

Nehemiah 1:1-4 God's Servant in the City

A sermon delivered at Calvary Chapel DC Metro
www.calvarydcmetro.org

One of the reasons I love the Bible is because it has so much to say to us today.

This is an old book, a very old book. The last chapters were added way back in the nineties – that's the 9-0's, not the 19-90's – so even the most recent section is still over one thousand, nine hundred and twenty years old; the book of Nehemiah which we are starting this morning is around 2,450 years old. And yet, God still speaks through it to us today.

And that is because, for all the advances we have made in technology, humanity is still much the same as we have ever been. We still love, we still form families, we still work and create and have fun, we still fight and argue and go to war. The things we write *with* and the things we write *on* may have changed, but the essence of our stories has not.

And, let's remember, there are probably at least a billion people on the planet whose lives today are much like the lives of those living a few millennia ago. Think of the Bedouins of the Middle East or of the tribes living in the bush of Africa, the islands of the Asian Pacific, and the jungles of South America. There are native tribes deep in the Amazon rainforests that have no contact with the outside world. The Brazilian government knows they are there, but will not allow anyone to make contact with them.

Yet if someone were to meet with that tribe, learn their language, translate the Bible into their language, and read it to them, they could understand this book. They could understand its message as much as you and I.

You see, the Bible speaks *to all of us* because it is a message from God *for all of us* – it is as much for the simple man who has never seen an iPhone as it is for the programmer in Silicon Valley who is working on iPhone 6, 7, or 8. It is for the desert nomad and the astronaut, the rice farmer and the executive, the father as well as his son. It is for the woman from the first century and for the woman of the next century, (should we still be around), because there is only one God and this is His one message to man.

So as we read Nehemiah, I want you to understand as much as you can of the historical background, the political situation and the layout of the city, the walls, and the gates – but don't get stuck at the level of archaeology, geography, and history - move on to the theology. We aren't just reading a textbook or a novel; this is a book about God, and about you, and what's going on between you and God. So hear the stories, grasp the details, but also ask – what does this have to do with me today living in NOVA, or the District, or Maryland?

Sometimes the answer is going to be immediately obvious – a very clear piece of instruction telling you “Do this” or “Don’t do that” or explaining something that you need to know. At other times it might be an example you ought to follow or avoid, or an illustration of the character of God. Sometimes it might just be a bunch of data that moves the storyline forward through history closer to the cross. But always ask the question, what does this section of Scripture teach me about God and what does it teach me about me? Keep those kinds of questions in the back of your mind as you read your Bible and you’ll be amazed at how much this ancient book has to say to you.

With all of that in mind, let’s talk about Nehemiah, a man I think many of us will be able to relate to. He is a Jew, but he isn’t living in Israel, which we’ll explain in just a minute. Instead, he’s a servant to Artaxerxes, the king of the Persian Empire – if you want to think about it this way - Nehemiah is a GS employee in the federal government of his day. He’s living in the capital city, working in a government building, a long way away from the place he would call home. Sound familiar? This is his story.

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.

It came to pass in the month of Chislev, *in the twentieth year* (of the reign of Artaxerxes – ca 445BC), as I was in Shushan the citadel,
2 that Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah;

So let’s take a minute and talk about why he was in Shushan serving with Artaxerxes.

History of Salvation:

- Creation, Fall, Promise
- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob – Israel
- Egypt, Moses, Law
- Promised Land (covenant promised it forever), Judges, Kings
- David, Solomon, Divided Kingdom [prophets calling back to righteousness]
- [prophets warning of captivity] Northern Captivity (722), Southern Captivity (586 140 years before Nehemiah’s writing),
- Babylonians, Medes, Persians [prophets speaking reassurance of return]
- 458BC (13 years before Nehemiah’s writing) - Artaxerxes sends a Jewish priest by the name of Ezra and others back to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple – it’s 1,000 miles away, a journey of about four months.



Now some of them have returned and Nehemiah asks, “What was it like?”

and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.

