

Nehemiah 1

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[0 : 00] If we were to look in the earliest Jewish scriptures, the book of Ezra was combined with the book of Nehemiah. In the earliest Jewish scriptures, it was just Ezra, which contained all of what we now have as Ezra and Nehemiah.

A little bit later in history, you ended up with Ezra 1 and Ezra 2. Ezra 2 would have been what we presently call the book of Nehemiah. Ezra 1 would have contained everything which we have in ours.

And eventually, before we get to the time of Christ, it is Ezra and Nehemiah. Very clearly, Nehemiah and Ezra are connected.

Very clearly, they are in Jerusalem at the same time. Ezra actually appears in Jerusalem some 13 years before Nehemiah, but he is still very much still there while Nehemiah is there.

Ezra, as we said before when we made our way through it, Ezra is the spiritual leader. He is of priestly descent, and he is one who is committed to know the Word, to understand the Word, so that he may teach the Word.

[1 : 05] Ezra will be seen later on in the book of Nehemiah when Nehemiah calls for a spiritual revival, and it is Ezra who stands up and reads the Word, and the scribes give the sense, or break out into small groups, and they help people understand.

But yet, Nehemiah and Ezra are contemporaries of one another, but they are serving the same purpose in different capacities. Where Ezra is a spiritual leader, Nehemiah is a political leader.

Nehemiah is a builder. He starts out as the cupbearer to the king. We'll see it in just a moment. He ends up being the builder of the wall. He's a wall builder.

And then he will eventually, very quickly into the book, become governor of Jerusalem. So he is operating in the political realm under King Artaxerxes.

Now just so you can have your Bible history in line, and you understand it before we read the text. Before Ezra and Nehemiah, we have a lady named Esther.

[2 : 08] Esther is in the kingdom of the Persians under a king named Xerxes or Darius. She becomes the queen.

She has a relative named Mordecai. Mordecai becomes a pretty high official in that area because he foils Haman's plot to wipe the Jews out. We understand that. We'll get to that in our next book, but you need to know chronologically that has already taken place.

Because once that king Xerxes dies, it is his youngest son who is King Artaxerxes. That is the king during the time of Nehemiah.

Artaxerxes becomes king because his older brother is assassinated after the death of their father. That's just world history stuff. And Artaxerxes ascends to the throne. So there's a lot going on behind the scenes.

God is moving and operating even through Esther and Mordecai and all the wonderful things that go on there. The festival that is started in the book of Esther, we think not much of it.

[3 : 10] We think, oh, well, it's something that we don't celebrate much today. Actually, it is something that even Christ Himself recognizes in the New Testament. So when we make our way through that, we will see it in its fullness.

But yet we know that there's a lot happening historically at this time. We have these three contemporaries, Esther, then Ezra, then Nehemiah.

And we have God working for one purpose, and really that is the preservation of His people and the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Jerusalem is important. Jerusalem has of utmost importance.

If you were with us Sunday morning, you know that we looked at all those covenantal promises of God. Someone told me when they walked out the door, they said, Pastor, you covered thousands of years of history in one short sermon.

I said, I know I did. It was kind of ambitious, but the people were patient. And we looked at all the covenantal promises of God. And if you remember, if you go back to Abraham, the covenant was connected to a particular people in a specific place.

[4 : 10] And that place is important because these are unconditional promises or unconditional covenants. God is bringing about the fulfillment of that here, specifically in Ezra and Nehemiah.

And He is literally opening the way for the coming of the Savior, the Messiah. If we go all the way back to the book of Genesis, where Abraham takes Isaac and offers him as a sacrifice to the Lord, and the Lord intercedes and says, No, don't do that.

He looks over and he finds a ram caught in the thicket. That is important wording there in the book of Genesis. I know it's a long introduction before we get into it, but I want you to understand its context.

When Abraham is going up the mountain, his son says, Father, I see the fire. I see the wood. Where's the sacrifice? He says, what? The Lord will provide, right? But he says something specific.

