

# Lean Times 2: The Trouble with Rubble

## Nehemiah 1

Introduction: The following story came from Pray! magazine:

I am a surgical assistant—the surgeon's right-hand man. At one point in my career, I lost my passion. I wanted a job with spiritual significance, and I prayed for that. Imagine my shock when God led me to a position in plastic surgery. Why would God want me in a hotbed of vanity? I wondered.

During my quiet times, the Lord assured me that this was part of his plan, and that I should wait upon his direction. So I obeyed, continuing to pray that the Lord would use me in this job.

The first thing I heard him say when I started my new position was, "Gather and pray in my name." There were only a few Christians who worked in the plastic surgery department, but I started with them. "I'm going to start praying for our workplace each Monday, 15 minutes before we clock in," I told them. "I'll be in Operating Room 2, and I hope you will join me."

We met each week, praying for our work, our colleagues, and our patients. Soon we were praying boldly for opportunities to witness. By the end of that year, God had answered many prayers, which included 10 friends who accepted Christ as their savior!

God has blown me away with his answers, and he has given me a purpose far beyond patient care. He expanded my circle of influence by transferring me to the main surgery department, where I now rotate through all four surgery departments in the hospital campus. I have been able to start several prayer groups throughout the hospital. Each group focuses on inviting the Holy Spirit to move in their department. They encourage each other in Christ, pray for opportunities to witness, seek God's will, and ask that Christ be glorified in their work.

I don't know if I'll always work in a surgery department, caring for patients who are under anesthesia most of the time I'm with them. But since I realized that I could advance the kingdom of God through praying at work, I have found renewed passion for my job, as well as for the opportunities for ministry it provides.

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"In every generation," wrote Ray Brown, "God equips trusted servants for effective leadership."

Was there ever a need for Nehemiah in his generation!

Ezra and Nehemiah are joined as one book in the Hebrew Bible, which makes sense since they are really two parts of the same story in most respects, and here is the theme: God remembers and restores! He had promised to remember His people, to return them to the land, and to restore them spiritually through His prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Ezra/Nehemiah form the two-part story of Him making good on His promises.

As we saw last week, the first group of exiles led by Zerubbabel set off for Jerusalem during the reign of Cyrus, King of Persia, in about 537 B.C. Some sixty or so years later, Ezra the priest led another contingent of people back to Jerusalem. Finally about thirteen years later Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem in 445 B.C.

Ezra came to Jerusalem as a priest. Nehemiah came as a civil governor. Ezra came to rebuild the spiritual life and worship of God's people. Nehemiah came to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. God uses them to build on two levels: the literal building of the walls and the spiritual building of the people. As J.I. Packer put it, "Nehemiah, through God, built walls; God, through Nehemiah, built people."

Why should we, being two and a half millennia removed from Nehemiah, study this Old Testament scripture? Here are a couple reasons:

1. There are significant parallels in the book of Nehemiah between the job he did building walls and the job God calls us to do of building His Kingdom and the church. The church is the one thing Christ promised to build, and He uses us to do that building. In fact we are His building! We can learn much from a wall-builder about church-building!
2. We can learn lessons from Nehemiah on an individual level. In Nehemiah God was in the business of restoring a nation. And God is always in the life-restoring business! Jesus is our Redeemer, and our Restorer! If your life is a mess, God wants to do a rebuilding project in you!

Let's look at the scripture:

## **1. The Report to Nehemiah vv. 1-3**

**1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. It came to pass in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the citadel, 2 that Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.**

Let me explain verse 1 for you: Chislev is likely December, of the 20th year of the reign of Artaxerxes, and Sheshan, or Susa, was the winter capital of Persia. Nehemiah had probably been born in Persia and lived there all his life, but while Nehemiah resided in Susa, Nehemiah's heart lived in Jerusalem.

Without the benefit of CNN, the only way he could learn of his homeland was through word that came from fellow Israelites who had been there. Verse 2 records that his love for his homeland and his people caused him to care enough to inquire about their well being. One question shaped a destiny; God was working in the heart of Nehemiah to cause him to ask, and he was open to the leading of God when the answer came.

Hanani, his brother, gave Nehemiah a sad report:

### **A. The Remnant**

**3a And they said to me, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach.**

These folks, this little portion of God's people who would be the future of the nation, were in "great distress." In the Hebrew that word means affliction, misery and calamity. It was a terrible situation for these people in Jerusalem.

