



**Date:** January 7-8, 2017  
**Speaker:** Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor  
**Scripture:** Nehemiah 1

I am excited as we begin this new teaching series today. I am excited for a number of reasons. Firstly, we get to delve into the Old Testament. We are going to be looking at and studying the book of Nehemiah. This book is found in your bible just after First and Second Kings, First and Second Chronicles, Ezra and just before Esther, Job and Psalms. You may want to take some time to find it and become familiar with it as we will be immersed in it over the next 8 weeks.

I think we have the tendency to see the Old Testament as a bit passé. Not as important as the New Testament but I am trusting and praying that we will see that the book of Nehemiah has a lot to say to us even today, some 2500 years later, in a different culture and a different time.

Also, I am excited because we are preaching this series in faith, trusting that God is going to speak to us as individuals and as a church in a powerful and even unexpected ways. In other words, we don't know where this is going except that we have planned the themes and the titles and the dates, and put together some pretty cool graphics. But now we are praying that God is going to align a lot of it with our journey as a church over the next few months as we launch 2017. We are in the midst of some strategic planning around the future goals and ministry at North Park this season. We are involved in some awesome activities to reach out into our local and global communities and we are just believing that God is going to bring it all together and stir our hearts as we study His word together in Nehemiah.

So, with that little intro, would you join me in anticipation as we pray together?

I want to give you a brief snap shot of what is happening in the history of God's people and the work of God leading up to the time in which the book of Nehemiah was written. It is important for us to know the context

of what is going on to be able to jump in and understand what is happening in the text.

In Genesis the first book of the bible, we have the creative work of God. Making the heavens and the earth, the stars and the seas, humanity and animals. He had a plan and provision for them but almost immediately we have the first sign of what would distinguish humanity's ongoing relationship with their creator, disobedience. Sin enters the world in Genesis 3, but God restores and provides for his people as they turn back to him.

In Genesis 12, God promises a nation of people to his chosen servant Abraham and He makes a covenant that He will bless Israel and use them to be a blessing to other nations. The population of Israel begins to grow but there is more disobedience

In Exodus, the second book of the bible, we find the Israelites in slavery to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. They cry out to God for help, he gives them Moses, who rescues them and begins to lead them to the Promised Land. But the people grumble and complain along the journey, first it was about food so God provides for them. (manna from heaven, water from a rock) But their complaining and lack of faith found them wandering for 40 years never reaching the Promised Land.

God gives them worship guidelines and sacrificial rituals to restore relationship with him when they sin, the Ten Commandments.

Finally, they enter the land God has given them, He gives them direction through leaders such as Joshua, but the vicious cycle continues.

God's people doing evil in his eyes, worshipping other gods, getting themselves into trouble and then turning back to God. He restores his people for a time and then

the people go back to their old ways. Until finally, during the time of Solomon, oh you remember Solomon, the wise king? Under Solomon, the nation of Israel self-destructs.

It splits and divides into two kingdoms, Israel in the North and Judah in the South, The city of Jerusalem is in the South in Judah. It is Judah's capital city and it is deemed the holy city of God. Kings continue to try to lead these two kingdoms but much more often than not, they continue to do evil in the eyes of God, until finally, the kingdom of Israel in the North is over taken by the enemy forces in the 700's BC. (1&2 Kings, 1&2 Chronicles)

The southern Kingdom of Judah holds on a little longer but finally around 586 BC, they succumb to Babylon led by King Nebuchadnezzar who destroys the city of Jerusalem and takes thousands of Israelites into exile in Babylon (you can read about that in the book of Daniel).

Eventually Babylon is defeated by the Persians of King Cyrus and King Xerxes (book of Esther) and that is where we find ourselves in Nehemiah around the year 445BC. Israel and Judah are in ruins, many of the Israelite people are in exile from their homeland, scattered throughout the other nations.

It is the low point in their history and the city of Jerusalem, God's chosen city, with its' history of worship and sacrifice, the city where God's presence dwelt in the temple. It is in shambles. The infrastructure is shattered. Walls and buildings destroyed. Think of Haiti after the earthquake or New Orleans after the Hurricane. Or more recently, the Syrian city of Aleppo after the ISIS invasion.

The city of Jerusalem, the most important city in Judah, God's city, lay in ruins. Devastated and left largely vacated during the Babylonian invasion and then the Persian uprising. The buildings have been decimated, the wall of the city has been destroyed, the gates, burned. And too many, had the feeling that God too, had left the city.