He says, The Lord will provide the lamb for the sacrifice. He gets up there and he lays Isaac on the altar. And right before he does it, God stops and says, Now I know that you love me.

[5 : 15] Now I know that you're committed to me. And he looks over and he sees not a lamb, but a ram caught in the thicket. The word ram could also mean goat, male goat in our translation.

But Abraham's profession was that the Lord would provide the lamb. But what he found was a substitutionary ram. So that's not the lamb that God will provide on that mountain.

That same mountain is the mountain that David is told to buy the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite after he orders the census taken of the nation of Israel and the plague of the Lord.

And the angel of the Lord is standing there. And God says to the prophet for David to buy that threshing floor and go offer a sacrifice of atonement on that threshing floor.

David buys that. It tells us in the book of Chronicles that David says, For this is the house of the Lord. That's the same mountain. We know it today as Temple Mount. That in Temple Mount, God would provide the lamb.

[6 : 17] We find that lamb being provided when Jesus walks into the temple on that Passion Week. And we say, Behold the lamb.

See, Jerusalem was important for that was the place of the substitutionary death. Some people today are waiting for the rebuilding of a new temple on Temple Mount. And they're really looking for prophecy because, as you know, in contemporary times, Temple Mount is no longer possessed by the Jewish people, but it's by the Islamic people.

And the dome of the rock is there. And so there's no temple. So they think, Well, the dome of the rock come. We'll have the reconstruction of a new temple. Just to bring you full circle, I'm not one of those guys looking for a new temple.

Okay? Because I think the temple served its purpose. And that was the provision of the lamb. Behold the lamb. And Jesus says, The glory has the party that walks out of there. The next wording we have in Scripture about the building of the temple is in Peter, where it says, We are being built together as spiritual stones into the temple of the Lord.

And I think the new temple that's going to be rebuilt is the people of the Lord and living forever in His presence and glory. So we don't break fellowship over that. If you're looking for a new temple on that mountain, we're not going to break fellowship over that.

[7 : 28] I have some dear friends that are looking for a new temple to come for that. And I know there's a lot of questions. That's just my understanding of Scripture. Okay? So I thought I'd bring you full circle. Jerusalem was there so that Christ could come.

Now, let's get to Nehemiah. All right. Nehemiah chapter 1 says, The words of Nehemiah the son of Hekaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa, the capital, that Hananiah, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came, and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity and about Jerusalem.

They said to me, The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are burned with fire. When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

I said, I beseech you, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and loving kindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments. Let your ear now be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant, which I am praying before you now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel, which we have sinned against you.

I, my father's house, have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances, which you commanded your servant Moses.

[8 : 59] Remember the word which you commanded your servant Moses, saying, If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples. But if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the remotest parts of heaven, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause my name to dwell.

They are your servants and your people whom you redeemed by your great power and by your strong hands. O Lord, I beseech you, may your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and the prayer of your servants who delight to revere your name and make your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man.

Now I was the cupbearer to the king. Nehemiah chapter 1. I want you to see this evening a man prepared for the work. A man prepared for the work.

Well, all the background historically of what's going on. One reality that we have noticed in Scripture is that God always has His man or woman in place at the right time.

God is never, though He may be silent and though it may appear as if He is not doing anything, God always has His people. Sunday morning, we may be looking at the opening chapter of the book of Luke and we will know that even after 400 plus years of silence, God still has His people.

[10 : 26] God always has His people that He is preparing for the moment in which He will call them to do the work He has conditioned them to do. It is Mordecai who tells Esther, it says, maybe for such a time as this, God has put you there.

That theme runs throughout Scripture that God is often preparing individuals in the background, in the quiet time, in the silent times, long before we see them coming to the foreground and being used by Him.

Carrie and I were just talking yesterday, talking about the reality of that Passion Week of Christ, that Last Supper. All we know is that there was a man with an upper room prepared.

There was a man that the disciples would say, go find the man carrying a jug of water on his hand. He has an upper room which he has prepared for you. We don't know that man's name, but we do know that man had been preparing a room for Jesus and his disciples, which by the way, in that room, is contained the longest discourse of Christ in any of His teaching.

