

NEHEMIAH

Part 1: “A God-sized Vision for Restoration”

Nehemiah 1:1–11

By David A. Ritchie

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Scripture Reading

“The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, ‘The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.’ As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, ‘O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.’ Now I was cupbearer to the king” (Nehemiah 1:1–11, ESV).

Introduction

Today, we are starting a new journey through the Old Testament book of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah is about the people of God accomplishing something extraordinary together in a time of great brokenness, weakness, and sorrow. It is a story of what the people of God can do when they unite together and work toward **“A God-sized Vision for Restoration.”**

The story of Nehemiah takes during what is known as the *post-exilic* period in the Old Testament. It is a story that takes place after the time of exile.

Israel was once a glorious and flourishing ancient kingdom. But eventually, this once glorious kingdom was divided and destroyed. As a result, the people of God were scattered across the nations in exile.

At the time of Nehemiah, the time of exile has ended. The Persian King Cyrus had allowed the Jewish people to return to their ancestral homeland and even rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

But return from exile is anticlimactic. The temple is rebuilt, yes. But it is a pale shadow of the temple built by Solomon. Some Jews return to Jerusalem, but the Holy City is still in ruins.

Yet, in this setting, one of the most remarkable and inspiring stories of restoration and renewal in the Bible occurs.

And as we delve into surveying the landscape of the book of Nehemiah, I want us to keep in view *two layers* of how this story applies to us as the people of God today.

Firstly, we should look at Nehemiah's love for his city and let it inspire us to be a people who love our own city. You are not in Amarillo by accident. God has providentially sent you and me to this time, this place, and this historical moment.

As God's people we are called to be agents of healing and restoration wherever there is brokenness in our city. We are called to be repairers of the breach (cf. Isa 58:12). We are to seek the welfare of the city God has sent us to and pray on its behalf (cf. Jer 29:7).

And there *is* brokenness in our city. According to the *2020–2021 Community Status Report*:

- Potter and Randall Counties have uniquely high rates of school suspensions, which indicates challenges and hardships for our area's youth.
- There is an economic trend in our city in which the rich are getting richer, the poor are getting poorer, and the middle class is shrinking, which will create increased economic instability.
- Not even counting COVID, our area has been on an upward climb in both physical and mental unhealth, including a tragically high suicide rate.
- We've also seen high child abuse rates, despite those rates decreasing elsewhere in the state.
- Just last week, we saw an outbreak of violence, with the city of Amarillo witnessing nine shootings in the period of only a few days.

Amarillo is a wonderful city. But there are places where the walls are broken. And, as the people of God, we are called to seek peace where there is pain.

But there is another layer to the Nehemiah story that deserves our attention; and that is the *symbolic* significance of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is the place where God revealed himself to Abraham as the God who provides (Gen 22). It is the place where God dwelt among his people (1 Kgs 8). It is the place where Jesus bled, died, rose again, and ascended to heaven. It is the place where the Church was filled with the Holy Spirit and then sent into the nations with the gospel (Acts 1). In Revelation, God describes New Jerusalem as the place where God will make all things new, and death will be no more (Rev 21).

Jerusalem is, thus, a representation of God dwelling in and among his people and moving through them to bring about his kingdom on earth. It can function as a representation of the *Church*. And this symbolism brings forth a fascinating perspective on the story of Nehemiah that is immediately relevant to us today.

For the Church in our time is in a place of great brokenness and weakness. Across the nation, the Church has been ransacked by the pandemic and political division. Like post-exilic Jerusalem, some have begun to return, but it is only a remnant.

At the same time, it has been a truly apocalyptic season in which hypocrisy, abuse, compromise, and scandal have been unveiled within the church, especially among some high-profile Christian leaders. Here too, it seems like the walls of Jerusalem have been broken down and the gates have been burnt by fire. And the hard task of restoring the credibility of the Church's witness is a clear and present need.

