

## Praying About Problems

### Nehemiah 1

Why does Nehemiah react to what he heard about Jerusalem in such a dramatic way? After all, nothing his friends said was really news: the events of today's passage took place around 446 BC, but the walls of the city of Jerusalem had been torn down way back in 587 BC. So, why would Nehemiah get so upset about something that had happened over 140 years previously? That would be like us weeping and mourning for the people who died in the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878.

Now, that's not to minimize the problems of the people of Jerusalem. As we learned from our study of the Book of Ezra last summer, the Babylonians had conquered their ancestors and carried them off into exile. Years later, when the Persians in turn conquered the Babylonian empire, they had allowed the Jews to return to the Promised Land – and that return from exile began a little more than 90 years before the events of today's passage. Upon returning to Jerusalem, they began to rebuild their Temple, a project which had been completed in 516 BC, seventy years before Nehemiah's visitors came to call.

So, why was Nehemiah so upset? Well, without walls around the city, the people of Jerusalem still weren't safe. After all, city walls weren't just built to keep invading armies out. They also kept marauding bands of thieves at bay. Without city walls, whoever was living in Jerusalem was bound to be, as verse 3 says, in great affliction, in great distress. Nehemiah thus had good reason to be concerned.

But verse 3 also says the broken walls were a reproach to the people – that means they brought shame and disgrace on the people. Now, for such reproach to make sense to us, we have to take a quick look back in Ezra chapter 4. The beginning of that chapter chronicles some of the opposition the Jews had faced in the days when they had been trying to rebuild their Temple. It turns out that the enemies of the people of God had complained to the Persian officials, who had put the whole project on hold for some 16 years.

But in that same chapter is another, similar story of opposition to God's people, not in the days when they were trying to rebuild the temple, but a story that happened much closer to Nehemiah's own time, when the people first tried to rebuild the walls of the city. Ezra 4:6-23 thus flashes forward from the time that Cyrus was king of Persia, the time when the Temple began to be rebuilt, all the way to the time that Artaxerxes was king – the king that Nehemiah was serving as cupbearer. In other words, Ezra chapter 4 lets us know that, sometime earlier in his reign, Artaxerxes had already taken up the question of whether the walls around Jerusalem should be rebuilt.

And, just like in the earlier time when the Temple project was going on, the enemies of the people of God had complained to the Persian government, warning them not to allow the walls to be finished. So, what had Artaxerxes said when he had heard these warnings? When the enemies of God's people reminded him that Jerusalem had once been a powerful city, one that had led rebellions against other, previous empires, he had agreed with them that it might not be a good idea for the walls to be rebuilt. Thus, by the time today's passage opens up, King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah's king, had already made it plain that work on the city walls must cease until he himself issued a decree to allow them to be rebuilt.

So, that could be why Nehemiah was so upset when he heard the report of his friends in verse 3 – perhaps they were reporting that Artaxerxes’ decision had recently gone into effect. Perhaps it was only recently that the wall-building project had come to a halt, blocked by Artaxerxes himself. So, perhaps Nehemiah was so upset not only because of the people’s great need for safety – because of their great distress. Perhaps he was also so upset because the people of Jerusalem were not trusted by their Persian overlords, and were thus under their reproach. It could have been their shame, their disgrace in the eyes of the King of Persia that gave Nehemiah such distress, as verse 3 mentions.

But if that were the only problem, we might have expected Nehemiah to have had a different reaction to this news. After all, he was cupbearer to the King, a person of great influence, if not power. We might have expected Nehemiah to say something like this to his friends: “Don’t worry – I got this. I’ll put in a word with Arty – we’re tight. After all, I’m his cupbearer – that means he trusts me enough to taste his food before he eats it, to make sure he’s not poisoned. He’s sure to listen to me.”

Now, Nehemiah does in fact get around to asking the king to allow the walls to be rebuilt, but not right away. No, if we compare the first verse of chapter 1 with the first verse of chapter 2, we realize that Nehemiah waited between 3 to 5 months after he heard the news from Jerusalem before he decided to speak to the king.