Not all of the Jews had been taken away in the Babylonian raids. A tiny band escaped with the prophet Jeremiah down to Egypt, and all the poor people of the land had been left as farmers and shepherds to keep the land productive with all the profits being sent back to the king. So Nehemiah is asking how these people have been doing, what's it like back in Jerusalem, back in the place we've heard so many stories about? What did Ezra's group find when they came back? He's hoping for some encouraging stories.

That's important because it shows that Nehemiah still cared about Jerusalem - he hadn't gone native in Shushan.

Remember, he had this comfortable position in the government. He lived in the palace. He ate good food and wore nice clothes. You know, life wasn't perfect, but it wasn't bad either. And I think we could all understand if Nehemiah started to focus a little on himself, on his position, on his career, on getting promoted. We could understand if he got caught up in all the gossip, and rumors, and intrigue. In short, if he lost sight of what was going on outside the capital and the court.

Because, isn't that a constant temptation in this place? There are plenty of people who just get caught up in the system - they move from position to position, from appointment to think-tank and back depending on who is in power at the time, they retire from a military position and move straight into a civilian position doing the same job. I'm not saying any of that is inherently wrong, all I'm saying is, it creates a temptation to live in this little world of our organization, or our profession, or our cause, and lose sight of what's going on elsewhere.

But Nehemiah didn't succumb to that temptation, he never lost sight of his roots so to speak. You see, it wasn't just that he *cared about* people outside the capital; he also recognized that his primary identity was *with* those people outside the capital. He wasn't a local. In spite of his position in the government, he recognized he was still a stranger in a strange land. He was a Jew and his heart was with the Jews.

Can I encourage you today that if you are a Christian, you are also a stranger in a strange land? This is not your home. No matter how comfortable you are here, no matter how far you have advanced here, no matter what position or rank or title you have achieved, this is not your primary identity. God has given you a place and a title among the governments and organizations of men whether they be local, state, national or international, but there will be times when you will need to consciously remind yourself that you are a citizen of Heaven before you are a citizen of any country on earth.

And yet, by the same token, if you feel like you lack any real role or position or influence in this city - remember that your status as a child of God is far more significant than anything you could ever attain on earth. There is both a Psalm (84:10) and a modern worship song based on that Psalm, that speak of the value of simply being a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord for, "better is one day in [God's] courts than a thousand elsewhere."

So stay focused on the kingdom of God and your place in it even as you serve in the kingdoms of men. Don't let the things of this earth keep you from what God may want to do. Nehemiah is about to receive news that will change everything – his position in the government is about to take a massive back seat to his position in God's kingdom because although things are going great in the citadel where he's serving the king, the same thing isn't true back in Jerusalem, that city he still cares about:

3 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."

That news hits Nehemiah like a ton of bricks. Now remember, there was no CNN, no Twitter, no Facebook, no SnapChat – there was no way to get instant news updates on what was going on a thousand miles away. But these men have just returned, they saw it with their own eyes. Jerusalem, the holy city, is still in a sad state. It's been 140 years and nothing has really been improved and with the walls broken down, it's like the city is a house with all the doors and windows busted out. There's no safety, no security, no sense of "home."

Many years ago I was part of the initial peace-keeping force that went into the small country of East Timor. East Timor had just voted for it's independence from Indonesia and when the vote passed a bunch of militia's, gangs, and thugs went through the country stealing anything of value and killing people in retaliation for the separation.

We arrived just days after the violence began and already the capital city was a ghost town. We found a UN Land Rover that someone had stolen – it had a busted out back window, and we stole it back, hotwired it, and used it for our transportation. As you drove down the streets all the people were gone – they had fled to avoid the fighting, and all the buildings were empty – you could see what had been stores, banks, offices, houses and neighborhoods, but everything was empty and there were still fires burning.

