

Tusculum Hills Baptist Church
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ONE MAN'S EXAMPLE

Nehemiah 1

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INTRODUCTION: Before we begin the book of Nehemiah, I need to give you a little background information on the history of Israel.

- God chose Abraham to be the father of a nation of people called the Israelites. He was the father of Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, whose 12 sons became the twelve tribes of Israel.
- When the Israelites wound up enslaved in Egypt, God used Moses to usher his people into freedom. However, because of their disobedience, they did not enter the Promised Land until many years later.
- The Israelites lived out a predictable cycle. They would fall away from God, worship idols, and live in disobedience. God would punish them, usually by allowing enemy nations to attack or conquer them. The people would repent, and they would return to him for a short period of time before beginning the process again.
- Finally, their disregard for God and his commands led the nation to split in two. Ten tribes joined together and kept the name of Israel. The other two tribes, including the city of Jerusalem, became known as Judah. Even this terrible situation did not drive the people back into the arms of the Lord.
- Finally, as a result of their continued rebellion, God allowed the Persians to conquer Israel and the Babylonians to conquer Judah. King Nebuchadnezzar attacked Jerusalem, destroyed the walls and the temple, and took all but the poorest of the people captive.
- Seventy years later, the Persians conquered the Babylonians, and King Cyrus became the great ruler of the East. By God's design, King Cyrus told the Jews that they could return to their homeland. While thousands did return to Jerusalem and Judah, many had built lives for themselves in Babylon and did not go back.

- Almost a hundred years later, a priest named Ezra discovered that the people back home were not doing well. They were not living in accordance with God’s word. So, Ezra requested and received the king’s permission to return to Jerusalem to help the people get back on track. During his time there, the temple was rebuilt but there were a lot of obstacles.

If you flip back a couple of pages from Nehemiah, you will see that Ezra is the book right before. In fact, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah are one book in some texts and tell one continuous story of the Jewish return to the Holy Land.

Oversimplifying it all here, I am going to summarize this and say that Ezra started a work and Nehemiah continued it. So, we are picking up the story in Nehemiah 1.

There are five points to today’s message:

- Nehemiah cared.
- Nehemiah mourned.
- Nehemiah repented.
- Nehemiah requested God’s help.
- Nehemiah volunteered.

1-NEHEMIAH CARED

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 1:1-2

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, ² Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

EXPLANATION: We do not know a lot about Nehemiah or his family. The name Nehemiah means “comfort of Yahweh.” At the end of this chapter, we discover that he is a cupbearer to the king. The king was the Persian ruler, Artaxerxes, the same king who allowed and blessed Ezra’s return trip to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah was born into captivity. For whatever reason, his family did not return to Jerusalem when King Cyrus allowed the Jews to go back home. It’s possible that Nehemiah came from a family of royal servants and that they were expected to stay

in service to the king. However, some of his brothers had gone back at some point, perhaps with Ezra.

Jerusalem, the capital city of Judah, was around 1,000 miles from Susa. That's a really long way for ancient travelers. While the Persians did have a postal system, it's very likely that news from one place was not quick to reach the other. When Nehemiah's brothers returned for a visit, Nehemiah was anxious to hear the state of affairs.

I'm sure that Nehemiah was excited to see his brothers. If they had indeed gone to Jerusalem with Ezra, it's possible he had not seen them in many, many years. Yet, he did not limit his questions to their well-being. Nehemiah cared not only about his family, he was concerned for the family of God.

ILLUSTRATION: English poet Thomas Gray coined the phrase, "Ignorance is bliss." It's a mantra that many people today take to heart. They reason that if you do not know about something, then you do not have any responsibility to do anything about it. If you do not ask, you will never know.

APPLICATION: Spiritually speaking, that philosophy is unbiblical. Galatians 6:2, along with countless other scriptures, tells us that we are to bear one another's burdens. We are to care for and help each other. How well do we carry out these commands? Do we care about what's happening in the lives of our friends, co-workers, and neighbors? Are we concerned with the well-being of fellow believers in other parts of the world?

1. Nehemiah cared.

2-NEHEMIAH MOURNED

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 1:3-4

They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." ⁴ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

EXPLANATION: Nehemiah knew that the walls of Jerusalem had been destroyed. King Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army had destroyed them nearly two centuries before. While Nehemiah may have never seen the destruction with his own eyes, he had heard the stories passed down from one generation to the next. By this time, however, Jewish people had been living in Jerusalem for about 100 years. Ezra himself had returned more than ten years before. I'm sure Nehemiah thought that the walls would have been rebuilt by now. Still, you may wonder why this news caused such an emotional reaction.