And that is the news that comes to our man, Nehemiah in Susa, the capital city of Persia some 900 miles away from Jerusalem.

If you have your bibles turn with me to the Book of Nehemiah chapter 1. Let' look a little deeper into what is going on in this text.

*Nehemiah 1:1*

*These are the memoirs of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah.*

Do any of you journal? I journal. It is part of my daily bible reading time. I write out my thoughts and feelings about what I have read and I write out my prayers. I find it really helpful as a means to process what is going on around me.

That is what a good chunk of the book of Nehemiah is, his personal journal. (Ch 1-7, 13). They're the thoughts and feelings of this man as he interacts with God around his circumstances. Look at how verse 1 continues,

*Nehemiah 1:1-*

*These are the memoirs of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In late autumn, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was at the fortress of Susa.*

I don't know about you but when I journal, I start each entry with the date, my name is on my journal and that is what Nehemiah does here. He is sure to state who he is. He includes his father's name, Hacaliah as a way of introducing himself which was very common in that day. Your lineage is the way you identified yourself and of course he also dated his journal entries. It is the month of Kislev, which would have been the winter time, (Nov, Dec) in the 20th year. See, things were often dated according to the length of the reign of the King, so this would have been in the 20th year of the reign of King Artaxerxes. This is all standard stuff, name and date on the entry.

In *Nehemiah 1:2*, he goes on,

*Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem.*

Nehemiah is in Susa, Persia's capital city and as he states in,

*Nehemiah 1:11,*

*I was the king's cup-bearer.*

Notice here, Nehemiah isn't a pastor. He is not professional clergy. He isn't an elder or a deacon of a church. He is a lay person just like many of you, employed in a very demanding job. He was a cup bearer

for the King and that was an important role. Much trust and responsibility was given to the cupbearer. Nehemiah had to ensure the King's food and wine were safe to consume but a cupbearer also served as a sort of personal assistant to the king. It was a pretty prestigious job.

As Nehemiah is at work in Persia, Hanani and others arrived from Judah, where the city of Jerusalem is located some 900 miles away and Nehemiah proceeds to ask them about the condition of the city, the kingdom, the people.

Let me make this clear. Nehemiah probably wrote this about 445BC. It has been 141 years since Jerusalem had been destroyed. Nehemiah although an Israelite by heritage, would not have been born in the city of Jerusalem. Chances are, he had never even seen Jerusalem but he knew of its' decrepit condition. He had strong ties to his motherland. He would have known his roots. He was raised to know the scriptures of His God, The God of the Israelite people, The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He knew all about the tumultuous history of God and his people.

Can you understand that? Some of you, your families have immigrated to Canada from Europe. Maybe the Netherlands. Even though you are Canadian, you maintain your proud Dutch heritage. And you are sure to bring out those dreadful orange shirts whenever there is a big soccer match or cycling event happening. Am I right?!

For me, it's Scotland. Although born in Canada, my roots are in Scotland. I have never even been there but there's this yearning. For some haggis, some bagpipes and a kilt. I pay a little more attention to all things Scottish.

For Nehemiah, his care and concern for Jerusalem is amplified by the fact that his ancestors did not leave their homeland by their own choosing. They were forced out. Routed by enemy forces, many taken into exile as slaves in foreign lands. That is Nehemiah's story and whenever he has a chance to chat with someone who has travelled through Jerusalem he wanted to know, what is happening back home? In Jerusalem?

The News he receives here is not good. He writes in,

*Nehemiah 1:3,*

*They said to me, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire."*

The significance and power of this statement may be lost on us today in our culture so let me try to explain the way that Nehemiah might have heard it. It had been 141 years since the total destruction of the city of Jerusalem. But over the years, things settled down. The Israelite people were given their freedom and allowed to return to Jerusalem if they so desired but many declined. They had managed to settle into their new environments quite well. They had put down roots and had raised families on foreign soil.

But there were two waves of exiles who did return to Jerusalem. One in 538 BC under the leadership of Zerubbabel, another in 458 BC with Ezra leading the way. (you can read about it in the book of Ezra) The hope was that these people would restore Jerusalem to its' former and rightful glory. And they tried. They went to work first on the temple. An important first step as they saw it, to draw God back to the city, but they faced opposition and eventually their reconstruction projects were shut down. The city still lay in ruins.

