

I WEPT AND MOURNED AND FASTED AND PRAYED

SERIES: THE MESSAGE OF NEHEMIAH

by Steve Zeisler

This is the time of year for blockbuster adventure movies filled with dangers and rescues, heroes and villains. The book we're studying in this series, Nehemiah, is similar. It's a story of struggles between good and evil, heroic deeds, and tensions that need resolution.

We ended the last message with our hero, Nehemiah, caught in a conflict, realizing that he needed an answer from God as to how to resolve the dilemma. Information was brought to him in the Persian citadel of Susa, from Jerusalem and its environs, a thousand miles away. It concerned the exiles who had returned there over the course of three generations. Chapter 1 verse 3 describes their difficult circumstances. "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." Nehemiah's brothers and sisters in the exile were in anguish. Their city was a place of sorrow.

The end of chapter 1 records the other horn of the dilemma. Nehemiah tells us he was cupbearer to the Persian emperor, Artaxerxes, the most powerful man in the world. Cupbearer was a very high station, an influential political position. Nehemiah had regular access to the king and would have been counted on to give advice. He surely had the status and wealth that went along with having such a position. His two identities pulled at him: brother to the exiles and cupbearer to the king.

Many of us are familiar with this tension. The world has paid off for us. We have found a place of security and status and comfort and wealth. And we know that on the front lines of the work of God people are caring for the poor and the sick, doing evangelism in areas where they are unwelcome and threatened, putting their lives on the line, risking all they are and have.

There are certainly other kinds of tensions as well. It may be that you're overcoming some pattern in your life that has ruined and hurt you, and this struggle is the pattern of stress you're called to live with. Or it may be that there is some other pressure upon you—a family crisis or medical emergency. Nehemiah's prayers and growing faith can be an encouragement in these circumstances as well. But those who have dual identities as Nehemiah did will find this chapter especially helpful.

We might note that others in the Bible faced the same problem Nehemiah did. Joseph had risen to the highest station of the land in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh, and he had to resolve the question of his identity as a Jew and his identity as an Egyptian, how he would serve God having the place and opportunity that he did. David had the same problem when he was running for his life from Saul. He lived for a time among the Philistines, and was accorded a position of respect among them. Daniel was Nebuchadnezzar's most important advisor. Esther served as queen in a Persian court. Her uncle Mordecai spoke to her at a crisis moment and said, "...Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14.) She was a Jewish believer, and she was queen in Persia. How would she resolve the dual responsibilities?

There are a couple of ways that most of us tend to react when we feel this sort of tension. Some of us, and I think this would have been Nehemiah's natural response, tend to fire off in all directions at once. If there are people suffering, somebody ought to do something about it. "I'm going to make some phone calls, issue a series of edicts, plan some strategies, and make something happen!" A lot of activity is generated, but nothing gets changed. The other natural inclination when we feel this vise of conflicting pressures is to look at how hard it will

be to do anything. It's such a long way from Susa to Jerusalem. The people have been there a long time, and they've got it tough, but what can be done? There's so much inertia to overcome, so many complexities and questions that need to be answered. So we decide to start a committee to do a study and issue a report. And in the end, we conclude that probably somebody else ought to do it anyway. It's easy to be impressed with how difficult the problem is and just give up.

But Nehemiah didn't choose either of those natural options. He didn't fire off in all directions at once, and he didn't do nothing. What he did was enter into the presence of God in a profound way, and that's what we want to consider in this message.

Spending time in the presence of God

Chapter 1 verse 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.

Nehemiah didn't know what to do. The answer was not obvious to him. God had put him where he was. He was cupbearer to the king, not for bad reasons but for good reasons. There was no sinful process that had led to his success in the empire. His family had been taken there as exiles and slaves. They had no choice in the matter. He was raised there under circumstances that were dealt to him. And he had succeeded. The problem was, now he knew there were people to whom his heart was knit, with whom his destiny was cast, who were beaten down by the circumstances in Jerusalem. After he was made aware of their suffering, then he knew that the report had come to him for reasons that his heavenly Father had chosen as well. And he didn't know how to proceed. "For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven."

That period of "some days" is probably four months. In 1:1 he says, "In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year..." In 2:1, when he begins to take action, he refers to the month of Nisan, four months later. In a moment we're going to read a prayer that is probably a distillation of what took place in the four months he wept and mourned and fasted and prayed. He went back time and again to be with God. He didn't understand and he wanted answers. He didn't take the easy way out. As Jacob wrestled with the angel and said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26), Nehemiah wrestled with God and said, "I need some answers from you. The burden is heavy. The direction is not obvious." For four months he spent time with the Lord in this way. Verse 6 says he prayed "day and night."

