

## Moving Toward Restoration

### Nehemiah 1

#### Introduction

God does not want anyone to live a life of sorrow and misery. However, the path of life today is strewn with wounded and broken lives. But God accepts us even though we live in a broken world, and He has a plan to heal and restore us.

In the book of Nehemiah, we see a picture of God's desire to heal and restore with the healing and restoration of the nation of Israel. It is a book that details how to rise above even the most demoralizing and distressing circumstances of your life.

Over the next few weeks, we will look at Israel's restoration through Nehemiah's eyes and see what we can learn about how to experience restoration for our own lives.

*John F. Kennedy said, "Israel was not created in order to disappear – Israel will endure and flourish. It is the child of hope and the home of the brave. It can neither be broken by adversity nor demoralized by success. It carries the shield of democracy, and it honors the sword of freedom." John F. Kennedy*

Nehemiah gives us some interesting reasons why this is true. Let's read the first chapter of the book of Nehemiah: These are the words of Nehemiah, the son of Hacaliah.

"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." (Neh 1:1-3 NKJV)

This news is heartbreaking to Nehemiah. It makes him cry! He cries out in distress, and then he cries out to God!

"So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and 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. We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses. 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. 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." (Neh 1:4-11 NKJV)

The news of Jerusalem's crisis deeply moves Nehemiah. It's been a thousand years since Moses led Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land, and it will be another 400 years before the birth of Jesus Christ. During the reign of the Persian King, Artaxerxes, Israel, and the Jewish people find themselves in a desperate situation.

The Babylonians plundered their cities and took many citizens into captivity. They conquered the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the glorious temple of Solomon. They deported almost everyone from the city, and for the next seventy years, Jerusalem was virtually a ghost town. The deported Jews began to settle in and make homes for themselves in Babylon. Many of them had no desire to return to the land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A few of the faithful Jews were given places of prominence in the government. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego were among those who became leaders in Babylon. During the Persian reign, the king chose Esther to be his queen. After seventy years of captivity in Babylon, the Persian king allowed many Jews to return to their homeland. Out of the two or, three million Jews deported, only 50,000 decided to return to Israel. That's only about 2%!

When Ezra arrives in Jerusalem, he finds the people demoralized and idle. Citizens of Jerusalem had tried to rebuild the walls but had failed. The walls of the city of Jerusalem were still in rubble. The people didn't think they could overcome their enemies, so the walls lay in ruin, and the people lived in terrible conditions.

So, Ezra inspires the priests and people to rebuild the temple and renew the spiritual foundation of Israel.

## **I. God's Plan Is To Restore You.**

Your life may be in shambles, and you may not think there is any possible way for things to change, but God wants to help you! God has a plan that will rebuild your life!

Nehemiah lived in the fortified palace of the King in Shushan, the capital city of the Persians. But even though Nehemiah's body was in Persia, his heart was in Jerusalem - 800 miles away. Nehemiah asks the Jews from Jerusalem how the people and the city were doing. He may have been an important man, but his heart was devoted to God, and he was concerned about the welfare of the people of Israel. Nehemiah knew Psalm 137:5-6

very well, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill! If I do not remember you, let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth; if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy." Jerusalem was special to Nehemiah because it was special to God. The news he received was not encouraging. The people were called survivors; how many of you know that is not a hopeful title. They were in great distress and reproach. The walls of the city were broken down, and the city gates burned with fire.

In the ancient world, a city without walls was a city completely vulnerable to its enemies. They had no defense or protection at all. Anything of value could be easily taken. Those who lived in an unwalled city lived in constant stress and tension. They never knew when they might be attacked and brutalized. If you tried to rebuild the temple, enemies could come and steal anything of value. No wonder the people lived in constant distress and disgrace. According to reports Nehemiah got, they were living only as survivors. I think there are many people today who are just surviving. Life is tough, and people are hanging on by a thread. But God has more in mind for us than to be mere survivors. God wants us to be overcomers and conquerors (Romans 8: 37).

Nehemiah's immediate reaction is extreme. Nehemiah didn't just feel bad for Jerusalem and its people; the news crushed him. There was no strength in his legs, he had to sit down, and he began to weep and to mourn. But Nehemiah didn't give in to despair. He chose to do something about the situation. But first, God had to do something in Nehemiah. Any great work of God begins with God doing a great work in somebody. Nehemiah's important position gave him an excellent opportunity to be a blessing for God. He first develops a curious heart about the welfare of Jerusalem and its people. Then we see a broken heart over the state of the people in Israel. Of course, God already saw the need in heaven, but He waited until the right person also felt the need.

Sometimes the greatest sorrows and tragedies in our life cause us to be sensitive to a need and willing to get involved. Most every Foundation or Cause has started because someone experienced sorrow and decided to take up the cause and do something about it. So we have, Walk for Mankind, Jerry's Kids and the Muscular Dystrophy Foundation, the Susan B. Cohan Breast Cancer Foundation, the Juvenile Diabetes Foundation, and on and on it goes; all because someone felt the need and decided to get involved. Libraries, churches, schools, and universities. Parks and zoos and gardens and retreat centers. These were all birthed from the heart of someone who cared not just for themselves but for others!

