



Finer Grounds

Nehemiah

Lesson 2: An Appropriate Response to Bad News (Nehemiah 1)

As we continue to study through Nehemiah, I encourage you to read through the whole book in one sitting. Since we will continue work through these lessons in weekly installments, I would recommend that you read Nehemiah at least once a week. The more we familiarize ourselves with the text the more we will learn and gain a deeper understanding.

Read Nehemiah 1:1-4

In the opening statement of the book, “The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah,” Nehemiah introduces himself as the author of the following account. Remember, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book, and here Nehemiah separates his account from Ezra’s. In verse one Nehemiah conveniently gives us the date, by using the Jewish calendar. The month of Chislev (or Kislev) falls during our November/December time frame, and “in the twentieth year” refers to the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes (Neh. 2:1). History records him as Artaxerxes Longimanus (Brown Driver Briggs, 77). Artaxerxes became the King of Persia in 464 BC, so that dates the beginning of this book as 444 BC. Now before you start rolling your eyes at the boring history part, it is helpful to know dates and how biblical history fits into the bigger picture of world history. It makes scripture more than just a “story” and its accuracy can be defended by comparing biblical recordings with other world historical events.

In verses 2-3, Nehemiah continues his introductory remarks by recounting what his brother tells him about the state Judah (the southern region surrounding the city of Jerusalem). Hanani describes the Jews that have returned to Judah as “the remnant.”

Why do you think it is significant to describe God’s people as the “remnant”?

The book of Jeremiah was written just before the Jews went into Babylonian captivity. In Jeremiah, God promises that He will rescue some of them out of captivity when their 70 years of exile is finished. God always describes the Jews who will return as “a remnant.”

Read Jeremiah 23:1-8

Based on the above passage, what is the significance of describing the people in Nehemiah’s day as the “remnant”?

God uses the term “remnant” to describe the small group of believers who remained faithful to Him regardless of the circumstances they found themselves in. In the same way, today we see masses of people claiming allegiance to God. In reality, their lifestyles and character don’t reflect



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that allegiance at all. Within these masses of people there is really only a small group whose life, character and attitude reflects reverence and faithfulness toward God. We must strive to be that remnant of truly faithful believers, no matter how few we may be.

In verse 4, upon hearing the news of the physical and emotional state of Judah, we see Nehemiah's incredibly emotional response. Nehemiah reacts to the news through weeping, mourning, fasting and praying...for days.

Why is it significant that Nehemiah responds in this way?

What does his response tell us about the way Nehemiah feels about the condition of God's people?

Do we feel as strongly about God's people when we hear how they are struggling to prosper spiritually in a particular region?

Many times we may not respond to such news the way Nehemiah does. Why do we sometimes respond with apathy upon learning of the poor spiritual state of God's people in our day?

The bulk of chapter 1 is devoted to Nehemiah's prayer to God in verses 5-11. There are many important aspects in this prayer that we should pay attention to.

Read Nehemiah 1:5-11

As you read through Nehemiah's prayer, write down your observations to these questions:

- **What is Nehemiah's attitude in this prayer?**

- **What is the primary attribute of God that Nehemiah emphasizes in this prayer?**



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- **What does Nehemiah take ownership for as he prays?**

- **Do we see the theme of restoration in this prayer?**

- **What does Nehemiah specifically say his reason is for this prayer?**

As we study through the prayer, we see that there are certain words and phrases that convey Nehemiah's attitude. One primary attitude that can be picked up on is Nehemiah's humility. In verses 6 and 11, Nehemiah describes himself as "your servant" placing himself far beneath God and offering himself completely to God. In verses 5 and 11, Nehemiah uses the phrase "I beseech you". This request to God gives us the picture of begging. It is not a casual solicitation. Nehemiah places himself lower than that. Nehemiah also humbles himself by praising God and elevating His status in verse 5 and again in verse 11 saying "who delight to revere in Your name." In addition to humility, Nehemiah displays an attitude of repentance for himself and God's people. In verses 7-9, we can see how Nehemiah includes himself with the people of Israel and confesses for all their sins. He shows his repentance by reminding God of His own words that He spoke

through Moses. God promised IF they would return to Him, He would restore them to Jerusalem and the region of Judah. Another attitude we can see is how Nehemiah views sin. In verse 7, he uses strong language saying "we have acted very corruptly." Nehemiah does not try to diminish their sins or sugarcoat them. Often, we do not have a humble, repentant attitude when we approach God in prayer. We skirt around the severity of our sin by simply asking God to forgive our 'generic' sins, yet never admitting to what they were or how terrible they really are.