*Nehemiah 1:3*

*The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire."*

Walls. Why are walls so important? Why does Nehemiah focus on the walls here? Today, we often think of walls in a negative way, don't we? Just think of our southern neighbours and all of Trump's talk about a wall during the election kind of stirred things up, didn't it? We use an expression, they put up a wall between us, meaning when someone won't listen to another. We live in gated communities which means we put up walls around where we live to keep us in and them out, right? A wall is thought of as something that separates us from one another. We spend a lot of time in our culture talking about how we can break down dividing walls between us, between ethnic groups. We invest a lot in breaking down walls today, don't we? Because walls can create alienation, loneliness and confusion in our world.

That wasn't so in Nehemiah's day. To live in a city without a solid wall around its perimeter, without properly functioning gates that would control traffic to

and from the city, to let your city gates deteriorate was a source of incredible shame and disgrace to the city and to its' inhabitants. A city wall signified security and safety, strength and peace for the residents in this day. But it was more than that. A well-built wall also represented a vibrant city, full of life and purpose and hope. For the city of God, the holy city of Jerusalem to be in disrepair, to be in shambles, especially its' walls and gates, that was a source of disgrace to the Israelite people. It brought incredible shame to their God. The God that had been with them all throughout their history. The one who had provided a way for them, for generation after generation and now His holy city was in ruins. The walls are rubble.

Jerusalem should have been the city that was alive and vibrant and cared for. The walls should have been well maintained. They should have been scrubbed clean regularly. Any holes or cracks should have been repaired in a timely manner. And it was the same for the buildings and the grounds. Litter and garbage should have been picked up, animal droppings scooped and discarded. This was to be a place where worship was to be alive and happening. This was the city of God but at this point in history, it was a hollow shell of itself.

Can you place yourself in the scene a bit? How would you feel? This was your city, your place of worship and it has been abandoned, left in shambles. How do you feel?

I got to wondering how many church buildings are like this. In shambles, vacant, disrepair, Jesus has left the building. How does that make us feel? At most, maybe an apathetic shrug of the shoulders. What stirs in us as we hear a neglected church? Empty buildings now being sold as homes or office space? You know how Nehemiah felt?

*Nehemiah 1:4*

*When I heard this, I sat down and wept.*

He wept. The invasion of Jerusalem by enemy forces happened about 140 years before Nehemiah was even born. He had probably never even been to Jerusalem. But he knew about God. He knew the history. This was his God, Yahweh and the condition of the city of God, the shambles, the attitude, the apathy, the condition of the people, disgraced and in great trouble. It drove him to his knees and he wept.

Can I ask you a personal question today? What makes you weep?

Oh you aren't a big crier? I am a baby! I cry at everything. I never used to. I never used to cry at anything. Now, I cry at everything. I don't know how the question came up but as our family was sitting around over the Christmas holidays, someone made the enquiry of everyone when is the last time you cried. And as we went around the room, the answers were everything from last week to last year to five years ago but when they got to me, everyone laughed. They knew. Dad cries at everything. My answer, was yesterday, I cried yesterday over the grief of the death of one of our young people at North Park, Crysta DenOulden.

Have you ever seen the show, Extreme Makeover, Home Edition? I usually cried at the end. The singing of the national anthem at a hockey game, I choke up. Something wonderful happens to one of my children, watch out for the water works. I never used to be like that. But, God used YOU to do that to me! As I have sat with you through deaths and significant losses and heart ache, God has used you to teach me to feel deeply, to care, even to cry.

My eyes well up when a bride walks toward me when I officiate at a wedding, even if I hardly know her. It gets me every time!

God has used you to turn a proud heart to a tender one, baptisms, listening to people share their stories, in the middle of worship songs, as I am preaching. Cry. Cry. Cry. Cry. What used to be embarrassing, I now embrace and am thankful for. God has captured my heart.

Do you remember in, Luke 19:41, As Jesus rode into the city of Jerusalem for the last time before he was to be crucified it says....

*Luke 19:41*

*As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it.*

Why do you think Jesus wept over this city? It was the same city, Jerusalem that Nehemiah wept over 500 years earlier. Do you think Jesus wept for the same reasons? The city was in shambles, the people were lost and disgraced. Their hearts far from God. They had no hope.

Five hundred (500) years earlier, Nehemiah had the same heart that Jesus had for his people, for the city. Jesus' presence is felt all throughout the Old Testament, did you know that? Oh how I pray that I have that heart too. That the same things that caused Jesus to be driven to his knees in tears are what makes me weep. What about you? What makes you weep?

