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Nehemiah 1

"God's Work Begins In Your Heart"

August 20, 2017

Let's open our Bibles this morning - not to Mark but to the book of Nehemiah.

This morning we'd like to start a series of studies through this wonderful book that I think you're going to enjoy. If you haven't ever gone through it in depth, we hope that you can join us. It is one of the best books in the Bible on serving. Certainly, as we follow Nehemiah, he gets to wear a lot of different hats. He gets to taste food for the king, he gets to build walls for Jerusalem, he gets to govern a province of Judea. You learn, fairly quickly from Nehemiah, that if you're faithful for the little things and through the little things, God will entrust much to your care.

But it's a very practical book. Nehemiah can teach us how to work for a difficult boss. Maybe you have one of those. Or how do you balance waiting upon the Lord with really, by faith, planning personally if the Lord should open doors for you? When is it time to act? And when is it time to just wait upon the Lord faithfully and patiently? How do you handle unanswered prayer? What do you do when you pray, and God doesn't seem to be listening? Or, how do you face impossible circumstances? You'd like to do something, you wish that you could, and you don't feel like you can. And how do you handle undeserved criticism that comes your way just because you're trying to serve the Lord? It is a great book. It's a book about gaining vision and God's direction. It's a book about hope and encouragement. I think by the time you get done with the book, you'll want to be more like him, more like Nehemiah.

And Nehemiah will show us, more often than not, that God works in uneventful ways, that He works through them. I know that we sometimes think, gosh, if the heavens could open and we'd have a sign, then we'd know. But that isn't really the way God usually works. He works through the mundane things around us. And Nehemiah will teach us about that, and he'll show us that this is the way God works, that He'll show Himself to those looking for Him. And much like God's appearance to Elijah (when he was there in the desert, there in 1 Kings 19), and looking for the LORD in the storm and the earthquakes and in the strong winds, He wasn't in any of those. He was in the small voice speaking to the heart of His guy.

So, God works more often than not in quiet ways; not so much the spectacular. And Nehemiah will teach us that. Think about Elijah with his servant, when they were surrounded by the Syrian army (2 Kings 6), and his servant freaked out, and he said, "Man, we're done!" They were in a place called Dothan, and Elijah prayed, "LORD, show him what I can see in You." And his eyes were opened, and he saw the angels of the LORD encamped around those who were encamped around them. And he could see what others couldn't. Nehemiah's a guy that just seems to see what the LORD wants to do long before anyone else.

It's a great book on leadership if leadership is defined by the extent that you influence others. We need good leaders. The government needs it, we need it in our homes, at our jobs, in the church. There's a lot of frustration that comes when we don't have it. Nehemiah's a great example of that.

So this morning we'd like to look at chapter 1. It's only eleven verses. It has one story to tell. We will find Nehemiah starting on his knees, alone with God, broken in heart, receiving a vision and direction for his life. And it won't be long before what God speaks to him will be followed by a whole group of folks who will share with him the vision and find the blessings of God.

Just a two-minute background to the book itself. When the nation of Israel went into captivity because of their sinfulness, and the Babylonians came in to overthrow them, God told them they would be in captivity 700 miles away for seventy years. And in 606 B.C., that invasion under Nebuchadnezzar began. First they took (in 606) Daniel and a bunch of other very rich kids, grown up in distinguished families. They were going to use these kids to oversee the nation when they would later bring them into captivity. Ten years later, in 597 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar sent another group of folks against what was then a rebellious king in Judah, and there were a lot of folks who lost their lives. There was fighting, there was a threat, "Don't make me come back." In 586 B.C., he came back. They leveled the walls of the city, they took the articles out of the Temple, they dragged away thousands of folks into captivity - many people died as a result, and twenty of those years had already begun (606 to 586 B.C.). In Ezra 1 (which is the book right before this one), in 536 B.C. (or a total of seventy years later), the Medo-Persians overthrew the Babylonians, and King Cyrus said to the Jews, "Go home. You're welcome to go home." Just like the LORD had said in Isaiah (44:28), that this king would allow. You would think that everyone would run home; they did not. Only 50,000 people of the millions who lived in Babylon went home. Most of

