

Nehemiah 1:1-11

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Preacher: David Helm

[0 : 00] Again, the scripture reading today is from the book of Nehemiah, chapter 1, the entire chapter, verses 1 through 11. The words of Nehemiah, the son of Halakai.

Now it happened in the month of Chislew, in the 20th year, as I was in Susa, the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah.

And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, the remnant there in the province who have survived the exile is in great trouble and shame.

The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and went and mourned for days. I continued fasting and praying before the Lord of heaven.

And I said, O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments. Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant, that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel, your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you.

[1 : 20] Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

Remember the word that 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 your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen to make my name dwell there.

They are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. 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.

And give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. Now, I was the cupbearer to the king. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God. Please be seated. Well, let me add my own welcome to you this first Sunday of the new year.

[2 : 45] If you are visiting with us, this is no ordinary day, not simply because of the turning of the year, but it is my full prayerful expectation that this year will prove to be the most consequential year in the history of our church since our founding 22 years ago in 1998.

Let me put it differently. Let me put it differently. If you're here today, I want you to know that while you walk into a community of faith that has been meeting now for some decades, you will, if you're here five years from now, be able to say, I was there at the very start.

For today is the beginning. For today is the beginning. With four congregations now secure in the city and two churches planted internationally and an organization that has helped assist the planting of 25 other churches in the city, we today stand on the threshold of change.

God is moving and he is moving us by May 3rd. This very congregation will take vows, not simply the naming or the changing of a name to Christ Church Chicago, but the covenantal vows wherein we give ourselves to one another and to God's renewed purposes for the next leg of this journey. I feel today more excited than at any day since our founding. I feel like it's part two of a great adventure story.

[4 : 26] One which you and I walk through together. I'm reminded of Tolkien in his Fellowship of the Ring at that moment when the fellowship, having now found their way into alternate settings, pushes on and says farewell to Lorien.

And it begins to move with renewed and purpose that it had at first. In other words, having begun, they now set out to begin.

Tolkien puts it this way. So the company went on their long way down the wide hurrying waters born ever southward.

And indeed, that is what God has put before us. Within a few months, we will have our sights on woodlawn. By that I mean a first stopping off place.

For indeed, from woodlawn we have many things to learn. Just as we have some gospel gifts to give. But the journey is today irreversibly in play.

[5 : 43] Our season is that unique. And it bears some loose analogical relationship or mirroring to Nehemiah's historical setting.

Verses 1 to 3. The setting of Nehemiah. If you're not familiar with this work, you will need to know that it is part two of a greater work.

In other words, it's the turning of the page to the renewed beginning. The purpose of which they first set out long before.

It was joined in the Hebrew scriptures with Ezra. Even in your own Bibles, it follows Ezra chronologically. But there was a season where you just would have referred to the book of Ezra. And Nehemiah would have been part of it. If you're not familiar with biblical history, this time period in Israel's own life sits somewhere on the backside of the great promise that King David's realm had.

[7 : 00] And the unique fulfillment that the Lord Jesus Christ will bring. The chronicler himself places you at a moment in history where some Jews set out to accomplish a great work for God on the back of a proclamation that said, Go back to Jerusalem and rebuild.

That is the way 2 Chronicles closes down, chapter 36, verse 22. And if you want to know Nehemiah's setting, in verse 1, he claims that it happened, verse 1.

This new beginning in the month of Shislev, December or so, and in the 20th year. And there he is in the capital of Persia, namely Susa.

If you look across the column in chapter 2 and in verse 1, you are still in the 20th year. And you find yourself in the reign of King Artaxerxes.

And indeed, historically, outside the scriptures, we're aware of this figure, this king of Persia. In fact, there were two Artaxerxes, the first and the second.

[8 : 10] And there's some scholarly debate in regard to when and how Ezra and Nehemiah relate to those two time periods. But to put it as simply as I can, what Ezra set out to do when he returned to Jerusalem with a small band in an effort to accomplish a great work was left incomplete, unfinished, never realized.