## **B. The Ruins**

**3b The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire."**

The place was a heap of rubble; all around the people lay the evidence of war. The Babylonians had destroyed the city of Jerusalem a hundred and fifty years ago, and there it lay still in ruins. It appears like back in Ezra 4 that the remnant had tried to rebuild the walls of the city but their enemies stopped them. Maybe they had even destroyed the little progress the Jews had made on the project. Without walls, the city was open and vulnerable to attack.

## **C. The Reproach**

**3 ..."The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach..."**

Perhaps this was the worst of it; there was great disgrace and shame because of the situation they were in. Imagine what the neighbors must have thought! Those Jerusalemites, they claim to know the living God, yet they live in that broken-down rat trap of a town! If their God is so powerful, as some of them want to claim, then can't He do something about the slums they live in? And if they cared for His glory, they wouldn't stand for the situation to go on as it is!

I wonder if you can see a picture of your life in this broken-down Jerusalem? You look at your life and you see places where the wall is broken down. You've become vulnerable, effectively defenseless, to the attacks of Satan. You've fallen victim to sinful habits that have you in their relentless grip to the point where you wonder if you'll ever find freedom. A root of bitterness or anger has sprung up in your life, and you just can't seem to shake it. There is shame, or there is the feeling of betrayal, or there is any of a number of things that bring you reproach in the secret place of your heart. Maybe no one else is even aware of the ruin, but you know it's there.

If you have been in the ruins for a long time you may even get to the point where you just want to give up, because you feel that there is no way out, no victory, and that throwing in the towel is the only viable option. Maybe you've become accustomed to the ashes; happy living amid the heaps; resplendent in the rubble. The people of Jerusalem had lived in the rubble for over seventy years, and there is record of only one instance in which they attempted to do anything about it!

But just as it was not God's will for the people of Jerusalem to live in the reproach of the rubble, it is not His will for you either! Today is the day, by the grace of God, when you can ask God to give you the vision and the power to rebuild your broken walls!

## **2. The Response of Nehemiah vv. 4-11**

Look down at verse 11. Who was Nehemiah? **"For I was the king's cupbearer."** Here is a man who had been born and raised in Persia. He had ascended the ladder to a position of influence and closeness to the ruler of the nation. The cupbearer was responsible for testing all the king's beverages for possible

poison. He was one of the king's most trusted men. He could have lived in ease and not lifted a finger to do a thing about the situation. And yet the first thing we notice about his response is that it is:

#### **A. Passionate v. 4**

**4 So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.**

Look at what the Word says: **"I sat down and wept."** This was a custom of mourning to the Jews; they would sit on low stools as a sign of abasement and dejection, of being brought low by some circumstance.

He mourned and fasted and prayed. Here was seriousness, passionate, deep concern. Here was a man, despite having the personality of an activist, knew he must call out to the One who could truly and ultimately do something about the situation: God!

Warren Wiersbe said, "What makes people laugh or weep is often an indication of character." What caused Nehemiah to weep? The Bible says he prayed beginning in the month Chislev, and then in 2:1 we see that his prayer was answered in the month Nisan. This was four months later!

Four months of weeping and mourning and fasting and praying takes passion. I believe that Nehemiah was passionate about the people of Jerusalem. And these were people whom he had never seen. Why should we care about the people in Niger? Why should we pray for Marlene Barger and the pastors and leaders there? Why should we care about Brother Ashok in Nepal who is trying to reach a nation that is less than one half of one percent Christian? Why should we care about China, or Sudan or Russia or all these other places in the world? Don't we have enough to care about right here in Grand Junction?

Nehemiah could have stayed in his comfort zone. He could have continued to just serve the king. But when he learned of the distress of these people, he got passionate about the need.

But more importantly, Nehemiah was passionate about God. This was his one holy passion: the glory of God! Here is Nehemiah's motivating passion: Nehemiah was passionate for the glory of God. It consumed him. All through the book this comes through time and time again.

Someone has said, "There are many things in life that will catch your eye, but only a few will catch your heart. Pursue them." Nehemiah was engaged in the passionate pursuit of the glory of God. Let me ask you today, what are you passionate about? For far too many of us as believers, we acknowledge God, but our passions are for the things of this world!

Next, notice that Nehemiah's response was:

#### **B. Prayerful vv. 5-11**

The rest of chapter one is Nehemiah's prayer. Listen to it:

**5 And I said: "I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments,**

6 "please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned.

