

Session 1

July 22, 2018

PRAY

Nehemiah 1:1-11

The book of Nehemiah picks up where Ezra leaves off. Following seventy years of Babylonian captivity, the Jews were once again allowed to return to their beloved homeland and its capital city of Jerusalem. Ezra records the first two phases of this return, and Nehemiah tells of the third and final phase.

The account of Nehemiah has several distinct features that set the book apart. Although the book of Esther comes after it in the Bible, the events of Nehemiah make it the last historical book chronologically. And unlike Ezra (a scribe), or Malachi (a prophet), Nehemiah was a lay-person; a somewhat ordinary kind of guy who was moved to accomplish some very extraordinary things. The lesson for us is that one person—fully committed to God—can have a tremendous impact for His kingdom.

The condition of God’s city (vv. 1-3). Now that the exile was over, there was more freedom to move among the cities and provinces of the region. Nehemiah was in the service of the court, serving as the cup-bearer for the king (1:11). While he had personal security and status (as long as no one attempted to poison the king!), he was quite concerned about his countrymen and the land of his ancestry. Thus, when a member of his family arrived in his city, Nehemiah was quick to inquire about the news from back home. Of particular interest was the condition of the capital city and the wellbeing of those who had returned from foreign lands once permission had been granted for their return. Ezra describes the rebuilding of the temple (completed around 515 BC), and the return of displaced Jews that began some twenty years later and continued on and off for the next decades. The second major wave of returning countrymen wasn’t until about 458 BC. It was likely those pilgrims that Nehemiah was asking about.

The report from the visiting countrymen was not good. Regarding the people, the report said they were *in great trouble and disgrace*. Taken together, the phrase indicates they were the objects of scorn and ridicule by the neighboring nations. God’s people, once chosen for His blessing, now hung their heads in shame. The city walls were described as *broken down*, and its gates *burned down*. Every indication is that the once glorious city was in ruins; in much the same condition as it was left by the Babylonians a hundred years before. With the walls themselves fallen down, the condition of the gates was of little consequence. But the gates stand for access and security. The fact they had been—and remained—burned down was doubly painful.

The commitment of God’s intercessor (vv. 4-11). That Nehemiah’s response was heartbreak rather than anger shows what kind of man Nehemiah was. His prayer was marked by five key characteristics: *Passion* (v. 4), demonstrated by days of fasting and prayer; a *plea* (vv. 5-6, 11) for God to see God’s servant, hear his prayers, and grant grace to the king at the appropriate time; *repentance* (v. 6-7) toward his own personal sin and on behalf of the sins of his nation; a recounting of *promises* (vv. 8-9) that God had long ago made to His people; and a reminder that Israel was God’s holy *possession* (vv. 10-11), chosen by God and delivered by His might.

Overall, two characteristics of Nehemiah's prayer life serve as valuable reminders for us. First, *Nehemiah was already prepared to pray*. His concern for his countrymen was not new. His willingness to intercede with prayer and fasting over a period of days didn't happen suddenly. He already carried with him a heavy heart and strong devotion toward his people. Second, *Nehemiah was prepared to act*. Verse 11 indicates that Nehemiah had come to some personal conclusions through his praying. His prayer was one of intercession, but also of preparation. Nehemiah was going to see the king!