Most people, most Bible scholars, believe that Joseph of Arimathea, when he laid Jesus in his tomb, that Joseph had been digging that tomb for Jesus Himself. For Joseph's tomb would have been in Arimathea, not in Jerusalem.

[11 : 44] And he was a wealthy man. And he was looking for the Savior. And he found Him. And he knew the Scriptures. And most believe that Joseph had dug that tomb, preparing it long before it was time for the burial of Christ Himself.

God always has His people that He is preparing. And what does it look like to be a man or a woman prepared for the work? Nehemiah is a man who is on the scene. Ezra has been studying Scripture.

He's of priestly descent. We would expect Ezra to be prepared. But Nehemiah has an important role to fill, just as important, by the way, as Ezra. And he is being called to not only rebuild the walls, but to rebuild the nation.

And God has prepared him. And now we see this preparation makes Nehemiah a peculiar man, a particular man. There are character attributes. I believe it's the same ones I looked at when we were in this about six years ago, because we just can't really get away from them.

But we see, number one, that Nehemiah is a man of concern. Nehemiah is a man of concern. Someone once said, and you'll have to forgive me, for I cannot remember where I read it, so I'm not trying to plagiarize anyone.

[12 : 54] It's just I can't remember where I read it over the years. Someone once said, the greatest disservice we do to an individual is not the physical harm we cause, we extend on them, but rather it is the complete indifference that we show towards them.

The greatest disservice and harm we can ever do to an individual is not a physical sense, but it is to be indifferent towards their need. To say, well, it's not me.

It's not my problem. I don't have to deal with that. It is to have a lack of concern, a lack of compassion. It says, now it happened in the month Chislev in the 20th year.

That's the 20th year of King Artaxerxes. I believe it is about 445 BC. It is 92 years after the decree of King Cyrus.

It is about 70 years after the completion of the temple. It is 13 years after Ezra has been sent back by King Artaxerxes into Jerusalem.

[14 : 06] In the 20th year of King Artaxerxes, he says, now I was, while I was in Susa, the capital. Now let's think about this just for a moment. Nehemiah is in the capital city, and we know he's the cupbearer to the king, and we know it's been 90 years since the decree by King Cyrus.

So, in all likelihood, we don't have to say in all likelihood, it would be a physical impossibility for it not to be. Nehemiah has known nothing but Persian rule. He's lived under the Persian Empire.

And evidently, Nehemiah has made a pretty good name for himself. Because to be the cupbearer to the king, many of you know, was not just to be the waiter, but it was to be a trusted confidant.

There were usually a number of them, but Nehemiah would have been one such man. To be the person who would take a drink from every cup that was given to the king to ensure that it was not poisoned.

To be a trusted confidant of an individual. To be able to give political advice if the king asked it. It would be on the inner circle of the one sitting upon the throne.

[15 : 13] And it would be to live in the capital city. Start difference from the people in Jerusalem. Nehemiah is living a life of comfort and ease and prosperity and really lack of concern.

But while he was in the capital, he asked concerning the Jewish people. Now some have problem with the fact that he says he asked concerning the escaped remnant or those who had survived the captivity.

Because they say, well, see, this can't mean those who went back after the king issued a decree, Cyrus that is, because he's talking about those who survived the captivity. Well, we really have no problem reconciling scripture here because we do know from the minor prophets of Haggai and Zechariah that that remnant that Cyrus told could go back, most of them did not inhabit Jerusalem.

Why didn't they live in Jerusalem? Because they went home into their homeland. They rebuilt the temple and then they moved out to their homeland, kind of out in the country. I don't blame them a little bit. And they built their nice houses and their paneled walls.

And the reason they didn't live in Jerusalem because Jerusalem was in shambles. Every building had been burned. The walls had been knocked down. The gates had been burned. What security is found in the city?

[16 : 34] As a matter of fact, when Nehemiah gets there, he asked people to move back into the city. So those that were in Jerusalem were quite literally those who had been left behind.