Why did he wait so long to try to do something about the people’s distress? Why did he wait so long to try to remove the shame and disgrace from his people? Well, the problem wasn’t just that the Persian king didn’t trust the people of Jerusalem. No, the broken walls around the city were also a reminder that God Himself had punished His people for their sins.

For why, after all, had God allowed the Babylonians to conquer Jerusalem and tear down His Temple and carry His people off into exile so many years before? In verse 8, Nehemiah recalls what God had told Moses – “If you transgress, if you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations, the unbelieving peoples of the earth.” And the books of Kings and Chronicles, along with so many of the words of the prophets make it clear that the people of Israel had indeed been unfaithful to God. They had worshipped all sorts of pagan deities, placing their trust in their wealth or their military power, oppressing and taking advantage of the poor and needy. They had, as verse 7 summarizes, not kept the commandments of God. That means they weren’t just under the reproach of the King of Persia – they were under the reproach of God.

But that still doesn’t really explain Nehemiah’s reaction. After all, he was living in Susa, the capitol of the Persian Empire, the greatest empire the world had seen up to that point in history. He was cupbearer to the King of Persia, a position of great importance and influence. Why was he so concerned with what happened to the people more than 1000 miles away in Jerusalem? Why did their situation cause him to weep and mourn?

Moreover, it was his ancestors – people older than his grandparents or great-grandparents who had committed the sins that had prompted God to send the people off into exile over 140 years earlier. Why should Nehemiah be so upset over things that had happened so long ago, things that no one alive at the time could remember? Again, it would be like us crying and confessing the fact that our ancestors owned slaves, something that hasn’t been done since 1865.

So, why was Nehemiah so upset? Why did he weep and mourn and fast and pray for over 3 months?

In the first place, Nehemiah wept because of his connection to the people in far-off Jerusalem. Now, in those days, the connections among God's people were as much genealogical as they were theological – the long lists of names the Book of Ezra records of the exiles who returned to Jerusalem makes clear that they were closely related to those like Nehemiah's parents who had stayed behind. Nehemiah was thus reasonably concerned about the welfare of his cousins.

But with the coming of Christ, our connections are much broader and deeper, aren't they? For what did Paul tell us in our Responsive Reading this morning? Everyone who trusts in Christ is part of the same body, connected to one another just as closely as our hands are to our arms, just as tightly as our feet are to our legs. Thus, in a very real sense, the Turkish government hasn't just falsely accused and imprisoned an EPC Teaching Elder – it's one of us that's in jail. In a very real sense, that shooter didn't just attack some folks at First Baptist Church in Sutherland Springs, Texas – he attacked us. And those weren't just Iraqi Christians who were killed by ISIS and forced to flee into places like Lebanon – those were our people, our family.

So maybe the first lesson we need to learn from Nehemiah's weeping, fasting and prayer is the closeness of our family of faith. Thus, we should be encouraged to extend our concern and our prayers around the globe as well as around the corner, praying for and working to encourage all those who love and trust the Lord Jesus, no matter their race or denomination or citizenship.

But if Nehemiah has a lot to teach us about the unity of God's people regardless of distance, he also warns us of our unity where it comes to our most serious problem: sin. That's why he prays in the first person when he discusses the sins of his people, even those that had been committed well before he was even born. Nehemiah thus challenges us to take sin seriously and personally, in a sense to own the sin of the broader church, to confess our part in the sin of the culture around us. After all, no matter how much the Persian King may have trusted him as an individual, he shared in the reproach, the disgrace of the Jewish people. More seriously, because he was aware of the sin in his own life, he knew that he deserved to share in the reproach of his people in the eyes of God.

And isn't the same thing true of us? Oh, sure, it has become quite popular these days to condemn previous generations for their sin, especially the sin of institutional racism. Removing monuments to Confederate heroes seems to have become something of a national past-time. And it was indeed a sin for our ancestors to enslave over 2 million people. But one wonders what future generations will say about us modern Americans, who in the name of sexual freedom and convenience have turned a blind eye to the slaughter of over 60 million people who never had a chance to be born. Are we really any more pure than our ancestors were?