So, with that said, you might not have come into this room caring a lot about the post-exilic era of the Old Testament. You might not care about the politics of the Persian empire or the historical happenings of Jerusalem in the fourth century B.C. But, nevertheless, if we have eyes to see and ears to hear, we will discover that we have *a lot* to learn from the words of Nehemiah.

Nehemiah will teach us how to seek the welfare of the city of man while bearing faithful witness to the city of God. Nehemiah will inspire us to bring healing to the places of brokenness in Amarillo, as well as inspire us to restore the integrity of the people of God, where that integrity has been wounded and tarnished. And I hope and pray that Nehemiah will help us collectively see a God-sized vision for what it means to be the Church.

Today, we will take a closer look at how such a vision comes about.

Exposition

1.) From Pain to Prayer

Nehemiah's story begins in a place of comfort and privilege. Nehemiah has done well in life. Once a son of exiles, he now lives in capital city of the empire of Persia and moves in powerful circles (Neh 1:1). He is the "*cupbearer to the king*," meaning that he tasted the

king's wine to make sure it was not poisoned and stood alongside the king when he was seated at court. This shows that, even though Nehemiah was Jewish, the Persian king literally trusted Nehemiah with his very life. In modern terms, Nehemiah is like a well-trusted presidential advisor.

But then another Jewish man named Hanani returns to Persia from visiting Jerusalem. Nehemiah wants to know how the Holy City is fairing now that the exiles have returned home (1:2). You get the sense he is expecting to hear good news. But, instead, what he hears grieves him to the core.

Only a "remnant" of people has returned (1:3). Their lives are threatened by surrounding enemies, and they live in profound shame. The city walls are broken down in ruins, and the gates are destroyed by fire. Nehemiah's comfortable bubble is shattered by the painful reality of the hardship his people are enduring.

But how does Nehemiah steward his pain?

He could have distracted himself with busywork, and ignored the problem. I'm sure, as a government official, he had plenty on his plate. He could have gotten mad and shifted the blame. He could have become overwhelmed with despair. He could have become cynical and resentful. But he does none of this. Instead, he allows his pain to lead him to a place of prayer.

Look back at our text: *"As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I said, 'O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments'"* (Neh 1:4–5).

Nehemiah runs to prayer as a way to shift outside of a self-centered perspective on his situation. He could have focused on the bigness of his pain. But, instead, he focuses on the bigness of his God.

He praises God for his greatness and glory. He thanks God for his goodness and his faithfulness. And in so doing, he is able to start seeing God's perspective.

But if we are honest, Nehemiah's first instinct is not our first instinct. When we see problems in our city or within the Church, it is all too easy to criticize the problem but be satisfied with saying it is someone else's fault and someone else's responsibility.

Particularly, within this unique moment in church history in America, I think there are some unique temptations at play. There has been a great deal of scandal and compromise among church leaders in America, and I have noticed two unhelpful but very common responses.

Some Christians have grown *defensive*. That is, we refuse to see where the Church has at times been overly influenced by the culture around us. So, when leaders are exposed for abusive behavior, sexual sin, or corruption, we get angry at those within and outside of

the church who would bring such matters into the light. We ignore, minimize, or relativize the sin, and it tarnishes the witness of the Church. This is like the people of Jerusalem who do not want to acknowledge that there is a problem. They are fine with sin and the *status quo*.

Another unhelpful response that is very common among younger Christians is to deconstruct their faith. These Christians see all too well the places where the Church has been guilty of hypocrisy and it drives them to doubt and despair. As a result, they often leave the church and some will even abandon their faith. This would be like a person saying the solution for Jerusalem is to tear down the broken walls, abandon the temple, and go live among the Babylons and the Persias of the world.

To this I want to say: I, too, have been grieved by the compromises of the church. I understand the temptation to want to ignore our problems or grow cynical and abandon the Church.

But here is the thing I can't ignore: despite the Church's failures and despite our greatest doubts, Jesus Christ has risen from the dead!

He is a God who is glorified in bringing beauty from our brokenness and life out of death. And because of this, hopelessness is not an option.