The whole nation of Israel was in need. And God planned to do something to meet that need through Nehemiah. Because God's plan is to restore and rebuild lives.

## **II. God's Plan Is For You To Take Charge!**

There was no way Nehemiah could do this alone. But he could be a leader and influence other people to help get this job done. Nehemiah is a book about leadership— something we desperately need today. Since leadership is about influence, it applies to everyone. Each of us has an area of leadership. The real question is, "Are you a good leader or a poor one?" Leaders prepare themselves for difficult work because they know it won't be easy. Whenever the people of God say, 'Let us arise and build,' Satan says, 'Let me arise and oppose.' (Redpath)

Leaders have a vision, and Nehemiah had a great vision. God was going to use Nehemiah to correct a problem that had been around a hundred and fifty years. You may feel like the difficulty of your situation has been endless but look at Nehemiah; he's tackling a hundred and fifty-year-old problem. Yet through Nehemiah, God was going to do re-energize something that had utterly failed before.

God wants to give you a plan that is big enough to conquer your impossible situations. All He needs is for you to be willing to take charge of the situation.

### **III. God's Plan Is For You To Succeed.**

Nehemiah got serious about the situation. He began to fast and pray. Nehemiah's reaction went well beyond an immediate emotional response. Often, a concern rushes over us, and we sorrow and may even shed a few tears, but then it quickly passes. But a burden from the Lord sticks with you and grows. It's a burden that will remain until the problem is solved. Nehemiah didn't complain, whine, or see who else could fix the problem.

He immediately began to pray and fast and ask God for help in this situation. Nehemiah understood why he was fasting who he was praying to. People trust in many different kinds of gods, but Nehemiah only wanted help from the Lord God of Israel. Prayer is essential to experiencing God's guidance and Divine presence. It appears that Nehemiah prayed for four months before he did anything. When the work of rebuilding the walls actually begins, it only takes 52 days to finish the job. But that 52-day project had a four-month foundation of prayer. Nehemiah took his pain and stress to God in prayer, and God gave him a vision and plan that would solve the problem. Prayer will give you strength. Isaiah 40:31 says that when you wait on the Lord in prayer, He will renew your strength (Isaiah 40:31).

Nehemiah also comes to God in humility. Humility begins with the understanding there is a God enthroned in the heavens, and the realization that I am not Him. In the movie "Rudy" (a wannabe football player for Notre Dame) the priest says, Son, there are two incontrovertible facts in life. One, "There is a God" and number 2, "I am not Him." We can't make God do anything! Nehemiah recognizes precisely who God is:

- LORD God of heaven
- great and awesome God

- who keeps Your covenant
- and mercy . . . with those You love.

Humility also expresses complete dependence on God. Nehemiah desperately asked God to hear his prayer. He acknowledges he is God's servant and his complete dependence on the Lord. He realized only God could help him, and if God would hear and listen to his cry, he knew God would help. It's important to confess your total dependence upon the Lord.

Humility will also cause you to confess your sin. Nehemiah confessed his sin without any attempt at excusing the sin. We can't excuse our behavior when confessing our sins. We can't say, "Lord, if I sinned" or "Lord, I'm sorry, but You know how hard it was" or some other nonsense. Humility requires honest confession without any attempt to excuse or cover-up what we've done. Nehemiah even went so far as to say, "Both my father's house and I have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You!"

Humility identifies with those in need. Nehemiah was a godly man, but he put himself right there with his father's house and prayed using "we" instead of "they." Someone once said, "You never lighten the load unless first, you have felt the pressure in your soul. You can't be used by God to bring blessing to others until God has opened your eyes to see things as they are. (Redpath). Nehemiah believes in God's promises and expects to receive God's blessing.

"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 you from there, and bring you 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."

This is a powerful way to come to God. Nehemiah asks God to remember His promises. Nehemiah quotes from both Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 30 and asks God to make good on the promises he made to Israel. That is the secret to great power in prayer: to plead for God to remember his promises. God delights in fulfilling his promises! He wants us to make our request of him and often demands it before prayer becomes effective. In Psalm 81:10, God says to His people, "Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it." God will not open His storehouse until we open our mouths to ask Him to perform His promises.

But there is a condition involved. We must return to God and keep His commandments.

## **Conclusion**

When Nehemiah prays, his heart is ready to *do* something. He prays, "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."

Nehemiah asks God to bless him when he goes speak to the king of Persia about the matter. Nehemiah wanted to do something about the sorry state of the Jerusalem walls and people, but he knows without God's intervention, he can do nothing. This is the prayer of a man of action, not an armchair critic. Nehemiah doesn't pray, "God, make it all better" or "God, get someone to move on this problem." Instead, his prayer is "God; I'm your servant, how can You use me to make things better."

When we recognize the need, we must follow up with earnest prayer and then wait for God to give us direction.

"Laying the matter to heart, he did not begin to speak with other people about what they would do, nor did he draw up a wonderful scheme about what might be done if so many thousand people joined in the enterprise; but it occurred to him that he would do something himself." (Spurgeon)



That's what we need to do! God wants to heal and restore you! He challenges you to step up and take charge of your situation. And he promises to help you succeed if you promise to follow His plan.