Walls during this time in history were constructed to protect a city from invasion. They were also a means of identifying a certain area. More than signage, walls helped define a city. After so many years of captivity, Nehemiah had hoped that the city of Jerusalem and the people who lived there were regaining their identity as God's people. Instead of prospering in safety, Nehemiah discovered that they were living among ruins and open to attack.

While Nehemiah may have known some of the people in Jerusalem, most of them were probably strangers. Their circumstances did not affect his. He was a trusted official, living in the palace with the king. Yet, Nehemiah was heartbroken over the affairs of the Jewish people.

APPLICATION: Romans 12:15 says, *“Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn.”* This is easy to do when it's someone we know and love, but how do we respond to the circumstances of our world? Do we mourn injustice, poverty, and persecution? Do we mourn the fact that people are not believers in Jesus Christ? Do we mourn the fact that many who say they believe show no evidence whatsoever?

1. Nehemiah cared.
2. Nehemiah mourned.

3-NEHEMIAH REPENTED

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 1:5-7

Then I said: “LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying

before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

EXPLANATION: Nehemiah's response to this unfavorable news is interesting to me. Most interesting is how he did not respond. He did not complain about the people living in Jerusalem. He did not accuse, and he did not ask for explanations or excuses. He mourned the circumstances, and he repented. He acknowledged how his own sin had contributed to the problem. He admitted his disobedience and the disobedience of his family.

APPLICATION: When the circumstances of our lives go south, what is our first reaction? Do we point a finger and blame other people, or do we examine our own hearts? When we look at the state of our nation and our world, do we look for excuses, or do we repent and seek God's help in turning from our own sinful ways?

1. Nehemiah cared.
2. Nehemiah mourned.
3. Nehemiah repented.

4-NEHEMIAH REQUESTED GOD'S HELP

SCRIPTURE: Nehemiah 1:8-11

Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' ¹⁰ "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. ¹¹ Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king.

EXPLANATION: Nehemiah knew who to turn to for help. He did not rally his brothers. He did not immediately go to the king. Nehemiah reminded God of his promises and requested God's blessing and God's help.

Hebrews 4:16 says, *“Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”*

APPLICATION: We have been given the great privilege of having a personal relationship with God through our Savior, Jesus Christ. Yet, where do we turn in times of trouble? Do we run to our spouses, our parents, or our friends to complain? Do we look for answers everywhere except in the Word? God wants us to seek his favor and help, not only for ourselves but also for others. God takes pleasure when we know his promises and bring them to mind.

1. Nehemiah cared.
2. Nehemiah mourned.
3. Nehemiah repented.
4. Nehemiah requested God’s help.

5-NEHEMIAH VOLUNTEERED

EXPLANATION: Although we will not see it until we get into the next chapter, Nehemiah had already made up his mind. He was not satisfied to just ask. He was not content to cry about the state of affairs. He was not willing to simply repent and request. Nehemiah knew that God wanted him to be a man of action. There was a job to be done, and Nehemiah was willing to do it.

APPLICATION: How do we respond when there is a need, especially a need among the church body or a need in the church? What do we do when there is a job to be done? Do we volunteer to lend a hand, or do we volunteer others?

Did Nehemiah have experience building a wall? Nope. Was his resume stacked with wall-building credentials? Nope. I doubt Nehemiah even owned a hammer. But did he use his lack of knowledge or experience as an excuse? Absolutely not. He set his mind to what needed to be done, and, as we’ll see in the next few weeks, he did it.

1. Nehemiah cared.
2. Nehemiah mourned.
3. Nehemiah repented.
4. Nehemiah requested God’s help.
5. Nehemiah volunteered.

INVITATION:

- Nehemiah was one man, and the job of building a wall was not a one-man job.
- Nehemiah was one man, and he did not have any experience or equipment for building a wall.
- Nehemiah was one man who lived far, far away from the problem.
- Yet, Nehemiah was a man whose heart was in the right place, and because of that, he was a man that God used in a mighty way.

Today is Father's Day, and what a fitting message this is. While the lessons here apply to both men and women, they are especially applicable to fathers. Nehemiah was a man who left us with a Godly example to follow. Fathers, grandfathers - what kinds of examples are you?

- Do you care for others the way Christ does?
- Do you mourn over the things that Jesus mourned over?
- How do you address the problem of your own sin?
- Do you acknowledge your own failures and repent?
- Do you request God's help to do hard things for the kingdom?
- Are you quick to jump in and lend a hand?

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Sincerely, Paul Gunn
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