

THOSE WHO REMAIN ARE IN GREAT DISTRESS

SERIES: THE MESSAGE OF NEHEMIAH

by Steve Zeisler

Time flies. It doesn't seem so long ago that I was a pastoral novice. My burden now is increasingly for young leaders who will guide us in the future. This church has a history of strong leadership, but there's nothing automatic about it. We have to invest ourselves in those who need to learn to lead for the next generation.

We're beginning a series of ten messages studying through the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament. It is a wonderful source for instruction about the nature of leadership and the qualities that make a good leader.

The world in which today's young men and women take their turn at the helm will be different from the world we live in now. Some eras require strong, even authoritarian leadership, a firm and powerful voice. Other eras require leaders whose strengths are more in community-building, communication, and articulating a common vision. We don't know what the world will be like ten or fifteen years from now, what skill set will be required, what issues leaders will face. What we do know, though, is that at the core, effective leadership has qualities that don't change from one time to another: wisdom, honesty, character, courage, and most important of all, godliness: a humble heart before God that will receive truth and direction and insight from him and dispense them to others.

Moses was the right man to lead the exodus and command a nation in the wilderness. Joshua was the right man to lead the conquest of the promised land. David was the right man to establish a monarchy. And in his time and place, Nehemiah was the right man to build a wall around a broken city.

Some background to the book of Nehemiah will be helpful. The period after the Babylonian exile, when the Jews were allowed to finally return to Jerusalem and try to build up again what had been lost, was very much like our own time. The exiles who returned were living in an era after the golden age of Israel. Similarly, the Christian faith and public acceptance of the values of the Bible used to inform our country much more than they do today. The phrase "post-Christian" is used by many to describe our time.

Second, we note that Nehemiah's book is written mostly in the first person. Most of the history books of the Bible, especially in the Old Testament, were written by later observers after the events they record. Nehemiah speaks often of his thoughts and especially his prayers, giving us insights we wouldn't have from a later historian.

Third, the book records many prayers and occasions for prayer, and it has much to teach on this vital subject.

Let's read the opening three verses of this book as an introduction to the whole:

The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

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

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."

There are two pictures I want to draw for us from these three verses. One is of Nehemiah himself, and we'll come back to that in a bit. The picture I'd like to speak of first grows out of Hanani's words (verse 3).

Living in a city with no walls

Hanani is a close relative (perhaps the full brother) of Nehemiah. When he comes to Susa, Nehemiah asks him about the condition of the people who have returned to Judah from exile, and he receives a grave report: "They are in great trouble and disgrace, the wall is down, and the gates have been burned."

Let's step back and do an eagle's-eye view of Israel's history to put this in context. God called Abram from Ur of the Chaldees to follow him. The story of the redemption of the world began with this man. One man led to one family, which led finally to a small tribe. The Israelites were eventually enslaved in Egypt. They grew to be a large people over four hundred years and were birthed out of Egypt as the nation of Israel through the exodus led by Moses.

Eventually they were allowed to enter the land God had promised them, Canaan. Hundreds of years passed during which the nation experienced struggles, faithlessness, and wrestling with God. The high point of Israel's history came when David, a godly king, was called to sit on the throne. For forty years David expanded the nation in both breadth of influence and knowledge of God.

Israel reached that high point only to degrade from there. David's son was a lesser man. His grandson was a terrible man. And eventually the nation disintegrated and most of it was enslaved, the ten northern tribes within a few hundred years. Two tribes of the twelve held on until 586 B.C., when finally they were overrun by the Babylonians, and all of the Jews were captured by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonian army. Jerusalem was destroyed, the walls knocked down, and the temple burned. The people were deported, enslaved once again. Their history had come full circle. They had rebelled against God and refused to be what he called them to be, the light to the nations, representing God in the world, telling the entire world of his love and faithfulness. That rebellion is why they were finally taken back into captivity.

Prophets predicted that this captivity would not destroy the nation; it would end and the people would be allowed to go back home. And in three stages, over about a hundred years, they were allowed to migrate back to Jerusalem and the environs around it, only to discover the city was still forlorn and desolate. Living there was dangerous and difficult and sorrowful. They managed to rebuild the temple--a small one--with difficulty. They were continually under threat of dissolving among the peoples around them.

Finally Nehemiah tells his story in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes. By now Persia had replaced Babylon as the region's great power, and the Persians ruled with a very different means of control. The commitment of the Persians was to resettle captured people in their native lands. While the Babylonians had ruled with an iron hand and a hobnailed boot, destroying every suggestion of independence, the Persians were more enlightened. Conquered peoples could act with a degree of autonomy as long as they supported the state and paid their taxes. And as long as their religion would support the reign of the emperor, they were free to worship as they chose.

Now let's look again at the word of Hanani: "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."

A city with no wall around it is vulnerable and disgraced. By analogy, we might say that a vulnerable heart is one in which invasion and seduction can happen at any time. Whether it's a physical city that is in danger or a faith that lacks conviction, in which everything is true and nothing is true, the dangers are similar.