You remember when the Babylonians came? Jeremiah was one that chose to stay behind. The Babylonians came. They ransacked Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar and Nebuchadnezzar, carried everybody away. And by the time they did the last deportation, they left the poorest of the poor behind just so that the nature didn't overrun Jerusalem.

And Jeremiah was among the poorest of the poor. So these are those people. Big contrast with Nehemiah living in the capital city of Susa being the cupbearer to the king.

And yet he asked concerning them. And he asked about his brother. He asked it from his brother Hananiah. The reason we can be certain that this happened after the decree is because his brother Hananiah had the freedom to go back and forth.

He wouldn't have had that before Cyrus issued that decree. And he's gone back and forth. And so now he's asking, concerning them. And he is concerned about them because it says, as soon as he heard it, that the remnant there of the province who survived are in great distress and reproach.

[17 : 46] And the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates burned with fire. See, he probably had never seen this city. He had been born into captivity. He had never seen this city. Yet he knew that that was his people.

When I heard these words, he says, I sat down and wept and mourned for days and I was fasting and praying. Here we go. This is the same response Ezra had when he found out people were marrying foreign wives.

When I heard it, I sat down and wept and mourned and prayed and fasted. Again, it is written somewhere that we spend far too much time working before men than we do waiting before God.

Sometimes, quite often times, the greatest thing we can do is wait before the Lord God Almighty. True concern is not necessarily exhibited in what we do for someone else.

but in the burden we bear before the Lord God on behalf of someone else. He sat down and he wept and he mourned.

[19 : 00] I wonder how long it's been and this is something I've been wrestling with all week that we've carried that type of concern for other people. Paul says he bore the burden of concern for all the churches and that it was overbearing.

Throughout Scripture, we find those that God uses are people that have great concern for others. If we want to be prepared for the work that God has called us to do, then the first matter that needs to take place is we must be people of concern.

That's hard to do in this world. Because in this world now, in our present day and time, they would like to convince you that the only person you need to concern yourself with is you.

If Nehemiah was just concerned with himself, he would have stayed at the capital and he would have maintained his position, but he didn't. Just kind of get ahead of ourselves, by the way, the moment Nehemiah steps out of the capital, the battle begins.

The moment he starts being used of the Lord is when the enemies show up. So we can't say it's self-concern.

[20 : 16] He was a man of concern. Number two, we see that he was a man of confession. Not only was he weeping and mourning and fasting and praying for the people, he began to confess.

He says, I beseech you, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who preserves the covenant of loving kindness. We'll get to that in just a moment. For those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear now be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant, which I am praying before you now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel, your servant.

See the repetition of the word servant here. And here it is. Confessing the sins of the sons of Israel, which we have sinned before you. There's one great thread that runs throughout Scripture.

And in particular, it begins to highlight itself with the Babylonian captivity. We see Daniel doing it. We see Ezra doing it. We see Nehemiah now doing it. And that is acknowledging and even aligning themselves with the sin of rebellion of their brothers around them.

Owning it. Daniel, when he opens up the window and prays, he says, We have sinned, O Lord. Ezra. Now, he has not given himself to foreign wives, but what does he say?

[21 : 36] We have sinned, O Lord. Here in Nehemiah, when he hears of this and he's still in the capital, he begins to pray and he says, We have sinned, confessing the sins not just of the nation, but he says, the sins we have done.

It is a realization that guilt rests upon the people. Now, we understand it's a particular people, right? But we try in our day and time to try to make faith such an individual aspect of our life.

Old Testament theology, New Testament theology is a little bit different. In Old Testament theology, sure, there was this national identity and the sins of the nation would lead to the blessing of the nations. The sins of the individual would lead to the curse of the nations and the blessing of the individual could bless the nation.

And today, we'd like to think, Well, I'm not held accountable for anyone else. I'm just going to be me. Well, we're also built up together as we continue to say, not just to those in war trace, but to the entirety of the church.