That doesn't mean our task is easy. If you have ever remodeled a house, you know that there are two easy things to do with a broken home. It is easy to ignore the problem. And it is easy to tear things down.

It is very hard work to try and restore that which is broken. But that is what we are called to do. And the only way we can go about such a task with hope is by reminding ourselves through prayer that our God is infinitely powerful and infinitely good.

2.) From Hardship to Humility

The next move Nehemiah makes is very counterintuitive to people in our culture. He doesn't ask for anything. He doesn't pray that God would bring judgment upon the enemies of the Jewish people. Instead, he humbly confesses his own sins and the sins of his people.

Look at the words of Nehemiah's prayer, *"...let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather*

them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there” (Neh 1:6–9).

You can tell from his prayer that Nehemiah has been reading his Bible. As a result, Nehemiah is able to see and interpret the brokenness of Jerusalem through the lens of God’s revealed word.

The problem is not that the Jewish people’s lack of political power. The problem isn’t the enemies from foreign nations. The problem is that the Jewish people were unfaithful to their covenant with God!

“*Covenant*” is one of those fancy, important, but unfamiliar terms of the Bible. Simply defined, a covenant is a sacred promise that defines a relationship, typically between a king and his people.

Centuries before the time of Nehemiah, God had delivered the nation of Israel from slavery through the leadership of Moses. After he rescued and redeemed them, he made a covenant with them by giving them his laws. If Israel obeyed these laws, God would dwell among them, and they would be blessed. If Israel disobeyed these laws, they would endure judgment and exile. Sadly, Israel disobeyed God’s laws and broke the covenant.

How did they do this? They worshipped the false gods of the nations around them, they committed injustice against the weak and the oppressed, they ignored the laws of God and did what was right in their own eyes, and, when they were threatened with judgment, they put their hope in the kingdoms of man rather than putting their hope in God.

Nehemiah understands the history of his people through the lens of Scripture. And he understands that the work of restoration must humble confession.

Think about how extraordinary this is: Nehemiah *did not* personally commit any of the sins that led to the destruction of Jerusalem. Nehemiah was born in exile! Yet, he humbles himself before God and says, *“I will take responsibility for the sins of my people. I will confess these sins. I will commit to walk in repentance and righteousness. The change I seek will start first in my own heart!”*

I wonder what it would look like for the people of God to model our response to the brokenness in our world after Nehemiah?

I tell you what our culture has plenty of—we have plenty of prideful people pointing fingers. I tell you what our culture lacks—people who are willing to be humble and confess where they have been wrong.

And I will tell you this, those who have been humbled by the cross of Jesus Christ should always be the first to confess our sins and sins of our culture. If we understand the gospel, then we know that salvation isn’t earned by our perfection anyway. We can let go of pride, and we can come boldly before God’s throne of grace.

So, I think it is good and godly for the people of God to confess our sins and the sins of our people. I think it is good and godly to confess how we and our culture have devalued the sacredness of human life from the womb to the tomb. I think it is good and godly to confess how we and our culture put so much hope in politics and the kingdoms of men. I think it is good and godly to confess how we and our culture have grown increasingly polarized, hateful, and divided.

And I can tell you why I think confession is such a gift. Biblically speaking, confession is not self-condemnation. Confession is coming into agreement with God about what is right and true. Confession is laying down our burdens before a God who gives rest to those who labor and are heavy laden (Matt 11:28). Confession is humbling ourselves under the mighty hand of God that he might exalt us (1 Pet 5:6).

I remember ten years ago, right around this time, I started meeting with some of the leaders of what was then called West Amarillo Christian Church. The church had gone through a long time of hardship. Attendance was down. Giving was down. The building had several problems that the church could not afford to fix. And the church was without a pastor.

Through a mutual friend, I had been contacted by the church to talk about whether or not I would be interested in being the new pastor. And I remember meeting with a handful of leaders. They asked me lots of questions and I shared my heart and my vision with them. But the thing that really astonished me was that in the middle of the meeting, someone stopped and said, “Can we just pray that God would restore our church?”