Is it the state of our city? London, 2017. Oh, we have buildings and monuments to our great intelligence and accomplishments but in the shadows of those edifices, we still have people living on our streets. People with not enough food to eat. People being ridiculed and picked on and bullied. Power and authority is still being abused. Rates of Mental illness, hopelessness and suicide are rising. People are turning their backs on God because of hypocrisy, condemnation and judgmental attitudes in the church. People are caught in cycles of sin. There are divisions in the church over petty issues. People we lock eyes with everyday are facing hopeless eternities. Does any of that drive us to tears?

Do the same things that break Jesus' heart, the same things that brought him to tears that brought Nehemiah to tears, do they stop us in our tracks as well? When we look at the state of our global world, what does it do to us?

Do you know that every 10 seconds a child will die from hunger related disease? Over six (6) million children died in 2013, 17 000 a day from preventable health issues. Over 660 million people lack accessible clean water. There are now terrorist attacks almost every week. This week it was Florida, last week, Turkey. What about refugee issues? Did you know that more than 20 million people are affected by human sex trafficking trade every year?

Are we driven to tears?

What about in our own lives? The state of our relationships? Friendships, marriages, parents, children, if they are anything less than they can be, what is our response? Apathy? Or are we driven to tears, driven to our knees, driven to God to restore and renew us and these relationships?

Look as *Nehemiah 1:4* continues,

*When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven*

It is thought that Nehemiah carried on the weeping, mourning, fasting and praying for 3-4 months. Months. He was so distraught by the condition of the people and city of Jerusalem and all that it represented. Listen to Nehemiah's prayer. I won't go into it in detail but would encourage you to read it through this week. But it is interesting to see that Nehemiah uses the ACTS principle of prayer. Are you familiar with the acronym ACTS?

When you pray, start with Adoration, then Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. (requests, asks, intercession). It is a way to pray that we have taught around here and Nehemiah was using it 2500 years ago.

In *Nehemiah 1:5*-Adoration

*Then I said, "O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands,*

In his prayer to God, Nehemiah starts with words of love and praise and adoration to the God that has stayed faithful to His promises to love and provide for the descendants of Abraham.

In *Nehemiah 1:6-7*- Confession

*I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! 7 We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses.*

You know we don't talk a lot about sin in the church these days. Do we? Maybe it's a backlash to the days when it's all you ever heard from the pulpit was hell, fire and brimstone, and the shame and guilt that brought upon a lot of us. But the fact remains, that we are all touched by sin, we all sin. Regularly confession of sin humbly before God is healthy and important for a vital and growing relationship with Him. And I love the way that Nehemiah doesn't just confess other people's sin, we can all be good at doing that. God, I am so sorry for all those other people and their actions that brought Jerusalem into disrepair. Nehemiah doesn't do that here. He names himself. He includes himself as a sinner, as someone who has a part in the fact that the walls and the city of Jerusalem lie in ruins. Even though he had never been there, he knew his apathy was part of the problem.

What do we need to confess to God today? What has been our sin? How have we contributed to the condition of our culture today, our city, our society, the state of our global community? What about our role in the apathy in our marriages of dysfunction or other relationships? But Paul, what they did to me, I know, but what about you, what about you? It starts with you!

Can you pray, Lord search me and know me and reveal to me where I need to come before you. Lord, help me to confess my shortcomings and Lord, help me to weep!? That is good, healthy. Dare I ask you today, is there anything you need to confess? Maybe it is bitterness or an attitude of pride. You need God's help to allow you to bust through and feel again....to weep!

In *Nehemiah 1:8-9* -Thanksgiving

*"Please remember what you told your servant Moses: 'If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. 9 But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.'*

In the original language, this word remember also has the nuance of truth. Something is reliable, you can bank on it. In this passage, Nehemiah is saying to God, I do remember what you have promised us through the ages. I am banking on it and I am thankful that you have said if we return to you and are obedient to you, you will take us back, time after time. And that continues to be God's promise to us today. No matter how many times we have turned from him, God will restore us back into relationship with him if we repent, turn back to him. It is truth, you can bank on it.

