

Hope Church South Haven January 4th 2025

Nehemiah 1:1-4 & 2:1-5

What is your burden for 2026?

One of my favorite seasons in ministry was serving as CHAPLAIN at **Waterkloof High School** from 2003 to 2005. It is a large school with more than 2,400 students. My responsibilities included:

- Leading the Christian program at the school.
- I did counseling.
- I mentored the teachers.
- I coached rugby and cricket.

In 2004, something special started happening at the school. Students began skipping recess so they could **gather for prayer in the chapel**. At the end of 2004, *more than 30 students* went on to work in ministry as pastors or missionaries.

LOUISE was one of those students and she met her husband, MEYER CONRADIE, at **college**. They were both gifted and could have chosen any high-paying career. But Meyer and Louise **shared a deep passion for orphans** – SOUTH AFRICA has around 3 million

orphans. Their shared burden, let them to start an organization called **MosaicSA** in **2008**.

Their vision is:

To see orphan and vulnerable children across Africa in a **loving and caring family**,
where they can be EQUIPPED to *realize their God-given potential*.

MosaicSA:

- Connect orphans with foster moms. They TRAIN and EDUCATE and EMPOWER the foster moms.
- Provide **safe** housing and food and education.
- Currently support **336 orphans and 148 caretakers**.
- They reached more than 45,000 children in 2024 through their education upliftment program.

Sometimes SOMETHING starts bothering us deep down. And it just will not go away. It is a **kind of restless feeling** that *things are not the way they should be*. It does not have to look as dramatic as what Meyer and Louise are doing.

- It might be a dad choosing family over chasing the next promotion. Being OK with where you are in the corporate food chain.
- It might be a **teacher deciding to quietly pray** for their coworkers.

- It might be taking the first step to repair a broken relationship.
- It might be **giving a little more** than you usually do.
- It might be finally getting involved in that volunteer work you have kept putting off.

So as 2026 begins, here are the questions I need you think about today:

- What are you **deeply passionate about**? Your family? Social justice issues? Helping the poor?
- What is that one thing in life that you feel needs to change? A habit? A relationship? Depth of your faith? Something in the community?
- And what are you doing about it?

Long before Meyer and Louise ever started Mosaic, God did something very similar in the **heart of an ordinary man** named NEHEMIAH. He wasn't a priest or a prophet. He was a *government official* with a comfortable job but **discovered a deep burden** he could not shake.

We are reading from **NEHEMIAH 1 & 2** today.

- The story of NEHEMIAH takes place in the middle of the 5th century before Christ, when JUDAH was a **small and fragile province** in the huge Persian Empire.

- **ARTAXERXES I** was the Persian king, ruling from 465–424 BC. His EMPIRE STRETCHED from areas like modern day Turkey and Egypt all the way to **Iran and parts of Central Asia**.
- The Jewish people were still living in shame because of the EXILE. Jerusalem's *broken walls* were a daily reminder of **how vulnerable they were**. How easily others could take advantage of them.
- Many Jews were scattered across the empire, divided between those living in and around Jerusalem and others, like NEHEMIAH living in Susa.
- Inside the Jerusalem community, **economic injustice ran deep**.
 - ⇒ WEALTHY FAMILIES owned most of the land and controlled access to credit.
 - ⇒ The POORER FAMILIES **drowned in debt** and sometimes had to sell their own children into temporary slavery just to survive.
- On top of that, neighboring groups such as the SAMARITANS and AMMONITES and ARABS *stopped* any **attempt to rebuild Jerusalem**.
- In Jerusalem, the PROPHETS were working to revive public reading of the law of Moses and challenged the JEWS to **renew their commitment to live as God's people**.
- Into this complicated and fragile situation walks Nehemiah.

Chapter 1:1

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I
was in the citadel of Susa,

- The book is NEHEMIAH'S own account of what **God did through him**.
- His story opens in the month of Kislev, which falls around November or December on the Hebrew calendar.
- The **twentieth year of King Artaxerxes** was around 445–444 before Christ.
- At that time NEHEMIAH lived in **Susa**. Susa was the Persian Empire's royal winter capital and one of its *key political centers*.