them were now very comfortable in the city of the world - not wanting to go to the challenges that would be out there. And so these 50,000 returned. They quickly began to lay the foundation for the Temple, which was a place of worship - the only place they could meet with God because they were Jews. They laid the foundation, and then there was some pressure externally, and they quit. They began to say to each other, "Gosh, we need houses to live in ourselves," and so they set the work aside, and they began to build their own homes. Sixteen years later, in 520 B.C., God sent Jerubbaal and Joshua, and they began to not only lead the folks, but then here came the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, and they got on the people. You can read the books; you have them in your Bible. And four years later, in 516 B.C., finally the Temple was built, and the worship of God could begin. Between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra (the book right before this) is where the book of Esther should be placed. But then, beginning in chapters 7-10 of Ezra (the book before this one), you read about a couple of groups that will follow. In 457 B.C., seventy-nine years after that first group had gone (the 50,000), a second group comes with Ezra; about two thousand people is all. They bring worship leaders and Temple workers and singers. They seek to restore worship and biblical reforms in this new community. And twelve years later, in 445 B.C., Nehemiah will be sent. So, that kind of gets you down the wall. It's been ninety-one years since Company A went out. It's been one hundred and sixty-one years since the captivity had begun. The city of Jerusalem had, still, no walls of protection. The people were still kind of sitting ducks to all of their enemies roundabout. It was shameful and desolate; and a place that the LORD, one time, had put His name was now in ruins, and the people were overrun. And it was a shame. But, in order for that restoration to begin, God wanted to get the heart of one man so that He could, through that one man, drive the nation to bring itself back to that place of honor - put up the walls, build the city streets, inhabit the land, have God's blessing again in the place of worship.

And so chapter 1 is really the calling of God upon Nehemiah's life. And I'd like to give you four things to think about in terms of how do you know what God has called you to do today? And I'll give you some things to write down - four principles that I think will help you to determine God's will for your life.

Verse 1 says, "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, 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. And they said to me, 'The survivors who are left from the

captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire.' " Now, verse 1 - the name Nehemiah means Jehovah comforts us; and his dad's name, Hachaliah, means he in whom the LORD delights. And because of those names, we assume that it might show us there was a godliness in this family line that Nehemiah grew up with. Because they were in a foreign country, the nation (for the most part) is not worshipping God. But he seems to be distinct from that in the sense of his background spiritually. Verse 1 also gives us the time of the activities, and the book of Nehemiah is filled with time markers. It says it was in the twentieth year of - this would have been Artaxerxes II. It was in the month of Chislev, which is the ninth month of the Jewish calendar (about November-December); it was winter. It was 446 B.C. Nehemiah was living in Shushan (Susa in Hebrew). It's the citadel. It's on the Persian Gulf in modern-day Iran.

When, at that time, this fellow Nehemiah receives a report (from verse 2) "Hanani one of my brethren." Now that doesn't necessarily mean "brother" literally. But it might in this case since (when you get to chapter 7) he'll take this man and make him one of the overseers, and it does seem like it was probably his real brother. Nehemiah was born in captivity; never been to Jerusalem as far as we could tell; raised in idolatry; lived through both the Babylonian captivity and then the Medo-Persian takeover. But it seems to be a family that is sold out to the LORD in the midst of all that is going on. He talks to his brother. He hadn't seen Jerusalem before. He'd grown up in the world, if you will, but his heart began to be concerned for the people of God. And he wanted to know what their condition was. "How are they doing? How about those who had escaped, those who had not been taken captive? And how about those who had survived the captivity and had returned. How are they?"