And finally, in *Nehemiah 1:11*- Supplication

*when Nehemiah asks, O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me."*

Do you know what Nehemiah is asking of God here? The condition of the walls and the state of the people of Jerusalem have so impacted him, so touched his heart that he was driven to tears, driven to prayer, driven to mourning, driven to fasting, and now he is driven to....GO! To Jerusalem. To take action. Tears are good but they are not enough. His supplication in the text is,

pave the way for me, God, I ask you to go before me and lead me and grant me favour on this mission to return to Jerusalem to do something.

That is the way God moves us. He invites all of us into the game of life. He has a plan and a purpose and role for all of us. When we are obedient to him, in relationship with him, when Jesus Christ has penetrated our hearts and our lives, we cannot help but be moved by the same things that move Him. To see people the same way that Jesus sees them. And we can't help but be people of action, empowered by His living Spirit.

Dan West. Have you heard of Dan West? Because of his faith, he was a conscientious objector during World War 1 and so he volunteered as the Director of Relief Services during the Spanish Civil War. One of his duties was to hand out milk to hungry children. But he didn't have enough milk for all of them, so he literally determined who would live and who would die, by who he handed the cup of milk to. This experience so touched his life, that he was determined to find a better way of eliminating hunger. West knew that if these poor families only had a cow, they could feed themselves. When he returned stateside, he spread his idea to his neighbors and many local church congregations of donating young heifers to families in need. The involvement from his community led him to bigger dreams. His idea became an official program of the Church of the Brethren in 1942 and eventually became an independent non-profit corporation in 1953. His phrase "not a cup of milk, but a cow" became the mantra for Heifer International, which continues on today.

Since its' inception, Heifer International has helped over 8.5 million people in 125 countries around the world. Striving to put a dent in world hunger.

Have you heard of Zach Hunter? He is a 25 year old author and anti-slavery activist. Hunter has been fighting to free slaves around the world since he was 12. In primary school, he studied slavery. He told his mom that if he was alive back then, he would have done something about it. But he was shocked when his mom told him that slavery still existed. That's when I knew I had to do something, he says. I had all these emotions about it and I wasn't sure what to think about the idea of having modern slavery. But I didn't think it was enough to just have emotions. Hunter took his emotions of anger and outrage and launched Loose Change to Loosen Chains. ((LC2LC). He began speaking

at schools, churches and other organizations to raise both money and awareness. "I wanted kids my age to get on board to help," he says. I want us to make history—and I don't mean to get our names in some history book, but to be known as a generation that did something for God, cared for the poor, and totally stopped slavery. Through LC2LC, students tell stories of modern-day slaves and collect loose change in yellow cups. The collected change is then used to help fund the work of anti-slavery organizations such as Free the Slaves and International Justice Mission. (IJM) An organization that North Park is heavily involved with.

Have you ever had something so stir your heart that it just caused you to weep, caused you to pray and caused you to take action? Some of you here today I know have had that experience and you are making a difference through Christ in your neighbourhoods, this city and some even into the world.

What brings you to tears today? What stirs in you as we look at this first chapter of Nehemiah? I don't know what God is going to do in this church or in your life as we move through this series. I don't know what action he is going to call you or us to take.

But over the next several weeks we are going to build a wall with Nehemiah and we are going to pray that God is building something new and fresh and vibrant in our midst as well. Will you join me on the journey? That is why we named this series, Count Me In. From Rubble to Renewal. Will you pray expectantly for all that God wishes to do in your lives and in the life of His church? And will you be open to having God break your heart for what breaks His? Who knows, maybe you may shed a tear or two, and we know that after that, anything can happen!

Amen? Amen. Let's Pray

**Points to Ponder**  
**Nehemiah 1**  
**Count Me In. From Rubble to Renewal**

**With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.**

1. In your group, discuss attributes of a church or Christian community that would demonstrate that it was alive and vibrant for Jesus. What are the attributes of a church or Christian community that is dying? Discuss any experiences you have had with both situations. What have these circumstances done to your personal faith and development?
2. Share a time in your life when you have actually been "moved to tears". What was it that touched you so deeply? Did these feelings prompt you to take action? If so, what did you do?
3. Discuss some areas of concern or need in your community, city or global world. What should the Christian response be to these situations? Where are the areas that followers of Jesus are making a difference? Where are we falling short? What needs to happen to get more people involved?

**Prayer and Action Item**

Take some time to pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Will you be bold enough to pray that God breaks your heart for the same things that break His heart? Make that your prayer today and in the days ahead and then invite Him to open your eyes and heart to places where He wants you to put your faith in action.