Chapter 1:2-3

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. 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."

- NEHEMIAH chose not to stay safe and comfortable in Susa while his people and his city suffered – he was **deeply concerned** about what was happening in Jerusalem.

- Jerusalem had been destroyed and its people *taken into exile around 586 BC*. The FIRST GROUP returned after about 70 years. Roughly another 70 years passed before this moment.
- That means that the *walls of Jerusalem laid in ruins for about 140 years*. 140 years where the city was exposed and defenseless. 140 years of living with the *disgrace and humiliation* of being defeated by another nation.

Chapter 1:4

When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and
prayed before the God of heaven.

- When NEHEMIAH heard what is happening in Jerusalem, it was like a gut punch...kick on the zip. He felt physically overwhelmed.
- For days he **mourned and cried** over the news. But he did not stay stuck in his sorrow. His GRIEF drove him to prayer.
- **He started fasting** – when you intentionally give up food or something else to seek God more passionately.
- His weeping and fasting and praying became part of an **ongoing conversation** with God.

Chapter 2:1-2

In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.” I was very much afraid,

- The month of Nisan falls in March or April on the Hebrew calendar. About **four months have passed** since NEHEMIAH first heard the bad news about Jerusalem.
- NEHEMIAH’S everyday job was **serving as the king’s cupbearer**. The cupbearer was a trusted official who tasted and served the king his wine to make sure he isn’t poisoned.

This role came with **real influence and real risk**.

- Being sad in front of the king **broke royal protocol**. It could be seen as not being grateful or even disloyal. It explains why NEHEMIAH was so afraid when Artaxerxes noticed his emotions.
- In that moment he was *caught in a tight spot*. FEELING TORN between **loyalty to the king** who trusted him. And **loyalty to Jerusalem** that weighed heavily on his heart.

Chapter 2:3-4

but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” The king said to me, “What is it you want?” Then I prayed to the God of heaven,

- NEHEMIAH begins his answer by honoring the king – *“May the king live forever!”*
- Affirming to the king his loyalty. That his sadness was because of personal grief and **not because of rebellion or disrespect.**
- NEHEMIAH describes Jerusalem as the ***city where my ancestors are buried***. His words struck deep because the Persian culture deeply valued ancestral tombs and family honor.
- NEHEMIAH wisely avoids naming Jerusalem directly. The city’s name carried a lot of political baggage in that court.
- When the king presses him, Nehemiah breathes a quick prayer to God. NEHEMIAH knew he needed God in that moment. Standing before **human power and authority.**

Chapter 2:5

and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

Nehemiah 2:1-5 NIV

- NEHEMIAH **does not** fumble for words or hide behind vague ideas. When the moment comes, he is ready.

- He gives the king a **clear and concrete request**: send me to Judah, so that I can rebuild it. Nothing UNCERTAIN about what he is asking for.
- SIDE NOTE: The way that God worked through ARTAXERXES is striking: a pagan emperor with no loyalty to Israel authorizes and funds the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls.
- It becomes a QUIET REMINDER that God often does what seems impossible **through unlikely people.** *Pouring out grace on those who have not earned it.* A beautiful promise woven through the whole Bible.

Nehemiah's story shows us this pattern:

God gives us a **burden**.

God shapes and forms us in the **waiting**.

God opens a door **where we need to show courage**.

That same pattern is often how God works in our lives today.

The burden/dream God gives.

- NEHEMIAH hears the report about Jerusalem. It's not bad news from something distant. Like a news report from Nigeria or Russia.

- Its news that matters. News that becomes a HOLY BURDEN. News that make him **drop to his knees in tears and fasting and prayer.**
- God is pulling NEHEMIAH'S heart **in line with His own heart** for that broken city.
- That is often how God starts His work in us too. God stirs something in us. **God plants a passion.** A longing. *God puts something on our hearts that we cannot easily shake.*
- The story of Nehemiah is a reminder that THIS LIFE IS NOT ABOUT US.
- Jesus *did not die on the cross* just to hand out private tickets to heaven.
- *He died and rose from the dead* that God's greatness would be seen and **His kingdom would show up** in a real and tangible way. Through us. You and me!
- Everyone who follows Jesus is invited into that kind of life.