And as I knelt and prayed alongside this group of people, I could feel God’s hand upon us. At the time, we did not have money, but those prayers revealed what this church did have—*humility*.

And God performed a miracle of restoration at this church.

Men and women can do a lot of things with fame, resources, and strategic thinking. But God can do *anything* with a people who will humble themselves before him.

3.) From Confession to Clear Vision

After Nehemiah humbles himself and fasting in prayer, he is able to see his situation in light of God. Almost at once, he knows what needs to be done. His vision is clear and simple. He needs to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

Now, there are a lot of things that go into this. Nehemiah needs permission. He needs the provision of financial and material resources. He’s going to need the authority to carry out this task, and he is going to have to come up with a plan.

But all of this is meant to accomplish one goal—*rebuild the walls of Jerusalem*.

So too, the vision for what it means to be the people of God is not complicated and novel. We are called not to the new, but to the *true*. And our true calling is to *make disciples of Jesus*.

Now, there are a lot of things that go into making disciples, especially in an age of overwhelming distraction. We are going to have to teach the truth of God's word in a culture where everyone wants to be their own authority. We are going to have to call people out of sin and individualism and into holiness and Christian community. We are going to have to invite people to participate in something that is cosmically bigger than the American Dream of comfort and consumerism.

We're going to need to love our city, and we are going to need to be a faithful church.

But it all comes back to that one clear call to make disciples of Jesus. That's how we will see restoration in the Church. That is how we will see restoration in our city.

Conclusion

Now, there we before we conclude our time today, there is only one reason that Nehemiah's God-sized vision for restoration can become a reality. And we see that reason in the last sentence of chapter 1: "*Now I was cupbearer to the king*" (Neh 1:11b).

Nehemiah has been providentially placed at the right hand of the king. And look what he does with his position: "*In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, 'Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.'* Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, 'Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?' Then the king said to me, 'What are you requesting?' So I prayed to the God of heaven. And I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it.' And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), 'How long will you be gone, and when will you return?' So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time. And I said to the king, 'If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy.' And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me" (Neh 2:1-8).

Nehemiah has been given a place to intercede to the king, when the people of Jerusalem could not intercede for themselves. He is able to acquire provision that his people cannot acquire for themselves. He is granted authority and power over the rulers of Jerusalem, despite the weakness and broken condition of his people.

And in the same way, the only reason we can ever have hope in the midst of brokenness is that right now, in heaven, we have an Advocate who stands at the right hand of the King of all kings!

That's why Paul prays in Ephesians 1 *that we would know* "...the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all" (Eph 1:19–23).

Jesus has provided for our redemption.

He has been granted all authority over the powers of darkness that oppress us.

Jesus Christ is the true and better Nehemiah. He is the one who has lived and pleads for us. He is the one who will not just build—*he will bring forth*—a New Jerusalem.

And in the true and better Jerusalem that Jesus brings, the power of death will be made no more. All tears will be wiped away. All things will be made new. And the gates will be eternally open for people of all nations.

But until that day comes, let us be emissaries of that kingdom. Let us represent Jesus in the way we love our city and in the way we embody what it means to faithfully be the Church. AMEN.

Discussion Questions for Gospel Community

- 1.) Read all of Nehemiah 1 and summarize what happens in this story in your own words.
- 2.) Notice how Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1 begins with worship. Why is it so important to worship God and consider his glory when we pray? When we pray this way, how does it change our perspective?
- 3.) Notice how Nehemiah confesses his own sin and the sin of his people in this prayer. Why is this act of confession so important? What does healthy confession look like today in the life of the people of God?
- 4.) Now, read Nehemiah 2:1–8 and summarize what happens in this scene. How does Nehemiah prefigure the work of Jesus in this passage (hint: look at Ephesians 1:19–22)?
- 5.) How might the story of Nehemiah inspire us to seek restoration in both our city and the church at large? How has God providentially placed you to be a part of his work of restoration?