Here's the first thing that you might want to write down as far as determining God's will. God's call to ministry always begins in the heart of an individual. God calls you personally. Personally. When Paul writes to Timothy in chapter 3, he said, "He who desires the office of a bishop desires a good work" (1 Timothy 3:1). He desires. God did a work in his heart. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians about his preaching, he said (1 Corinthians 9:16), "If I don't preach, necessity has been laid upon me to preach. Woe to me if I don't!" God's work always begins in the heart of an individual. You can teach people just about anything. You can't teach calling. There's no way to teach people what to care about. That God has to do in the heart of those who love the LORD. And desire, once you get saved, is a place

where God can work in determining and driving you to what He wants you to do. If we know that, if we know that God places desire in the hearts of His people, then we would never find ourselves trying to force concern for a work upon others; because we have it doesn't mean they do. God has to do the work in the heart of an individual. And I would say to you if the concern is missing, then probably the calling is missing as well. I mean, here's a man serving in a very prominent position with the king who just couldn't get out of his mind how well the people of Israel were doing - 700 miles away, in a place he'd never been - when the whole nation, pretty much, had settled in to life in Babylon. God had begun to do a work in his heart. We sometimes have people call the church to share their burdens with us, and they'll say things like, "You know what the church needs?" and we try to encourage them that if God is giving them that burden, rather than trying to pass it off to us (who may not care about what you're saying, not like you do), how will God use you to meet that need? What is the Lord going to do with you to meet the needs that God has stirred or put into your heart? You see, the desire has to come from Him. It comes from Him. And it's a good thing that we all don't have the same desire. Who would the ushers seat if we're all called to be ushers? And who would the worship people lead in worship if we're all called to be on stage with an instrument? God has a way of raising up those that He desires to use in different manners. But it starts in your heart - just like it did in the heart of Nehemiah. He's the only one in all of Shushan concerned with Jerusalem, it seems. But if God was going to reach the nation, He was going to start by reaching one heart, one man's heart, and He did.

The report (in verse 3) from Hanani was extremely discouraging. Jerusalem had now been lying in ruins for one hundred and sixty-one years. The city was vulnerable. They had no gates, no roads, no protection. The words that are used (in verse 3) are they are "in great distress and reproach." "Great distress" is the word for adversity; "reproach" is the word for shame. The people of God and the place of God - Jerusalem - was lying in rubble and was the ground for thieves and rogues and difficulty.

So we read, in verse 4, "So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days ....." The news broke Nehemiah's heart. If point one is that the calling of God begins with an individual (you and me) - what is the desire that God is placing in your heart? - the second point is this - you can oftentimes discover what God wants to do with you or through you by what breaks your heart. And this moved Nehemiah's heart to tears. He sat for days, weeping

and mourning. Now, look, Nehemiah is not the first guy to weep over the city of Jerusalem, and he won't be the last. Lots of folks, as we read through the Scriptures - Daniel, Habakkuk, Jesus Himself will cry over the direction of His people. But that which means the most to you, that which touches you the deepest as a child of God, can oftentimes also be the clearest sign of the work God would do through your life because it has moved your heart. And we read in Psalm 37:4, "Delight yourself also in the LORD, and He shall give you the desires of your heart." So not only is the desire borne by God, but for you, what moves you to tears is often the thing that you need to be involved in and make yourself available for. Nehemiah would spend days alone, weeping over Jerusalem. The best vessels to lighten the load are those who have felt the weight themselves first. The best vessels that God would use in doing His work are those who feel and have experienced the difficulty that they seek to relieve. You've seen the need. Your zeal will be that, because of the need, you'll serve out of love, not obligation. You know, there're lots of people that get busy in church because they want to do a great work for God. Nehemiah has nothin'. He's got a broken heart, and he doesn't have a clue as to what to do. He is just broken by what he sees. He wants God to use him to build the walls; it says so in verse 11. But before he could do that, he'd have to weep over the ruins.

It is often a great step in the right direction when you begin to follow that which God is doing in your heart, especially in the things that move you. I thought back over all of the ministries that we have here in the church that were borne or built out of the vision of somebody whose heart was broken over something; and those ministries tend to last, and they are ministries that are developed, and they stay fast. I really believe God's called me to teach the Bible. I believe it works. I am frustrated that people run around the world thinking about God in a way that God doesn't even present Himself like. If they could just know the God of the Bible, I think they'd love Him like we do. And so I have this opportunity to go teach, and I get invited to a lot of places, and I try to not turn any of them down because it burns in my heart. What burns in yours? What is God doing with you? What is God calling you to, if you were to assess it just by the things that break your heart? Missions? Prison? Convalescent homes? The poor? The children? Evangelism? It's got to touch you and move you before God will move through you.