Tell them to go after God, who piles on all the riches we could ever manage—to do good, to be rich in helping others, to be extravagantly generous.

1 Timothy 6:18 The MESSAGE

- A God-given burden often shows up where three things overlap:
⇒ It's something that you **deeply care about.**

⇒ It's something that you you're actually good at.

⇒ It's something where there *is a real need for it*.

Affinity...ability...*opportunity*.

- That kind of BURDEN is not always comfortable. It can feel heavy. But it is **good and holy** because it pulls our hearts closer to God's heart. God's heart for us and for this broken messy world.
- A God-given BURDEN does not crush you with despair. **It keeps nudging you toward prayer.**
- A God-given BURDEN is not about guilt. It is a grace-filled stirring – the love of Christ quietly pushing us towards something.
- A God-given BURDEN **wakes** you up to what matters to God.
- A God-given BURDEN **draws** you to become more like Jesus.
- A God-given BURDEN is not about making yourself look better.
- So here are a few questions to sit with:
 - ⇒ What situations or people or relationships or injustices move you to prayer? Maybe even move you to tears?

- ⇒ Where do you see hurt and loss and wrongs that you just cannot shrug off?
- ⇒ Where might that ache in you be echoing something that breaks God's own heart?

Liminal spaces: the in between.

- NEHEMIAH does not hear the news on Monday and stand before the king on Tuesday.
- About four months passed between Kislev and Nisan. Four months before anything changes.
- That gap is a kind of **LIMINAL SPACE**. The uncomfortable “in-between” space between what was and what will be. Where one chapter **has ended but the next has not yet begun**. The space between *conviction and opportunity*.
- Liminal spaces is disorienting and uncomfortable.
- But liminal spaces are often places of **deep growth and change**. They become places where God quietly reshapes our IDENTITY and PRIORITIES in ways that matter.

There will be a time in the process of God fulfilling his dream placed in your heart when he will take you all the way to the edge, and you must die. Every dream passes through the cross. Every dream takes you to where you let go of everything and everyone, every agenda and expectation, and then it is only as the Lord resurrects you and your dream that you can go on.

Chip Ingram

- In that in-between space, the real question is not just ***‘Will the dream happen?’*** but ***‘Who am I becoming while I wait for the dream to happen?’***

Being courageous when it matters.

- By the time NEHEMIAH stands in front of Artaxerxes in chapter 2, his heart is still pounding.
- Courage for him does not mean feeling calm. It means answering the king’s question honestly. Without hesitation.
- He has **prayed** and he has **waited** and he is **ready to take the risk**.
- The story of NEHEMIAH reminds us that God loves to work through ordinary imperfect people in **less-than-ideal situations**.
- What God looks for is COURAGE AND OBEDIENCE, not perfection. God loves to show His strength through human weakness.
- The story is a reminder that **courage is not the absence of fear**. It is choosing to obey at the right time. It is choosing to do the right thing when it really matters. Even when fear is loud.
- God’s favor and kindness and blessings does not meet people *in their comfort zones* but as they step out in **costly obedience**.
- NEHEMIAH’S story echoes God’s words to Joshua:

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.

Joshua 1:9 NIV

- Nehemiah's story reminds us:
 - ⇒ God places holy burdens to **waken up our hearts**. To connect our hearts with His.
 - ⇒ God shapes our character **while we are waiting**.
 - ⇒ God honors **courageous obedience** when the moment of opportunity comes.
- Maybe God has already put someone or something on your heart. A **person** or a **need** or a **calling** or a **broken situation** you simply cannot ignore any longer.
- You have cried over it. You have prayed over it. And yet you still find yourself waiting.
- Do not lose hope.
- The same God who worked through NEHEMIAH'S tears and prayers and long delay can work through you as you keep carrying that burden. As you keep waiting in faith. As you stay willing to step forward when the moment comes.

As you do 2026, do not only ask yourself – **What is my burden?**

Ask yourself – How will I pray and worship and stay present in the moment while I

wait?

Ask yourself – *Will I have the courage when God opens the door?*