Four verbs are used in verse 4 that may help us see Nehemiah in God's presence. It says, first of all, "...I sat down and wept." When it matters to you that someone else's experience is difficult, when you love somebody, you make yourself vulnerable to their pain. Paul clearly describes the church that way in the New Testament: "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it." (1 Corinthians 12:26.) We're part of each other too much to not feel others' pain. I much prefer to let layers of distance exist between myself and other people so that I can know of their circumstance and maybe even wish them well, but not have the hardship of whatever it is they're dealing with enter my heart. But I'm not successful at keeping the wall up, and God won't let any of us be. There are times when somebody else's misery or sorrow descends on you, and your body reacts. Tears fall, sobs break loose, your shoulders sag. That's the first thing that happened to Nehemiah. He let himself emotionally be part of what his people were going through.

The second thing we're told in verse 4 is that he mourned. Mourning is a thoughtful response to the hard circumstances. Weeping is emotional, often involuntary. But mourning is a deliberate, thoughtful entering into the problem. It includes taking off the masks, if you will. It acknowledges that there is not only pain but guilt, that things are not only hurtful but wrong. We'll see in a bit his acknowledgment in this prayer: "We did this to ourselves. The reason life is so hard is that we resisted God." There's an awful sense in which we are reaping what we sowed.

The third thing Nehemiah refers to in this process is fasting. Now, that certainly includes choices to restrict one's

diet for the purpose of paying attention to God. But in the ancient world meals were not like ours. We can have a sandwich with us or quickly grab something to eat and be talking on the phone and typing while we eat it, so that the experience of eating happens almost without our knowing it. In the ancient world meals were communal events. The whole family would be together. It took a long time to prepare. It was expected that you would enter into extended conversation and be part of the social network. So fasting was a deliberate attempt not only to keep from eating but to withdraw from the whole network, to stop listening to all the voices, to not attend to all the responsibilities. Fasting was stepping away from the world and all its entanglements in order to spend time with God.

If that was the way it was in the ancient world, think of how much more difficult it is in the modern world to make time for God. Think of how many ways we can be contacted and demands can be made on us for response: meetings, phones, message machines, mail, e-mail, aggressive advertising and promotion.

I had something somewhat remarkable happen to me yesterday. I got a letter from Steve Holmlund. It wasn't e-mail, it was a letter written with a pen. I can't remember the last time a personal letter conveying some real information came to me that way. Steve is actually fighting back. I want to commend him. He led a great Bible study for our elders the other day, and we were teasing him about it. He walked in and opened a notebook, and in it were handwritten notes about what he was going to teach in the Bible, which he carefully went through as he taught the passage. He said, "I have made myself do this. I have made myself think differently instead of having everything reduced to something electronic. I am making myself not use all the powerful study tools at my fingertips. I want to think in God's presence, not just gather the massive amounts of information that are available to me." I'm quite sure he hand-wrote the letter for the same reason. His only downfall was that he used a copier to duplicate his letter and sent it to a bunch of us. But he had gone a long way toward fighting back against the overwhelming experience of the network and the demands of its structure and environment.

That's what Nehemiah did when he fasted. It was more than just not eating food. He was saying, "I'm stepping back. God will have space in my life; no intruders are allowed."

The fourth thing mentioned in verse 4 is prayer before the God of heaven. That's a broad, inclusive term for communication with God. Knowing he had a problem, he spoke with and listened to the God of heaven, the Lord of all. His heart would not let him rest. He didn't know what to do, and so he spent these four months wrestling with God, calling on God, appealing, listening, returning, not settling for easy, obvious answers, but wanting to know what his Lord would do with his life, what his future should be.

Now we come to what I believe is a distillation of the prayer that occurred during those four months.

A prayer to the God who keeps his promises

Verses 5-11:

Then I said:

"O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, 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 house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, --If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 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.

"They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand.

O 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.

Let me make some observations about this prayer. It's one of the great prayers of the Bible, and there are more to come. This is a great book to read if you want to learn to pray or to grow as a man or woman of prayer.

Verse 5 begins as the majority of the prayers recorded in the Bible do, by speaking to God of himself. It doesn't start with Nehemiah's problems, hopes and dreams, or concerns. As Jesus taught his disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven," so Nehemiah starts out, "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love...."