In a similar way, it's easy for us Evangelical Presbyterians to be smug about the orthodoxy of our own denomination and look down on other denominations that believe all sorts of weird things. But folks outside the church don't know the difference between a Presbyterian and a Pentecostal. When a Roman Catholic priest abuses young boys or Jim Bakker misuses funds from the offering plate or an EPC pastor cheats on his wife and abandons her – all us Christians get tarred with the same brush. When any of us Christians sin, we all share the shame.

Yes, that's a big part of the reason that Nehemiah spent well over three months in prayer before trying to do anything about his people's problems – he knew that he was just as guilty as his ancestors were, just as deserving of God's anger and punishment. He knew he wasn't doing what Jesus said was the essence of all the Law and the Prophets. He knew he wasn't loving the Lord his God with all his heart, all his soul, all his mind, and all his strength. He wasn't giving God everything he was and everything he had. And he knew he wasn't loving his neighbors just as much and in the same way that he was loving himself. No, he broke the Law of God every day, with everything he did and everything he left undone. And so do we.

But if Nehemiah challenges us to take the unity of the Body of Christ seriously, and if he warns us not to distance ourselves from the sin in the Church and the world, there's something else he can teach us, something wonderful. For the other reason Nehemiah spent over three months in prayer was because of what he knew about God.

And what does his prayer tell us about God? Well, he calls God the God of heaven, great and terrible, which means great and fearsome, awesome in power. You see, Nehemiah understood that it wasn't the power of the Persian King that would ultimately make a difference in the lives of the people of Jerusalem – no, it's the power of the God of heaven that really matters, the God Who called the heavens and the earth into existence with but a word. That God was the One Who would allow those walls to be built. Nehemiah thus knew that when he was praying, he was talking to the One Who could really solve His people's problems – that's why prayer was a lot more important than him going to see Artaxerxes.

But Nehemiah also prayed for another reason, because he knew something else about God: He knew about God's love and faithfulness. That's why in verse 10 he mentions how God redeemed His people by His mighty power. After all, the people whom God led out of Egypt weren't worthy of His love either – they spent 40 years in the wilderness bellyaching and complaining, insisting that God should have left them in Egypt. The people God had allowed to return to Jerusalem were no different – we've seen how the prophet Haggai had to light a fire under the people to get them back to work on the Temple project and stop spending so much time fixing up their own houses. And we with our half-hearted, self-centered obedience aren't any better, are we?

But in spite of their sin, God still chose to redeem His people because He loved them. In spite of their sin, God still kept His promises to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to bring them out of Egypt, into the Promised Land. In spite of their sin, God allowed them to return from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem. And so as Nehemiah asked God to take away the reproach of His people and allow the walls of Jerusalem to be rebuilt, he was trusting God's love and God's faithfulness to bless His people once again in spite of their sins.

That's why Nehemiah prayed, and prayed for over 3 months. He wasn't relying on his influence with the Persian King to get those walls around Jerusalem rebuilt. He wasn't even relying on his own righteousness to get God to answer his prayers. No, his prayer was solely dependent on God's love, on God's faithfulness, not on his own deserving.

And that's the good news for us today, no matter how great are our individual or cultural sins, no matter how big a mess we've gotten ourselves into. For we worship the same faithful, promise-keeping God. We worship a God Who has proved His love in an even more extravagant way than

Nehemiah understood, a God Who gave up His only son so that we might be forgiven. We worship a God Who has proved His power, not just by sending plagues upon the Egyptians and parting the Red Sea, but by raising Jesus from the dead. We worship a God Who has, in spite of our sins, made us part of the body of Christ, along with all believers across space and time.

So, as we look at the sin in our lives, as we look at the problems in our culture and in our Church, instead of falling into despair, let us join Nehemiah on our knees. Let us confess our own sin, even as we mourn the sin we see so clearly all around us. Let us look to God to forgive us and to bless us, to take away our reproach and meet our deepest needs. For, just like Nehemiah did, we can trust that our loving, gracious, faithful God will bless us in His way, in His time.