We live in a world that is very much without boundaries, one in which the difference between truth and lies, holy and profane, substance and image, deep and shallow, lasting and momentary, divine and human, is regularly muddled. We ought to acknowledge and defend what we stand for. If we can't tell the difference anymore between righteousness and unrighteousness, between godliness and rebellion, then we live in a place without walls. Part of

the sorrow and anxiety of the Jews who were living in Jerusalem was that they had lost their identity as God's beloved ones. They didn't know who they were or what they stood for anymore, and their broken walls were very much like their spiritually undefended hearts.

The other thing I would say by way of analogy is that while it's hard to live under the iron rule of an enemy, it's also hard to live in a multicultural, highly tolerant set of circumstances in which you can have your private religion as long as you never rock the boat. So the rule of Persia was a welcome replacement for the rule of Babylon, but it carried with it its own difficulties.

Living in two worlds

Now let's look at the other picture we can draw from these verses. Who is Nehemiah? What does he tell us of himself? He is the son of Hacaliah, a man unknown to us anywhere else in Scripture. He is the kinsman of Hanani. In saying that, he declares that he is a member of the Jewish race, an exile himself. The other thing he tells us in these verses is that he's now living in the citadel of Susa, the fortress of the Persian emperor.

Finally, in the last sentence of chapter 1, which we're going to get to in the next message, is almost a throw-away line: "I was cupbearer to the king." As it turns out, over the course of exile he had become educated, grown in stature, and moved up through the ranks. He was a man who tasted the king's wine before the king drank it to make sure it wasn't poisoned. He therefore had intimate access to the royal person. He almost certainly had political standing, a portfolio, a position of state of some kind; the cupbearer typically did. He was a man high in the ranks of influence in government, and he presumably had the wealth and stature that went with the title.

Note the humble way Nehemiah introduces himself. He tells us of his unknown father. He tells us of his commitment to the exiled people. He tells us where he lives. He even recalls his prayer. It's a wonderful prayer, which we're going to look at in the next message. He says all that before he gets around to telling us that he's cupbearer to the king.

How do you introduce yourself? What things about you are the most important to tell someone first? Do people know about your prayer life before they get your business card? Do they know of your passion for the things of God? Do you regard these as more important than where you work and for whom you work and what status in society you occupy?

In introducing himself the way he does, Nehemiah is also identifying the great tension of his life in these opening two verses. He lives in Susa, and he's a kinsman of the exiles. How is that tension going to get resolved? He is cupbearer to the king, a man of station and influence, living in the capital, near to the king. It must have occurred to him that he could well serve God in that position. Daniel served foreign kings all his life and never returned to Jerusalem. We can imagine Nehemiah asking, "Should I be like that? Should I use the status I have to steer the emperor toward good policies?"

But the tension remains: "My brother has come and said the people are in disgrace. Their hearts are sick. The walls are broken. The gates are burned. On the front lines people are risking much to be faithful to God. They might have stayed abroad, made their living in exile, succeeded in having some kind of worldly stature, kept their religion as a kind of important compartment at home. But they didn't, and now they're under tremendous pressure."

I think most of us live in two worlds exactly as Nehemiah did. Most of us in a sense are cupbearer to the king. We have risen to some level of status in this world. It's paying off. We're making a living. We're in secure surroundings. Careers have a predictable trajectory. Yet some have been called into front-line service of God. Some experience major changes in occupation, residence, language, and culture. Some put lives and fortunes at risk to serve the Lord. How do we determine what place of discipleship God intends for us?

The text before us can help answer this question. It's significant that Nehemiah asked his brother Hanani about the remnant in Jerusalem. He could have insulated himself from the visitors if he chose to. Yet he sought them out

and heard first-hand of the hardships and sorrows of his people.

This is an important starting point. It's easy to stay unaware. Do you care enough to want to find out what's happening with kids and youth, with foreign missions and care of the poor? Where is the word of God changing hearts? Where are people coming to Christ? I don't want the difficulties of discipleship to be reduced because I am too busy to be informed.

This introductory message will end without a resolution to Nehemiah's dilemma. Learning to hear God as he directs our lives is not a quick or easy process. It requires honesty about ourselves.

The musical *Fiddler on the Roof* is a sweet story of Jews in exile. It's especially the story of a milkman named Tevye who loved God and wanted to live a life that pleased him. My favorite song in that musical is *If I Were a Rich Man*. In it Tevye lists all the things that would happen if he were a rich man: He'd have chickens and geese, and his wife would have a proper double chin. She'd have servants she could order around. They'd have one long staircase going up and a longer one coming down. And more. The singing grows quiet toward the end, and you hear the heart of the man. He says, "You know what I'd really do if I were a rich man? I'd have a seat by the eastern wall in the synagogue (nearest to Jerusalem), and I'd discuss the holy books seven hours every day, and that would be the sweetest thing of all."⁽¹⁾ He was saying, "If I were rich, if I had everything I really wanted in life, what I'd really want is to be where people care about God. That's what I'd use my riches for."

That's the tension that Nehemiah faces. I pray it's ours as well. If I could do whatever I wanted, if I could somehow figure out how to steer my way through the responsibilities and the dreams I have and get to be more where I want to be, where I'd want to be is where God is, with the people who love him the most. That would be the sweetest thing of all.

Notes

1. Sheldon Harnick, lyrics of *Fiddler on the Roof*, book by Joseph Stein, © 1964, 1965, 1971. Times Square Music Publication Co., distributed by Hal Leonard Publishing Corp., Milwaukee, WI.

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