And then comes Nehemiah. Long after most of the original corps, perhaps all, who had set out on the move, had been displaced from the scene.

And a new people is in place. And it's a new beginning for God's people in God's place.

And a new work that is commissioned by God himself, as though he stood from his throne, enacted independently of all human wisdom, and set the church at work to accomplish that which was never fully done.

That is the setting. And here you have then Nehemiah entering the narrative already at verse 2.

[9 : 44] Here he is in the capital city of Persia, asking a question from a traveler who's come back from the Holy Land. And he asks concerning two things.

Notice his concerns. A concern for the people and a concern for the place. I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped who had survived the exile and concerning Jerusalem.

A people and a place. These are his great concerns.

And what you learn when you begin to read this book is that the people were held in derision. Even by the time we will arrive at chapter 2, and in the middle of that verse, it will use almost those very words.

Verse 17, that we may no longer suffer derision. Our text says that the people that had returned were in great trouble and shame.

[10 : 59] Israel was at a point in its history where the people were known for the derision they faced by the rest of the world. And rightly so.

They were mocked. They were jeered. They were sneered at. For indeed, as a collective people, all of their convictions, their religious persistence that godliness had evaporated from view as though

blindness had been put on.

And they lived in the midst of a soul state of dilapidation. The people were in great trouble and in shame.

And the place, it says, verse 3, the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed by fire. In other words, there was no ability to protect themselves.

There was no ability to have economic vitality for themselves. The city in which they lived was completely ruinous. This derisive state, this city of disrepair, this neglect of the things that matter had made them of all people to be pitied and derided.

[12:28] David Jackman rightly says that the work of God had become paralyzed and the people of God had become demoralized. That is the setting.

Now this people and place which run through the book like parallel tracks have yet to merge in the scriptures to a single rail.

Let me explain. Some hundreds of years from this point, Jesus of Nazareth will arrive on the scene and claim within his very person a true representative of Israel and all the promises of David.

And yet, he will liken his person to God's very place. And he will indicate that if you tear down the walls of Jerusalem, God will rebuild it in three days.

So, that as these ideas are developing and progressing in the scriptures, God's people and God's place in Nehemiah's day, two distinct and separate entities have yet to become fulfilled in one man who is himself true son of God and the place where God's name dwells.

[14:04] Indeed, we are not even yet then to where Paul will liken the church as the very household of God and the individual members as unique temples in whom the spirit dwells through whom the name of God can be known.

All of that merging, all of the fullness of those ideas gloriously put forward in the scriptures have yet to take place or transpire. So, Nehemiah is at a moment in time dealing with the people of God who are in great trouble and the city itself which is broken down.

Let me put it to you this way though, as we commence, one cannot read Nehemiah or write until they understand that it is not about the revitalization of the city but rather the renewal of the church. From our vantage point, this much is clear. It's less about the reconstruction of a building than it is taking a people on as the very renovation project of God.

That as you read this work in the coming weeks, you ought to think of yourself if you have faith in Christ in whom all God's promises are fulfilled.

[15:31] that you embody his presence in the world. That his name is implanted by his spirit in your person and that your collaboration in this family is what unites you to the very people of God.

In other words, in Nehemiah, we are, our very souls, our lives, are a construction site for God. And the world will never see, nor will it ever know, the glories of Jesus if Jesus does not first capture with great gravitas the fullness of our own mind and heart and life.

This is the setting then of Nehemiah. the state of the people of God, the church, the household, the family, the one through whom his name was to be known, was in great trouble and in shame.

The walls were broken down. It was a people of derision and it was a place of disrepair. This is where the book begins.

This is where our journey starts. May we then be informed by that setting with the two-fold response of Nehemiah.

[17:09] First, great sadness. Look at verse 4. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days.

There is a sadness that gripped this man's heart when he understood that God's promises for Jerusalem all the way back to Deuteronomy 12 and verse 5 were that it was to be a place where the name of God was known unto the whole world.