The insistence that begins this prayer is that events are going to have their outcome not based on the armies of earth, the wealth of individuals, or the great social currents that roil against one another, raising up some and putting down others. Events in history are going to have their outcome based on what God decides. "You are the God of heaven and you keep your promises."

Of course, it didn't look that way to Nehemiah, and it doesn't look that way to us. No measurement of current events is going to suggest to you that God is in charge. It's not apparent that the Lord is bringing glory to himself and mercy to people, or that he is working out history so that it will have the glorious ending that he has promised it will have. It doesn't often seem as if God is doing what he ought to do in our lives. It seems as if everybody else is in charge of our lives, and where is he? Ray Stedman used to quote a limerick:

*Humankind had a lovely beginning,
but we ruined our chances by sinning.*

*We know that the story
will end to God's glory,
but at present, the other side's winning.*

That's the way the world looks: We started well, and it's supposed to come out well, but right now the bad guys are in charge. But it's not true. God keeps his promises, and that's how Nehemiah starts his prayer.

Further, he declares that God can hear and see and remember. The prophets castigated worship of idols, saying, "They're deaf and dumb! Why would you put your trust in blocks of wood made by human hands?" But this God to whom Nehemiah prays has ears that hear and eyes that see and a heart that remembers.

We hear Nehemiah's honesty about the problem: "We are guilty as charged. We have deliberately and knowingly trampled on the word of God. We have rebelled against you, and we are getting only what we deserve. You are entirely right." He doesn't imagine extenuating circumstances or plead special cases.

"My father's house is rebellious, and so am I." He is willing to join his people in their sins. Many of us are willing to admit the minor faults that we think we have, but we don't like to think of ourselves as part of the greater human race that is capable of all the terrible things that have been done. Yet Nehemiah doesn't shy away from that. However, he doesn't dwell on recognition of sinfulness, nor does he end with it.

This is very much a Scripture-based prayer. When Nehemiah prays, he prays with the Bible in his mind and perhaps open before him. He is praying the words of Moses. He is referring to the prayers of Daniel and probably others here. This is a prayer that is deeply informed by what God has already said about himself. So Nehemiah says, "You promised us that if we rebelled we would be punished, and we did and we are. But you also promised that if we turned back, however far we had been scattered, you would bring us home." And he refers to the people now as those whose hearts are broken, who revere the name of God. He calls on God to act as he promised he

would. This is a prayer that speaks back to God his own words. Sin doesn't have the final authority. The punishment is not the end; the return of God's people is the end of the story.

The last observation I would make about this prayer is about the very simple request that comes at the end. Nehemiah has prayed about the greatness of God, the failure of the people, the promise of God to bring about their return. He has cast back to the time of Moses, saying, "God, our world is going to turn on whether you keep thousand-year-old promises. Artaxerxes and his armies and the greatness of this empire are nothing compared to the word you gave to your servant Moses, and we're claiming that now. In view of this, the personal request he makes at the end of verse 11 is actually surprisingly small: "Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." Now, Nehemiah knows that God rules the emperor, that the response he will get from Artaxerxes is the response that God will call for. I think the success he hopes for is that he will have the courage to follow through. "Will I be able to do what it is in my heart to do? Will I have the courage to speak up?" The success may for him depend more on whether he speaks up than whether Artaxerxes gives the right answer or not.

Notice that by verse 11 the tension has been resolved. Nehemiah no longer questions how he should handle the dilemma of being brother to the exiles and cupbearer to the king. As we will see in chapter 2, he asks permission to go himself. The answer God gave him in this four months of prayer was, "Nehemiah, you go." He could have continued to pray, "Lord, bless the exiles, bring them relief, raise up leadership, provide money, change the hearts of the enemy." He could have prayed for all of that to happen while he stayed in Susa, and it might have been God's choice for him to pray and stay. But it wasn't. In this case, he knew by now that he must ask permission of the king to go himself. "Lord, send me." That was the answer that had come about after he had spent this time wrestling and fasting and mourning.

I want to urge upon us that we can know what the Lord wants from us. When things seem confusing, when pressures pull us in more than one direction regarding where we should be and who we should be and how we should use our gifts and what ministry we should have and how and when the way to find out answers to these questions is the pattern of Nehemiah: to spend this focused, honest, lengthy, serious time with God. His choice was to say, "Lord, direct me. Make of me what you want. I'm willing to invest myself in pursuing you to find out." If you're experiencing the same longing to know what God would make of your life, are you willing to do what Nehemiah did? Are you willing to spend this kind of time with God with this level of passion, this level of love and expectancy?

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