7 "We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

8 "Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations;

9 'but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.'

10 "Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand.

11 "O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." For I was the king's cupbearer.

We learn a lot about a man and how he thinks of God from how he prays. Nehemiah believes God to be:

- Sovereign and Majestic – **"Lord God of heaven"**
- **Great and Awesome** - One to be feared and revered
- Merciful – **You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments,**
- Attentive – **hear the prayer of Your servant**
- Holy – Nehemiah confesses his sin and the sin of his people because The light of God's holiness exposes our sinfulness.
- Forgiving – he believes that God will forgive
- Faithful - God had promised to return His people to the land when they obeyed Him, and Nehemiah knew God would keep His Word!
- Restoring – he believes God will bring His people back

Notice also that Nehemiah's response was:

### **C. Penitent vv. 6b-ff**

When we get a sense of the awesomeness of God, it reveals the depth of our sinfulness. Instead of blaming others, Nehemiah identifies with his people and names himself as one of the guilty. Packer said, "Godliness is founded upon repentance right from the start." Repentance involves an about-face that gets beyond mere sorrow or good intentions; Only believers who are repentant will hear when God calls them to serve Him!

Hey, if there is ruin and rubble in your life, face it! And face it with an honest admission of any role you played in the ruin! Nehemiah said, **"we have acted**

**very corruptly!"** There was a failure to obey God, and Nehemiah faced it head-on. He said, **"Both my father's house and I have sinned."**

But then he asks God to remember His own Word and His own promises. God had promised cursing to those who disobeyed, but blessing to those who kept His Law and sought His face. Nehemiah prayed in accord with Scripture. And He called God to keep His Word, which was not presumptuous at all, because he knew God to be a covenant-keeping God! Uncertain of the future, Nehemiah remembers the past, and that prepares him for the final aspect of his response, it was:

#### **D. Participatory v. 11b**

**...let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." For I was the king's cupbearer.**

I don't believe that Nehemiah sat down and thought things through on the level of well, will I or won't I? Should I get involved in this, or should I leave it to someone better qualified? I don't believe that Nehemiah viewed himself as having much choice in the matter; I think that he understood that the choice had already been made for Him by God! If God has given you a passion for what God wants done, then it is YOU he is calling to get busy and do it! And you know, don't you, that you are called by God--already! He has called us to believe in Him; He calls us to live holy before Him; He calls us each to serve Him. As a man of God, Nehemiah knew he had to be a man of action.

The question is not, "shall I pray or shall I do?" For Nehemiah, that was a false dichotomy. He knew that when God gave him the passion God also gave him the project.

In his book *Halftime*, Bob Buford speaks of how God used an event at his work to change his life. He tells of meeting with a strategic planning consultant named Mike who, having taken a look at Bob the Christian's life and finding it to be a jumble of good intentions, conflicting ambitions, unfulfilled dreams, and undertakings devoid of organizing purpose, asked Bob one question: "What's in the box?"

Bob asked Mike to explain, and Mike related the story of how he had worked with the folks at Coca-Cola regarding their plan to launch "New Coke". They had told Mike that the driving force, the mainspring of their business, was "great taste." They had done blind taste tests and found that people preferred the taste of New Coke to standard Coca-Cola. Shortly thereafter, they introduced New Coke to the world and you know the story: they launched one of the biggest marketing debacles of all time!

Soon they called Mike back, at which time he suggested that they had chosen the wrong thing to put in the box when they said "great taste". After several hours, they decided that they had to put something else in the box: "American tradition". Pulling Coke Classic off the shelves was like criticizing motherhood and apple pie!

Mike said Bob had to decide what was in the box of His life. Mike told him, "I'll help you with the strategic organization of your life, but first you've got to tell me what's in the box."

For Nehemiah, the answer is clear: The Glory of God was “in the box.” The one thing about which he was most passionate, that which was in the box: the glory of God. Hey, what’s in the box for you?

**Bringing it Home:**

- What are you passionate about? Is God “in the box” in your life?
- What are the areas in your life which need the restoring work of God? Have you recognized the trouble with the rubble in your own life?
- Is your tendency to rush into the project or to rush into the prayer room?
- Is your God big enough to handle the problems you are facing? In other words, does your faith need to be built?
- As applied to the building of this church, and recognizing that passivity is not an option for the obedient, what role(s) are you willing to play?