And we ought to admit and we ought to be able to understand the reality that the church universal has fallen short too often. And we have created such a great disservice for the name of the Lord God Almighty.

- [22 : 49] We ought to be weeping and mourning over these realities rather than casting judgment upon them. Because it is a reflection of who He is. It's about the character of God, not the praise of the individual.

And Nehemiah begins to confess the sins. He says, I and my Father's house have sinned. Why? Because he knew that he wasn't perfect. I'm reminded of Isaiah. In Isaiah chapter 6, where he stands before the Lord, he says, Woe is me for I am a man of what?

Unclean lips and live among a people of unclean lips. Before we can ever begin to pray on behalf of the sins of others, we must first acknowledge our own sinfulness.

We must first be able to own the reality that we have fallen short to. That we, like Isaiah, are people of unclean lips. And that's not judgmental, that's just humbleness.

He says, We have acted very corruptly against you. And he begins to confess and acknowledge their failures. Confession is a mighty work.

- [23 : 53] See, the greatest need, if we want to carry a concern, the greatest need of the people around us is not for physical matters to be addressed.

That is, the walls to be rebuilt. The greatest need Nehemiah knew of was the fact that they needed a spiritual rebirth. And so he began his work with the confession of sin and repentance.

The greatest need of anybody we come into contact with is not that they may have a physical ailment taken care of or a physical need met.

Rather, the greatest need of any individual is spiritual by nature. But I want you to also understand this. Nehemiah is not a priest.

Nehemiah's purpose is not to teach the Word. But before Nehemiah takes on the task of political work, he begins to pray for spiritual revival.

- [24 : 52] Because it doesn't matter if we're in vocational ministry or if we're in quote-unquote secular occupation. Every bit of it is spiritual in nature.

Because when the man or woman of God is employed in any service, it is spiritual by nature. Nehemiah took on his task as a spiritual task.

Could have been real easy when he heard about the walls. He could have sat down and said, well, the first thing he could have done was, well, this is what we need to do and this is how we need to do it. By the way, he does that. We don't ever have it recorded that he does it, but we do know that he does it.

We know that he does it because in the second chapter when he's standing before the king and King Artaxerxes says, what would you have me to do? In an instant, Nehemiah gives him an answer. This is how long it's going to take me.

This is what I need. I need you to send me letters from governors so that I can rebuild the gates and I can have the boards and I can have all the lumber that I need. See, Nehemiah was a planner, but do you notice that we don't have any record of Nehemiah's plans?

- [25 : 58] Nehemiah knew his stuff intellectually. His work was political and physical by nature and he went into it prepared, which means that we ought to do the same. But the first thing he did was pray over the matter.

By the way, the one thing that's highlighted all throughout the book of Nehemiah is Nehemiah is a man of prayer, which is astounding. Nehemiah seems to pray more than Ezra and Ezra is the priest.

So there is no such thing, by the way, as a holy occupation. Wherever you're employed, that is a holy occupation for you are a sanctified individual. And the Word says, what?

To do whatever you do as unto the Lord and not unto man. And sometimes the greatest way we can ever share the Gospel is through doing our work well and praying over the nature of our work and saying, Lord, help me to do this for Your glory.

It is confession. The third reality we see is that Nehemiah was a man of conviction. And here we see the convictions. He says there are a number of them and we can see it very quickly.

[27 : 11] He says he began to fast and praying before the God of heaven, which by the way, the phrase God of heaven is a very Persian phrase. It is not a Jewish phrase.

It is a very Persian phrase because he is in the Persian Empire. But then he kind of brings it down. He begins to pray and he says, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God.

The first conviction that Nehemiah had, Nehemiah was fully convicted that God was able and in a position to do what he was about to ask.

He had a settled conviction. Hello, ladies. How are y'all doing? Good. Nice of y'all to join us. We appreciate y'all coming through. How are you doing? Good. Y'all were distracting everybody, so I thought I'd say hi.

I don't know why they don't ever want to talk to me. Anyway, Nehemiah had a settled conviction that God was in a position to do what he was about to ask him to do.