And yet it was in disrepair. How could it be known to the world if itself could not even stand? It was sad because he knew that God's pulling out of Israel unto himself as a people was that they would be holy and blameless, separate.

In other words, it's a book that's not concerned with looking out at the culture and lamenting all that is wrong. Nehemiah's heart turned in and understood fully what God intended for him and us and the people and it moved him.

Look at how it slows down. He sat, he wept, he mourned. This is the question then, the first question of Nehemiah.

[18 : 41] how do you feel when you consider the state of the church? The church. sadness, sadness, a sense of unfinished business, sense of personal regret, an understanding of how far away I am and we are from his design, his intention, his plan.

plan. This is the state of the church and it brought on a prolonged sadness.

Look over, next week we'll take it up in chapter 2 and verse 2. It will be four months later and the king will say to Nehemiah, why is your face sad?

It's a prolonged sadness. It's not, wow, get me back to the next Netflix where I can escape the sadness. It was a full-orbed, months-long embrace of what has happened to the household of God. And the sadness which emerged from the setting gives way in verses 5 to 11 to intercession.

[20 : 49] To prayer. Right there, the transition is clear at the end of verse 4. I also continued in fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

And then verses 5 through 11, the remainder of the text is simply a summation of the kinds of things he prayed over a four-month period of time.

He prayed. Let me apply this. He prayed. He did not institute a program. He called a prayer meeting.

He did not commence with urban social political action.

He started with intercession.! He did not form a committee.

[22 : 03] He simply called out to God. Could it be that today's church, church, which is preoccupied with seeking a experiential high of personal praise, is never fully realized because we seek that more than we seek prayer.

prayer. We seek to experience the goodness of God without ever seeking the face of God.

Could it be that praise, which preoccupies the church, needs to be replaced with prayer? Think of it not just in regard to praise, but the church's preoccupation even with preaching.

And believe me, I'm not trying to denigrate praise or preaching, but there is more to life than getting everything in the scriptures correct.

There is God himself who is to be known, communed with, not merely a command over. Could it be that the church's present preoccupation with power, both political and spiritual, is another manifestation of the forgotten call to prayer?

[23 : 49] Could it be that the walls are broken down within your life and within our body, that the gates have been set afire in you and among us?

Could it be that the greatness of the name of God and his son, Jesus Christ, is so derided because we have not been saddened to the point of settling down in intercession?

Could it be that we have not seen great things done because we have not yet been moved with the condition, the true condition, that Nehemiah saw?

Indeed, the scriptures here have given us a directive that when the heart of a man or a woman is truly saddened by the state of our spiritual malaise, they will be set to intercession.

I want you to notice just a couple of things about this prayer. First, I want you to see how it's organized. It's really in two parts that are marked off by the repetition of a phrase that divides its organizational force.

[25 : 20] Verse six, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant.

And then again, verse 11, O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and the prayer of your servants.

Those are the two literary organizational halves of his prayer. He has two appeals in prayer two then things he wants God to hear given what he feels.

And notice the first one, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this man. He's an individual. He's a man. He's not a pastor. He's a layman. And he's going before God with his own prayer and it's on behalf of the people.

But by the time you get to verse 11, he will say, let the prayer of your servant and the prayer of your servants who delight in your name. In other words, he is a man who has been overcome with the state of the church that has led him to pray and he's one who's called other people to him and they are now praying.

And in the first half, he is praying on behalf of the people. And in the second half, the people are praying on behalf of him the man.

[26 : 51] Notice his approach. His prayers are an interesting beginning. Verse 5, O Lord God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.

In other words, he begins by addressing God as great, as awesome, as terrifyingly good. as elevated, as other, as larger, as bigger.

And he connects him to the very words of Moses. By the end of verse 7, the things that God had commanded the servant Moses. He connects him to a God who has inscripturated himself that we might know who he is.