As we set up operations in Dili, the capital, over the course of several weeks and then months, people slowly began to return, like the people returning to Jerusalem, but what they found when they arrived were only shells of what once was. Everything had been gutted. Think of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina – the city had been completely devastated. Where do you begin to rebuild? And with what resources? Everything of value is gone.

Hananiah has told Nehemiah that Ezra and those who went with him had rebuilt the altar and done some work on the Temple, but the over all picture of the city was still just sad.

And how did Nehemiah react to this news? Remember, he's got a pretty good gig going in the palace. Jerusalem is 1000 miles away, he's never been there, he has no personal ties to the city, and yet:

4 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.

God gripped his heart and burdened him for the city. He wept, he mourned, he fasted, and he prayed. Let me ask, has God ever given you that kind of a burden for a person, a people, a place, or a project?

I believe that He wants to. He wants us to have His heart. He wants us to be moved by the things that move Him. And that's what's happening here. Nehemiah is weeping over Jerusalem just like the prophets who foretold the fall of the city if it didn't repent and turn to God long ago before it was captured. And like Jesus would a few centuries later. God has a heart for the city of Jerusalem, and it's being reflected in Nehemiah. And because of that connection, that similarity of concern between God and Nehemiah, God is going to use this man to do something great in that city.

Brother and sisters, this same God is after your heart this morning as well. I believe that He wants to show you things that will make you sit down and weep, and mourn, and fast and pray. God wants to show you people and places and projects where there is a desperate need for Him. He wants to equip you to meet those needs, not in your own strength, but in His. And God wants to use you to do something about those needs.

Last week we said there are 2.5M people living in the greater DC area – how does God want to use YOU to make a difference in their lives? Did He put you in this city, in your neighborhood, at your school or job or gym, to make a difference for Him at such a time as this? I want you to think about that and think about your place in this city and this government.

Will you pray, *“God help me see the world the way you see it. Help me feel the way You feel. Help me value the things You value. God, keep me from getting caught up with life here in the citadel, and help me see how I can reach out.”?*

Because I absolutely guarantee you, there is someone or something or somewhere in need around you. And maybe God has allowed you to be the one to see it or hear about it because He wants to use you to do something. Just ask Him to open your eyes, and open your ears to hear the report. Be willing to let Him grab your attention and be willing to say yes to whatever He brings your way.

In the coming weeks we'll see how He used Nehemiah in Jerusalem and it is my hope and prayer that you'll gain a greater understanding of how He wants to use you too.

So as we celebrate communion this morning, ask God to give you the kind of burden He has given to Nehemiah. Take time to remember what God has done for us, and perhaps, in the process of remembering all that He has saved you from, He will also show you all He has saved you for.

Now, maybe you're here this morning and you say, you know what? I'm the one that's broken down. My life feels more like the city of Jerusalem than Nehemiah – I'm in great distress and reproach, I feel like the walls of my life have been broken down and burned, I feel like I'm a mess that needs to be rebuilt. Well, if that's so, then maybe it's time you met the master carpenter.

Jesus created the whole world in the first place and then came to earth as the son of a construction worker in Israel a few thousand years ago.

He grew up going to Jerusalem and then gave up His life on the cross in that same city so that God could forgive us for all our sins and begin the process of rebuilding our lives the way they were supposed to be. Why not let this morning, the first Sunday of the New Year, mark the day when you said – God, I surrender to you. Please, come in, take over my life, and rebuild me from the ground up. Forgive me of my sins and use me for Your good plans.

If you want to do that, just pray with me right now.

Heavenly Father, I come to You today as a broken down sinner. I ask You to forgive me of my sins through Christ Jesus, and to show me how to love and serve You from this day forward, and Father, I surrender my heart to You – burden me with the things that burden You, and use me whenever, wherever, and for whatever You see fit, I am yours. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.

And for the rest of us, take this time as the communion elements are passed out and ask God – what does He want you to see, or hear, or know about? What does He want to burden you with? And how does He want to use you? He has redeemed you for a purpose. It's not enough to simply be saved; you are saved in order to be used. But where? Ask that question this morning.