

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth on Nehemiah 1 on July 5, 2015 at Victory of the Lamb.

Series: Nehemiah

Today's Focus: A Broken Heart Over Broken Walls

"Don't Panic. Pray...and Plan!"

In the name of Jesus Christ who once said, "If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:32).



This week Sarah walked into my home office, I saw the look on her face, and I knew something was wrong. Then I saw her cracked iPhone {pic}. Oh...my heart sank. Not even a year old. Of course we didn't get the extended protection plan either. You ever have that sinking feeling? Sometimes you see it just looking at a person's face. Sometimes you can tell it in their tone of voice the moment you ask, "How's it going?"

Well that's the question that Nehemiah once asked—"How's it going?"—except not about an iPhone of course but about the status of his homeland and its capital city Jerusalem.

Let me tell you a little bit about Nehemiah and the book of the Bible that bears his name. One neat thing is that his name means "The LORD comforts." Nehemiah—that's a pretty cool name. But otherwise Nehemiah seems at first glance like a pretty ordinary guy. At least...he wasn't a priest. He wasn't a prophet. He wasn't a soldier or a king. He was a cupbearer to the king of Persia actually. You know what a cupbearer is? The guy who'd taste wine for the king to make sure it wasn't poisoned. That was part of his job. But this also meant he was a trusted advisor of the king almost like a member of our president's cabinet. So basically you could think of Nehemiah as a layperson in the church today who happened to hold a significant position in the government in Washington. It's just that in Nehemiah's case he was a Jewish man living in the city of Susa in the kingdom of Persia a thousand miles away from Jerusalem. He lived in what is modern day southern Iran in the year 444 B.C.



And do you know why he lived there? Because here's the story. His family had been taken captive as prisoners of war about 150 years earlier when the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed Jerusalem in 586 B.C. You can read about this in the Bible. But then the Persians rose to power and overthrew the Babylonians in 539 B.C. Their king Cyrus allowed many of the Jews to return home.

This was awesome. And so some Jews returned to Jerusalem to rebuild God's specially chosen nation. That was about 100 years before Nehemiah's day. And after some setbacks, the Jews who returned to Jerusalem rebuilt the temple. Worshiping there they began to anticipate again that one day a Savior would be born according to God's ancient promise. And so it seemed from a distance like things would be going pretty well over there back in the homeland. But then one day Nehemiah's brother, Hanani, just came from there along with some other folks and Nehemiah asked him, "How's it going?" It was a simple question, but here's what happened...

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 2 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.

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."

You understand the conversation? Nehemiah says, "So how's it going, Hanani?" Hanani says, "Not good, bro. You should see it. It's a disgrace. There are still piles of rubble all over the place. The walls are broken down. Any one of our enemies could just waltz in there and ransack it again. And the people are in trouble, Nehemiah. They're demoralized. And they're not turning to God. They're not following his laws. They're following the ways of the heathen world around them. They're adopting their values. It's a sad spiritual situation." So you get the picture? The walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the people were in sad shape.

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.

So how did Nehemiah react? Well his gut level reaction was to grieve. Even though he lived a thousand miles away his heart broke over the broken down walls of Jerusalem. Of course what really broke Nehemiah's heart was the broken down spiritual condition of the Jewish nation. The people were in trouble. Now maybe at first it seems a little hard to understand why he felt this way until we remember that it was through the Jewish nation that God promised the Savior would be born one day. And it was in Jerusalem alone where sacrifices were to be offered at the temple. These sacrifices foreshadowed the forgiveness which one day God's Son the Messiah would accomplish on the cross through his sacrifice. But at this time the people were disgraced and we'll learn more about that as we go on in this series over the next couple weeks. And so you could say that Nehemiah recognized and felt the tension between the reality of what is and what he knew could and should be. This broke his heart.

Friends, what breaks your heart? What in our country, in the church, in your family, or in our community is causing your heart to break right now? Does your heart break over the 55 million babies that have been murdered since Roe v Wade in 1973? Does your heart break over the Supreme Court's recent decision to ignore God's Word and change God's definition of marriage? Does your heart break over the 9 people senselessly murdered at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal church in Charleston two weeks ago because of racism? Does your heart break at the growing epidemic of heroin and painkiller addiction not only in Milwaukee but here in the suburbs and our local community? Does your heart break at the atrocities committed by terror groups like ISIS in radical countries around the world?

This weekend of course we here in our country celebrate Independence Day. We are a free country— God be praised! This is truly a reason to celebrate by thanking God for the freedoms of religion and speech and assembly that we enjoy which so many on this planet do not have. But as we celebrate our freedom this weekend, what are we also celebrating in our country? Our freedom to overindulge with God's gift of food or alcohol because we have the means to do so? Our freedom to express God's gift of sexuality casually and in ways God never intended? Our autonomy to decide to use our time to do

whatever we want so long as it doesn't require any self-denial, any struggle against temptation, or any effort to seek God's will by studying his word?

And if, like Nehemiah, your heart breaks over the broken down walls...what do you do? Do you get angry and make threats? A guy from Tomah, WI was arrested for threatening to kill the president when he was visiting La Crosse this week. Is that right? Absolutely not. That is sinful and wrong. But do you immediately point fingers, place blame, or curse others with the same bitter spirit? Do you immediately take to social media and rant...trolling message boards and firing off poorly thought out and completely loveless comments? Or do you throw up your hands in panic for the future? Or... do you do instead what Nehemiah did? Listen to how he reacted...

