much to do in our lives for his glory. And only God can do it, if he would do it in and through us. But it takes humility to move God's heart to listen and to guide in a way that honors and glorifies

God's name. Nehemiah did not pray dressed in the splendor of a cup bearer to the king. He prayed dressed with humility and tears. It is the essence of all those who have prayed in history knowing who they really are, and that only God can equip them with what they need to fulfill whatever God has destined them to fulfill in their lives.

May God help us to have concern for God's house and God's people, to love them sincerely from our hearts, and may our love for them drive us to prayer. And may God Almighty humble us to know who we are, who he is, and what he has called us to do for his own name's sake. Amen.