

NEHEMIAH 1

1.The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, when I was in the citadel of Susa,

We do not find out the significance of Nehemiah until the very end of this first chapter. The date mentioned would have been between mid-November and mid-December 446 BC. The “twentieth year” mentioned here was the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes, who reigned from 464 BC to 423 BC.

Susa was where the Persian Kings went to spend winter, one of the three Persian capitols.

2.Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

Nehemiah takes the opportunity to quiz one of his kinsmen on the state of his people back in Jerusalem. Note right from the start of the book that Nehemiah is not simply concerned about bricks and mortar – he is concerned about “the Jewish remnant that survived the exile”, and had returned to Jerusalem after Cyrus’ decree (see the book of Ezra).

There is a great theological understanding which lay behind Nehemiah’s inquiry. He knew that the hopes for the people of God lay with the remnant. God had always promised he would not abandon his people, and that if he had to bring judgement on them for breaking the covenant, he would spare a remnant (Isaiah 10:20-22).

3. 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.”

The news Nehemiah hears is not good. As we know from reading Ezra a remnant has returned and rebuilt the temple, but the land still lay shattered. The walls (important for the security and identity of the city and the people) lay in ruins. More importantly the people themselves are shattered and “in great

trouble and disgrace”, rather than being the people of God and bearing his name.

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 is often used as a great example of leadership and activity, and he is that, but note where he begins. He weeps, mourns, fasts, and prays. This is what lay behind all his activity. Though he was away from Jerusalem, he identified with the work of God going on there, and mourned when God’s glory was not being seen through his people. This weeping is characteristic of those who are concerned for God’s glory and for people (see Luke 19:41-44, Ps 119:136).

He was also not prepared to rush headlong into activity to try and solve the problem. Nehemiah knew that any reversal of fortunes would only come if God acted, and he needed God to show the way forward.

5. 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,

Notice that Nehemiah begins his prayer by stressing his trust in God’s sovereignty. When things are going wrong, nothing else is of any comfort. He is the God who has entered into covenant with Israel (notice he is called “LORD”, the covenant name for God). Nehemiah can call on God because of the relationship He has established and the promises he has made – but notice as well that there is no complacency here. This is a prayer for mercy as Nehemiah knows Israel have not “loved him and obeyed his commands”.

6. 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.

The mention of God’s covenant in verse 5 leads to an acknowledgement of the people’s failure in verses 6 and following.

One striking feature of this prayer is the deep personal identity Nehemiah has with the people of God. He does not pray from a professional distance, he includes himself in these confessions (notice the “we”). He includes himself and his family in these prayers. He knows he needs mercy.

Notice the fact that this prayer is not a one off for Nehemiah “day and night”. What we probably have here is a sample prayer of what Nehemiah was praying for 4 months (see 2:1).

7. We have acted wickedly towards you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. 8. Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations,

Nehemiah knows he comes empty handed to the LORD and the people of God deserve to be in the state they are in. The exile was not simply the result of a dominant Babylon, but a covenant curse promised by God if the people were to turn away from him (see Deuteronomy 28).

9. but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled peoples 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.

However, there is hope! God has also promised that if his people returned to him, he would show mercy and restore them. Nehemiah brings God’s promises to God and asks that he will be faithful to them. As Derek Kidner says “Nehemiah is empty handed, but not uninvited”. As we will see going through the book, the prayers in Nehemiah are all steeped in scripture, as so can teach us about how to pray.

In this prayer Nehemiah is doing what many leaders in the Bible do, by standing in the breach interceding on behalf of a faithless people before God. Remember Moses in Exodus 32-34 (and Psalm 106:23) – although the principle continues (remember Paul’s agony in Romans 9).

The fact that God disciplines his faithless people and restores his repentant people is not a truth to be dismissed as something only relevant to this part of Biblical history. As we read Jesus’ warnings and promises to the seven churches

in Revelation 2 and 3 we see that faithlessness leads to discipline (and even removal of churches), and repentance leads to close fellowship with Jesus and blessing.

10. They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11. O Lord, be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name.

In this verse Nehemiah uses words from Deuteronomy 9:29 to call on God not to reject his people and the work he is doing through them (significantly they were words used by Moses when he was interceding for the people after the golden calf incident). Notice the emphasis of the word “your”. God’s work and glory is at stake.

Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.”

I was cupbearer to the king.

It is only at the end of this chapter that we find out the significance of Nehemiah. He has an important role in the court of King Artaxerxes. The cupbearer had close access to the King, he was a high official who had the task of choosing and tasting the Kings wine to check it was not poisoned. It was an influential role. Has God raised Nehemiah to this position for “such a time as this?” It is clear from the last clause of the prayer that Nehemiah is thinking along those lines.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

These are only suggested questions. Remember, if they don’t make sense to you, or if you can’t rephrase them if someone was to ask you to, don’t use them!

What does Nehemiah question Hanani about? What does this tell us about the historical setting of the book of Nehemiah?

What reply does Nehemiah get? What is Nehemiah’s response to the news he gets?

What does Nehemiah's response in verse 4 tell us about the kind of man Nehemiah is?

Look up Ps 119:136, and Luke 19:41-44. Is Nehemiah's response unique? Is there a place for this kind of weeping in the church today?

With what aspect of God's character does Nehemiah begin his prayer? Why is that a comfort in difficult times?

How does Nehemiah show that he takes his share of responsibility for the sin of God's people in this prayer? How does this challenge the way we might view the weaknesses of the church? – *We don't stand apart from the church criticising it, but we weep over our own failures and sins first*

What is Nehemiah doing in verses 8-10? Surely God knows all this historical detail already? Why is praying what God has promised important?

In what sense are these warnings and promises true for us today?

How does Nehemiah's prayer suggest that he is ready to be the answer to his prayer?