But here's the problem. Here's Nehemiah, sitting in a palace 700 miles away in a job that he really can't quit. This is an all-powerful dictator who could put you to death if you made him upset. These weren't nice people. These weren't godly

people. These were heathens who had world-governing power. The only thing Nehemiah had was a concern borne in his heart by the Spirit, a concern that broke his heart, that brought him to tears and mourning and wailing. What could he do? Seven hundred miles away from his concern, working for an unbeliever. He'd need tons of material and years of, probably, time off to build infrastructure and roads and work crews and protection from the enemy. And if that wasn't enough, he had four generations of people who were absolutely lethargic to Jerusalem. They were happy where they were living. He might as well hoped to have gone to Mars! I mean, everything that he looked at was absolutely against him. The situation looked hopeless and impossible, out of reach, and yet his heart didn't get any better; it was still broken. The work of God begins in the heart of an individual. It can often be determined what God wants you to do by what breaks your heart.

And here's the third point. When you get to the point where your heart is broken, and you don't know what to do, the third thing you have to do is pray. Weeping and mourning should drive you to fasting and prayer (verse 4). In the middle, we stopped. He "mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. 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, 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.' "

Third step - concern should lead you to praying. If concern goes to mourning, mourning goes to praying. "I need a solution, God." Despair should eventuate into determination. "What can I do with my burden? I see what I'd like to do, but I don't know what to do. I'm totally dependent upon You." And I think that, in the light of trying to decide what God wants from your life, this might be the one step that's oftentimes just skipped over. We see the need, it breaks our heart, we quickly want to just run off to rectify the situation, so we do planning and money raising and influence and wisdom. And it's not at all Nehemiah's approach and probably shouldn't be yours and mine either. There's something to be said about, "God, if this is Your work in my heart, then show me what to do next." Drastic conditions or needs got him to his knees. He wasn't going to run off with his own ideas. He didn't say, "I'm going to talk to the king tomorrow about getting three years off without pay. I'm going to go." He prays. It's a pretty short book for Old Testament standards. You'll find Nehemiah praying eleven different times - just stopping whatever he's doing and asking the LORD to help. You should mark them

down because Nehemiah chooses to fix his gaze upon God, not the insurmountable kind of challenges to what he would like to do. His God is pretty big in his eyes. And I would say if your God is big, then your concerns shrink; if your God is small, then you're overwhelmed very quickly.

Now, he addresses the LORD as the One who is faithful to His Word, but he begins (notice in verses 5-7) by confessing his sin. Why does he do that? Well, Israel was in captivity because of their idolatry. They had brought this upon themselves. Right? And they'd been brought into Babylon to learn not to be idolaters. But he would - because he's part of the nation - take responsibility for himself being a part of the nation. Sometimes when trouble comes, we want to blame others. Just check out Adam and Eve. But the city was still lying in ruins. No one that had returned earlier seemed to have a passion for it. Nehemiah couldn't change the heart of the nation, but he could deal with his own heart. And so he says to the LORD, "I'm part of the people that caused this problem, LORD. We're sinners. My father's house and I - we can answer for ourselves." I know in marriage counseling sometimes, it's the old "he said, she said," and invariably we get, in counseling, to the point where we say, "All right, maybe that's true. But what are you going to do about you?" Because, really, you can only answer for you. How are you going to submit yourself to the LORD? What can God do in your life? Same thing for ministry. Rather than seeing what others are not doing, ask the LORD what He can do for you and through you.

And so, while the nation sat comfortably in Babylon in their nice homes and in their developed lifestyles, Nehemiah could think of nothing else than going 700 miles to a place completely blown up, if you will, and dangerous so that he could serve. Nehemiah wanted God's blessings, but he came with empty hands. "I don't have anything to offer. I really don't know how I can help You." No prayer of merit, "You owe me. I know who You are, I know who I am. I know who we are as a people."