[28 : 11] You are the Lord, that is Yahweh, the covenant God of heaven, great and awesome one. We must be convicted when we come to this reality of prayer that when we are before Him, there is a settled conviction that He is able.

Jesus said that if we ask and doubt, we're not going to receive. James says that when we pray with doubting, we're like waves of the sea being tossed to and fro.

We ought to be people of conviction. The second conviction that Nehemiah had, he had the conviction that God would keep His Word. Because look at what he says.

We have acted very corruptly, but what does it say in verse 8? Remember the Word which you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the Word. Friend, listen. I hope you have this conviction.

And it's not a prideful thing, but it ought to push us to study. We ought to live with the conviction that we can hold God to His Word. What He has declared, He will do.

[29 : 15] Which means we need to know what He's declared. Nehemiah knew what God had said when the people failed, when they stumbled. If they will repent, I will respond.

We ought to have a conviction that God will keep His Word. There should be no doubt in that reality. That if He has said it, listen, my entire ministry has been built on the conviction that God will keep His Word.

Not that I have the ability, not that I am able to, but that He will keep His Word. Put all my eggs in that one basket. And we ought to have that conviction.

Look at what He keeps going. So He has the conviction that God will keep His Word. He goes on in verse 10. He says, They are your servants and your people whom you redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

Here's the conviction. that God would fulfill His plans and purposes. That God would not fail because He had redeemed them for Himself, for His glory.

[30 : 21] There ought to be the settled conviction. Listen, if you have accepted Christ as your Lord and Savior, you have been redeemed from the hands of Satan and God has a glorious purpose for your life.

Stand into conviction that He will bring it about. And that glory is for His name, not necessarily for our recognition. We are His people.

We go on. He says, O Lord, I beseech You. May Your ear be attentive to the ear of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name. And here's the last conviction. Make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man.

He had the conviction that God was able to overrule the king He was about to approach. That God truly turned the hearts of the kings in the palm of His hands.

One more conviction and I'll be closed. I told you that was the last one. I got one more. And it's that final statement. Now I was. Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

[31 : 27] There's some things, there's little nuances I love in Scripture. Scripture. Like I love in Scripture where Peter and John met a man who used to sit at the gate and beg of alms.

I love the word used to because he doesn't sit at the gate and beg of alms anymore because Peter and John met him as they were going into the temple. He used to sit there until Peter and John met him and they said, we don't have riches and go, but what we do have in the name of Jesus Christ, get up and walk.

And he walked away and he went into the temple with them. So he doesn't sit there anymore but he used to. There used to be a man who sat beside the pool of Siloam and wait for the angel to stir it up. He doesn't sit there anymore because Jesus showed up one day and said, why are you here?

Get up and go home. There used to be a man who was paralytic and now we find one here. Nehemiah used to be the cupbearer. He was the cupbearer to the king. Nehemiah had the conviction that God had a greater call in his life than what he was doing at that time.

And so when he goes to rebuild the walls, the enemies come. There were no enemies in the palace but the enemies show up. Nehemiah fulfills his task. Why? Because he had the conviction that God was calling him to do something else.

[32 : 34] Sometimes when we answer that call of God, it will cause us to sacrifice something, give up something and by the world standards it will look silly. By the world standards it won't make sense.

By the world standards people are going to tell you you're out of your mind. They're going to tell you you've lost your senses and it makes no sense and the math doesn't add up. Friend, if you have a conviction you are supposed to do it, then do it.

I say that with all of my being. Do it. But be convicted of the reality that that's what God has called you to do.

And when you have that conviction, know that the enemy is going to show up and he's going to attack you from the very beginning. But if you're operating under conviction, you will know that's what God's called you to do and you will struggle at times.

But you won't stop. I speak from personal experience. We ought to have the conviction that God has called us to do what we're doing for His glory and His alone.

[33 : 38] Nehemiah was a man prepared for the work. May we be people prepared for the work that God has given us. Found in Nehemiah chapter 1. All right, we need to get