Throughout the prayer, Nehemiah emphasizes God's attribute of faithfulness, which can be seen in verses 5, 8 and 9. As Nehemiah quotes God, through Moses, in verses 8 and 9, it is as if Nehemiah is reminding God of His own promises. God always keeps up His end of the bargain. God's blessings are conditional to our response, but He always keeps His word. In verse 9, He made good on His promises that He made in Deuteronomy 30:1-5 (having returned them to Jerusalem). In the same way God will keep His promise to us no matter what, if we keep our responsibility to the covenant we entered into with Him. God's promises are not for those who disregard the conditions of His covenant. It is important to note here that a covenant is not the same as a contract. In a contract, both negotiate the terms and come to a compromise. In a covenant with God, He always sets His non-negotiable terms. God then swears to fulfill His promises only if we comply with the conditions of His covenant.

One interesting aspect of this prayer is that Nehemiah takes ownership for the sins of God's people by using the personal pronouns "we" and



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“I.” Nehemiah says he prays on behalf of “the sons of Israel which we have sinned against you I and my Father’s house have sinned, we have acted corruptly against you” (vv. 6-7). Nehemiah takes responsibility for himself and for the sins of those before him. But wait a minute! If the captivity began in 606 BC and it is now 444 BC, then Nehemiah wasn’t even born when the captivity began. So technically, Nehemiah could not have actually committed any of the sins that led to the people’s captivity. However, by including himself in a prayer of repentance for the sins of the entire southern kingdom, Nehemiah is emphasizing the fact that God’s people exist as a community. By taking ownership of the sins of God’s people, Nehemiah teaches us about the communal nature of God’s people. God intended for us to belong to a group. If something affects an individual, it affects the whole community. Too often, we distance ourselves from the group and try to be lone-wolf Christians in regard to our spiritual prosperity or our spiritual struggles and sins. God wants us to view ourselves as a part of the Christian community (i.e. the church) in order to help, encourage and strengthen when our brethren may be struggling.

In our last lesson, we identified the main theme of the book of Nehemiah as “restoration.” In Nehemiah’s prayer, this theme of restoration is brought out in verse 9 when he quotes God’s own words. Nehemiah knows they must return to God and restore themselves to His original commands in order to receive God’s promises. Think about this. Moses originally wrote those words about 1500 BC, but Nehemiah prayed this in 444 BC. That means over 1000 years have passed since God originally gave His law. God’s people are in a different part of the world, and they have adopted

a new culture and language. God’s people are living in a brand new millennium. Yet God still expected them to go back to what He originally said. The application for us is huge! We live in a totally different location, a different generation, a different culture and an entirely different millennium than Christ’s church was established in. However, God still expects us to restore ourselves to His original instructions for us in Christ. Just because times, locations, and customs had changed, God required full restoration from them. Today, God also requires that we continually go back to what He originally asked of us.

In verse 11 we can see the reasons why he prays. In the last part of the verse he says “make your servant successful today.” As we will see in the next lesson, Nehemiah wants to do something about the state of Judah’s physical and spiritual distress. Yet before acting, Nehemiah prays for guidance first. Nehemiah makes a prayer of preparation before he takes the matter to King Artaxerxes. He seeks God’s help and blessing BEFORE acting. How often do we act first, and then pray to God? Nehemiah’s prayer is a wonderful example of humility, reverence and repentance. It emphasizes the faithfulness of God, while recognizing of communal nature of God’s people. He emphasizes the need for restoration and approaches God’s feet before he endeavors to restore God’s people, not after.

After ending his prayer, the last sentence reads, “Now I was the cup bearer to the king.” This statement explains both the last part of the prayer and introduces us to the next section. In context, the last phrase of the prayer “grant him compassion before this man” refers to King



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Artaxerxes. Nehemiah tells us of his position in the royal court and because, in this role as cupbearer, Nehemiah is around the King regularly and he will have a chance to petition on behalf of his people in Chapter 2.