And so he appeals to God's faithfulness, verse 8. "Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; 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.' Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong

hand." He appeals to God's faithfulness. Nehemiah comes with empty hands, but he doesn't come uninvited. God had made great promises to the captivity - about their repentance, about what God would do in restoring and forgiving them and bringing them back. And I like the lessons. And here's a good lesson to learn while you're praying. Bring your Bible with you to prayer, and you can quote back to the LORD everything that He said. Look at the word in verse 8, "remember." I love it. You think God needs a reminder? He doesn't! But we do. And so Nehemiah prays with his Bible in hand. "God, You promised us - to forgive us, to restore us." "After all," verse 10, "we belong to You." David would write, "When I remember You on my bed, I meditate on You in the night watches" (Psalm 63:6). "I remember the days of old;" he would write (Psalm 143:5), "I meditate on all Your works; I muse on the work of Your hands." So Nehemiah looks back to God's former works. He's encouraged in his present situation. He doesn't need to remind God, but he reminds himself of God's words and promises. "I think I'm on good ground here. This is what You said, so this is why I'm praying." The work of God began in his heart as an individual. He determined that this was what God wanted him to do by what was breaking his heart. The grieving led him to prayer; it was prayer based upon God's promises.

And then we have number four - if you really want to know what the LORD wants to do with your life, make sure that you make yourself available to God to be the answer to your prayers. "I'll be the answer. I'll be available. I'm not praying that You'll do it with somebody else. I'm available to have You use my life." Verse 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." Ultimately Nehemiah, in this difficult place, says, "I'll be available. Answer my prayers. Let me go. Let me be a part of the solution." And his prayers put things into perspective. I love verse 11, that he calls the king - the king of the world, now - "this man." "I work for this man." Because when your God is big, no one else is. So he submits himself to the LORD OF LORDS and says, "I work for this powerful king, but he's just a man." He held a very trustworthy position. He tasted the king's food so people wouldn't poison him. Nehemiah recognized who God was and also what God could do. So, "Here I am." The question becomes - does God answer his prayer? And the answer is - eventually, but not immediately. In fact, it'll take months - which is actually next week's lesson. Why does God delay in prayer? Sometimes to clear your vision. You know, we're so impulsive, but it takes time for us to be able to look at things through

God's eyes. Sometimes He waits just to authenticate our callings. I don't know if you've ever been up late, and you see a little picture of a baby across the world, and you go, "Man, that's horrible! I want to help." And in the morning, you forget. Because we're moved emotionally but that doesn't necessarily mean we're being moved by God's Spirit. And so time has a way of keeping us from flying by night with an emotional decision. Sometimes God does things just to quiet your heart. It's hard to have your knees knock while you're on them. Sometimes just to activate your faith. Or to plan ahead. It's going to take some time. We'll see that next week.

So, if you are interested in what God wants to do with your life, in the spiritual sense, I would say to you - what is God doing in your heart that concerns you? What predominates your thinking? What occupies your thoughts? What matters to you that doesn't matter to others? And furthermore, in an intensity situation, what breaks your heart? What are you facing that just takes it out of you? If you can get to that point, and yet find yourself up against the wall, then you shouldn't lose hope. Because, ultimately, the circumstances you're in or the situation that you face (like Nehemiah) has nothing to do with the God that you serve. He can make doors where there are none. But you just are driven to pray, to fast, to wait, and to seek the LORD. You might realize your weakness, but then you're also going to have to realize His strength. And you'll begin to find Scriptures that enable you to stand. "This is what God has said. I believe it with all of my heart." And finally, you just make yourself available. Don't assign blame to others. Or don't try to pass along responsibility to someone else. If God is wrecking your heart over something, you go to Him and let Him use you. And God will open a door that no man can shut. There's always opportunity. It's just a matter of determining what He wants you to do because that calling is unique. You'll find it if you'll watch and see.

Next week, we'll begin chapter 2, and we'll see how the LORD answered his prayer; maybe the first ten verses or so.

Submitted by Maureen Dickson  
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