



We are starting a new series this morning on the book of Nehemiah, called, Rebuilding Your Broken World. Nehemiah is a book of the Old Testament with only 13 chapters. But, it's one of the most studied and preached books of the Old Testament and it's easy to see why. Nehemiah is one of the greatest leaders in the Bible. He was a man of character, prayer, wisdom and action. He was a humble and yet very powerful leader. This book was sort of like his journal, written to Jews living in exile. If you can remember from our teaching series, The Story, the Jews were in exile because of their own sin and rebellion against God as a nation. They failed to listen and follow God for a long time and He finally allowed an enemy nation to come in. The Northern tribe fell to the Assyrians and the Southern tribe to the Babylonians. Now God is allowing the Jews to slowly come back home.

The city of Jerusalem was first destroyed by the Persian Empire in 586 BC. Most Jews were sent to Babylon—modern day Iraq—as exiles for nearly 70 years. In 537 BC the first group of Jews were allowed to return and they started to rebuild the Temple. In 516 BC the Temple was finally rebuilt. Then, in 458 BC Ezra led a second group back to Jerusalem. Just eight years later, in 445 BC, Nehemiah asked permission to return to Jerusalem with a third group to rebuild the wall. In those days, without a wall, the city would be defenseless and helpless to attack. What we will see in this book is not only the rebuilding of a wall, but the rebuilding of a nation, the rebuilding of the people of God. As the wall is put together, God will put together the pieces of a broken people.

As you think about your own life this morning, is there anything broken you'd like the Lord to rebuild? Life is wonderful, but it's also hard. Life has a way of showing us the harsh realities of the world we live in. Broken marriages, broken dreams, broken finances, broken bodies, broken relationships, broken jobs and broken families are just some of the things that drive us to our knees in desperation. The brokenness we experience is usually the catalyst to get us to pray. It often takes a crisis in our life to remind us of what's most important. When a crisis hits there are some who become self-sufficient and self-reliant, trying to fix the problem ourselves. Then there are others, those who have followed Jesus long enough, who know that in those moments, when our world falls apart, there is only one place to go, down on our knees. Abraham Lincoln famously said, "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day." Maybe

some of you are feeling that way today. If so, Nehemiah will be a life giving study for you.

The Crisis in Jerusalem

Let's begin reading Nehemiah's journal and see what it was that drove him to his knees:

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

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 had 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" (Nehemiah 1:1–3).

Nehemiah is writing this in December, from the Persian King's winter palace in Susa. One of his blood brothers, Hanani, came all the way from Judah, some 800 miles to see him. Nehemiah was at first thrilled to see his brother and wanted to hear reports of how things were going in Jerusalem. Were his people thriving, settling down, and worshipping Yahweh in the newly built temple? The news was grim. Nehemiah learns that his people are in "great trouble and disgrace." Things are not going good at all and to make matters worse, the wall surrounding Jerusalem, the wall that provides security and safety, is broken down again and the gates have been burned. How can the Jewish people settle in and begin again as the people of God if they can't even protect themselves from surrounding enemies?

In Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the Jews who returned weren't even meeting the most basic needs of survival: safety and security. Not only that, but God's glory was being compromised. The nations were supposed to look at Israel as a people and the Temple and see God's glory and blessing. Instead, people are wondering if their God even cares. Nehemiah is distraught because of this report. He can't believe his ears. This is the worst news imaginable. So, what does this great leader do? He prays,

"When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven" (v. 4).

This is the first of three prayers in this book. Nehemiah was a man of prayer. He also was a man with a broken heart. He wept.

He cried. He didn't try to hold it all in or try and fix anything yet. His natural knee jerk reaction once hearing about this crisis was to pray. Usually, when I hear bad news, I want to tell someone about it. I want people to empathize with me. I want people to be praying for me. Nothing is wrong with those things, but I want to be a man of faith who first turns to the Lord. Have you ever had a doctor check your reflexes with one of those rubber hammer things? If they tap on your knee, what happens? Your knee responds immediately by kicking up. It's an automatic reflex. That's the kind of deep faith God wants to develop in you. When life kicks you in the knees, which it will, God wants your response, like Nehemiah, to be one of prayer. Life can't beat you to the ground if you are already there on your knees.