5 Then I said: "LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 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 family, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

So what did Nehemiah do? He didn't panic. He prayed. And I hope you caught this. He confessed that he was part of the problem. He didn't stand apart from the people like, "Boy I'm sure glad none of this affects me." He didn't stand above the people like, "I'm sure glad I'm better than those folks." He stood with the people. *I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.*

Friends, whatever else you personally have to confess today let's all admit that we Christians here in our country have become complacent. We've slacked off. We've cozied up to the idols of our day. We've forgotten that this country isn't our true home. Our citizenship is in heaven and so we're just here passing through. Yet we've gotten comfortable here. Too comfortable. And I'm not just talking those people out there. I'm talking about me. I'm talking about those of us who are within these four walls here today. I'm talking about you. We need to own this. We have not shared our faith with the courage of the apostles like we should. We have not loved people with the love of Christ like we should. We have not studied the Bible with the zeal of the Bereans like we should. We've allowed ourselves to be content with having just a superficial understanding of the Bible. So let's own it and confess it today.

But then like Nehemiah let's remember who we're confessing and praying to. Because think about it. Why would Nehemiah include himself with the sins of the nation—people living 1,000 miles away? I mean wouldn't it be easier just to point fingers at all those other people and stand at a distance? But instead he prays: *"LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 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.* Who is Nehemiah praying to? The LORD. All capital letters. From time to time I get to talk about this. Whenever you see the LORD in all caps that represents the special Hebrew name for God. It's a

special name because it reminds us that God always keeps his word and since he's the great and awesome God that means He's got the power to back up what he says. You see Nehemiah knew that the LORD had made a special covenant with His people, the Jews, and not because they were so special or better than anyone else. But purely out of grace, undeserved love. The LORD chose them so that through them other people would be drawn to learn about Him and keep His laws until one day He would keep His ultimate promise of sending His own Son, Jesus. He would be the promised Messiah who would come to seek and to save what was lost, all of us lawbreakers everywhere

So though his heart was broken over broken walls, Nehemiah didn't panic. He prayed, just like Jesus did when he walked this earth. And he too grieved over the people of Jerusalem because of their stubborn, persistent rejection of the Lord's prophets even in his day. And yet despite that stubbornness, despite their refusal to listen to God's word, Jesus remained steadfast in going to the cross where even as he died he showed true love to his enemies—offering his life for theirs to pay not just for some sins of some people, but all the sins of all people, national, public, personal and private. This is why God wants all people from every nation to humble themselves and instead of celebrating their independence from Him to admit their total dependence on Him. This is why He wants all people everywhere to turn to Him just like the prophet Ezekiel once said, *“Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?’”* (Ezekiel 33:11).

Nehemiah knew that the LORD had promised if they returned to him with humble and repentant hearts He would forgive them. He would save them. He would once again restore them as His people and use them to be a light to the rest of the world. Nehemiah didn't panic. He prayed to the LORD our God—the God of free of faithful grace.

8 “Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people 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.’

10 “They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

So what did Nehemiah pray for? Well we're going to see what his plan was next week. But it's interesting here just in closing. After confessing sin and praying for forgiveness, Nehemiah prays that God would give him success by granting him favor in the presence of the Persian king. You know what this means? It means Nehemiah wasn't just going to sit back and hope that God would do a miracle independent of him. He was asking God to give him an opportunity to work alongside him in going before the king. I think we can all learn something here. Nehemiah never prayed for God to just rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. What Nehemiah prays for is an opportunity to go rebuild it himself with God's

help. Friends, what opportunity are you praying for to be a part of God's plan? Don't panic, let's pray about it.

Dear LORD, the God of heaven and earth, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love even to this day. What grace! Thank you for keeping your promise in sending Jesus to be our Savior. We acknowledge today even on this Independence Day weekend that we are truly dependent on you—for your mercy, forgiveness, and all our blessings. Today we also pray that you would help each of us present here to catch a glimpse of the vision of what could and should be in our lives and in the world around us and we ask you to give us opportunities to play in a role in your work. Give us wisdom, discernment, and courage to do so. And wherever we need it because we're missing it, we dare to ask you to open our eyes and hearts to the needs in our community. If necessary cause our hearts to break at what we've barely yet begun to notice so that we your people as a church can help make a bigger difference here with your word. Let Your ears be attentive to this our humble prayer which we offer in the name of our Savior Jesus Christ, the sinless lamb who takes away the sin of the world. Amen.

My Next Steps

Point to Ponder: Dependence on God isn't weakness, it's true strength. Prayer is dependence on God that takes you beyond human possibilities!

Treasure to Share: "O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor..." (Nehemiah 1:11).

Action to Take: This Independence Day weekend, take a step back to recognize your dependence on God. What in our country, in the church, in your family, or in our community is causing your heart to break right now? Don't panic. Pray about it! Pray for an opportunity that God would use you to be part of the solution and plan as if you expect God to answer your prayers. Reread Nehemiah's prayer to jumpstart your thoughts if you need help getting started.