So to know God was to read the words of Moses, to read the words of Moses was to know God.

And he says, God, you are great, you are awesome, you have redeemed a people for yourself.

And I come to you asking that you, that God of Israel's history, that God of the Hebrew scriptures, I pray that you would hear me.

[28 : 06] And here's what I want you to hear. We have sinned. God that's the approach. He's confessing, verse 6, the sins of the people, his father's house.

We've acted corruptly, corruptly. He even says, which we have sinned against you, I and my father's house.

He is all in. He is all in. He is God. This great approach to let God be God, and then to immediately confess the great distance between us, leads then to his first forceful activity that he wants God to know.

In other words, when you get to verse 8, you are seeing the reason for which he is praying. hear my prayer, here it is, remember. There is something that he wants God to remember.

He's reminding God of something. And it won't be until verse 11 that he is making a request of God for something.

[29 : 29] That's the two ends of the prayer. And what is he reminding God of? He's saying to God, I want you to remember that the very word you gave Moses, which indicated a scattering of the people of God went in, we did not follow you, is the very word also that contains you will gather them unto yourself.

And the scattering that has taken place in the generations of Nehemiah are now gathered into his own heart. heart.

And he's praying, verse 9, for a gathering of the church, the people. He's praying for a unification of the people, a restoration of the people, a rebuilding of the people, and that he would bring them, verse 9, to the place that you have chosen.

All the way back in Deuteronomy and in other places, that place was Jerusalem. Jerusalem was to be the place where God's word sat open at the middle, God's voice was heard, and God's glory would be known to the ends of the earth.

And what he's saying is, God, I'm confessing our sins, but I want you to be reminded that you who promised to scatter us likewise promised to gather us so that your name would be known.

[30 : 56] That ought to be the driving concern of our community of faith in the coming year. Not merely what has happened to the people of God, but wherein can we see his name known again in glory for all that he is.

That's what he's praying. Remember God, remember God, that this sinful, frail, feeble people are your people.

who carry your name so restore their lives that you might be known in the world. And so then he goes, verse 11, let your ear be attentive also to this, not merely something that God would be reminded of, but as a request of something from God.

Look at this. Give success to your servant today and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. Now I was a cupbearer to the king.

Something clicked in this prayer. Part two of the prayer. You find a person saying, God, I want to do something that will require the good hand, your good hand resting upon me.

[32 : 40] We'll learn next week what that is. But don't miss this as we close. Nehemiah wanted to do something great for God.

And he wanted to be a member of a church who was fully committed to God's greatness too. And he prayed for success and for mercy.

me. Let me put it to you this way. Nothing truly great is ever accomplished for God without laymen and lay women, men and women of the church who are willing to pay the incredibly high price of persistent prayer.

nothing great happens for God without men and women who pay the price of prayer.

And no man or woman here would ever be so moved to do so until their own heart was truly saddened by the state of the church.

[34 : 11] And no person will ever be truly saddened by the state of the church until they know God's great design for her and that she would be a place where God's very name dwells.

And so we come to the most consequential moment in the history of this church and we arrive there today.

This is not pastoral hyperbole. I'm convinced that God would see fit to accomplish in your heart and in ours the sentiment that we have already sung.

Let revival come. I'm not a wizard. I'm not a word of knowledge pastor that's going to tell you you stand on the threshold of revival.

I am going to tell you that if the people of God who are called by his name will humble themselves and pray a new work can begin.

[36 : 03] Your life can be rebuilt. Your spiritual indifference for some of you due to the pain that the people of God have caused can be replenished.

Your latitude with his ways can be made straight. Our calling can be made secure.

If we truly understand the state of the church and the spirit of God from outside in stirs our soul with sadness to the point where our feet find their way to prayer.

I do hope to see you tonight at 730 as we pray.

Our Heavenly Father, what book that stands before us and what a season of vibrant life awaits us as we give ourselves to your word and your ways.

[37 : 54] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.