Nehemiah not only prays, but the text says he mourned and fasted for "some days." Fasting is a spiritual discipline where you withhold from eating a meal in order to focus on God in prayer. There are some who fast for a meal or a day; we know Jesus fasted for 40 days. Fasting is a way to teach our body, soul and spirit that "man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Father." We deny ourselves food so that we can feast on God. Instead of preparing a meal and eating it, we take that time to pray. How long did Nehemiah mourn, pray and fast? Well, he first hears about the news in December, the month of Kislev. Then in chapter 2 it says he talked to the king in the month of Nisan. That's about four months. Incredibly, for four months Nehemiah made this crisis a matter of prayer. He wept, he mourned, he prayed and he fasted.

Why does Nehemiah take four months to pray? That is a long time to wait. Did he ever wonder if he was wasting his time? Why did he pray for so long? He prayed because this was a humanly impossible situation. No one but God could help him. The only person in the entire world that could do anything about that wall was Nehemiah's boss, the King of Persia, King Artaxerxes. And why would the most powerful man in the world do this for his cupbearer? Why would the great king want a former enemy nation, one that he has conquered, to rebuild its walls and become powerful again? Humanly speaking, this was not going to happen. Nehemiah knew that, so he prayed.

Hudson Taylor, the famous missionary to China once wrote, "It is possible to move men through God by prayer alone." Is there anything in your life that seems impossible? If so, that's God's speciality. Hudson Taylor also said, "I have found that there are three stages in every great work of God: first, it is impossible, then it is difficult, then it is done." How will the wall get rebuilt? It will happen through a man of prayer.

Nehemiah's Prayer

Then I said: "Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 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 family, 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. 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."

I was cupbearer to the king (verses 5–11).

This passage not only shows us how he prayed, but what he prayed. There are five lessons we can learn from Nehemiah's prayer that can and should influence our own prayers. First, Nehemiah's attitude was right (v. 4). Don't forget, Nehemiah had it made. He lived in luxury as cupbearer to the King, which was like the Prime Minister. At his disposal was the best food and drink the world had to offer. Rather than fasting he could have escaped the emotional pain with a gallon of ice cream and a few martinis. Is this really his problem anyway? Nehemiah was born in Babylon and most likely had never even been to Jerusalem. The crisis is hundreds of miles away. Why should he care?

Deep down he cared because he knew God cared about it. God's reputation, God's name was being drug through the mud and God's people were suffering. When Nehemiah hears about the crisis, how God's people are depressed, distraught, discouraged and defeated, his heart was broken. He didn't pray to God with an arrogant or prideful spirit either. He didn't demand God answer him. He humbled himself. He came to God with a broken heart. Psalm 51:17 says, "*My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.*" God loves to use brokenhearted leaders especially when what they are broken about is what God is broken about. Bob Pierce, the founder of World Vision used to say, "Let my heart be broken with the things that break the heart of God." Before you go to God in prayer, is your attitude right?

Second, Nehemiah acknowledges God's greatness (v. 5a), "*Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God.*" Prayer must first start with God because prayer is all about God. When Jesus taught us to pray he said start this way, "Our Father, who is in heaven." Prayer is primarily talking to God about God. It's adoring

Him for who He is. Like Nehemiah, we should start our prayer amazed at God's power, beauty, sovereignty, wisdom, righteousness and justice. Before Nehemiah will ask anything from God, he first starts with reminding himself of the God he is praying to. You pray not to get stuff from God but to get God himself. That's the whole point. Tim Keller, in his new book on prayer writes, "Prayer is both conversation and encounter with God...We must know the awe of praising his glory, the intimacy of finding his grace, and the struggle of asking his help, all of which can lead us to know the spiritual reality of his presence." We pray to be in His presence. Is that enough for you?

Next, Nehemiah reminds God of his covenant with Israel (v. 5b, vv. 8-9). He does this for a couple of reasons. Remember, God's covenant with Israel was conditional. If Israel obeyed God, He would bless them. If they didn't, He would scatter them. Nehemiah is hopeful that his people will repent and turn back to God. So, he reminds God of His promises to Israel. He says, "God, do you remember what you said to Moses? Yes, I know we messed up and you scattered us. But, you also said that if we return to you and obey your commands that you would gather us again to Jerusalem. Remember God, these are **your** people, who **you** redeemed by **your** hand." Prayer is not only reminding God about God, it's also reminding God of His promises. God never forgets, but in God's economy, it pleases Him to hear us repeat His promises. That means we know His promises and believe them.

It's like when my kids get into trouble. I'll ask them, "Why are you being punished?" They know, but I want them to verbalize it. I want them to hear themselves say, "Dad, you said this and I did this so that is why I'm in trouble." I know what I said and what they did, but I want them to acknowledge it too. In the same way, God knows who He is, what He has said and what you did, yet He still wants us to pray. He still wants to be reminded of all 3573 of His promises.

In light of who God is and what He has done, Nehemiah confessed Israel's sin (vv. 6-7, v. 11). He lays it all out there, "God, here is how we've blown it!" Notice that Nehemiah includes himself in this confession. He uses the pronoun "I" and "we" several times. I love that! Nehemiah is not above the people. He hasn't "arrived" either. He acknowledges that he is a sinner just like them. Good and godly leaders know they are just as messed up as the people they serve. When they, when we, forget that, we get into trouble. I may be a pastor and an elder, but the first thing I am is a sinner. If you knew what I think about and what I've done, you might want to get up and leave. If I knew all that you think about and have done, I might want you to leave too! We are all in the same boat, sinners in desperate need of God's grace. Let's never forget that.

Finally, Nehemiah asked God for help (v. 11b). During this four month period of prayer, God must have revealed to Nehemiah that He would be the one to do something about the problem. Nothing ever happens until someone provides leadership for it. I think that is why Nehemiah prays specifically, "Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." Who is this man? King Artaxerxes. In obedience to God, out of a four month period of prayer, Nehemiah was about to take a huge risk and ask the king for permission to go help rebuild the wall. Nehemiah was not an idiot, he knew exactly the danger he was placing himself in. He would have to leave the king's court, a great position of power, luxury and security, to go to Jerusalem. And it might even cost him his life. Nehemiah was not only willing to pray about the problem, he was willing to do something as well. This crisis drove him to his knees and it also became his calling in life.

The question is not, Will I ever face challenges in this life? The real question is, How will I overcome those challenges that come my way? There are normal challenges that we face every day—issues at work, keeping your marriage strong, things like that. I'm not talking about those. There are seasonal challenges, like having a newborn baby, or caring for aging parents. I'm not referring to those either. I'm talking about those really hard challenges—broken relationships, financial struggles, our fear of the future, and major health problems are just a few of the things we lose sleep over at night. The book of Nehemiah will be a great encouragement to us all as we see a man who went through trial after trial, storm after storm, and yet came out on the other side stronger and closer to God.

For today, Nehemiah reminds us that God's people respond to crisis on their knees. Our knee jerk reaction, when confronted with a major challenge, should be to fall to our knees in prayer. Even when Jesus faced a crisis, the cross, he prayed, "***My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death,***" he said to them... ***Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will"*** (Mark 14:32-36). If Jesus needed to pray in the face of difficulties, how much more do we? How might our lives be different if our natural reaction to life's difficulties was to pray? I'm not there yet, but that is the kind of follower of Jesus I want to be. What about you?

We are going to end a little differently today. In the Old City of Jerusalem, there is the Western Wall, also known as the Wailing Wall. It's a small wall that surrounds the Temple Mount. The wall is believed to be the last and only structure left from King Solomon's Temple. It's believed that the Wailing Wall was closest to the "Holy of Holies," the innermost part of the Temple.

So, praying at the wall, in Jewish belief, is like praying directly to God in heaven. For many years people have placed slips of paper containing prayers in the wall. More than a million notes are placed in the wall every year.

Since we can't all go to Jerusalem together and we can't build a replica of that wall, we did our best to recreate a part of it near the stage. It's only partially done, to remind us that God is still in the process of rebuilding our broken world. In your bulletin you'll find a blank prayer card. We want you to use these next few minutes as a time to respond to God. On those cards, feel free to write your prayer needs, your struggles, your victories,

and your gratitude. Then, when you are ready, during the next two songs or after the service, fold it up and come tuck it into a crevice in the stone prayer walls at the front, just like they do at the Wailing Wall. If you want to spend a moment up front praying, you can do that too. We will leave these notes in the wall throughout the entire series as a reminder of our prayers and the God who hears them all.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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