

June 11, 2017

National Presbyterian Church

Nehemiah: Building Through Prayer

Nehemiah 1:4-11

David Renwick

In the last couple of weeks we've been looking at one of the smaller books in the Old Testament part of the Bible, the Book of Nehemiah. It's the story of a Jewish official serving in the court of the King of Persia -- about 450 years BC, and experiencing a call from God to leave his day job, and lead an expedition to the city of Jerusalem (about 1000 miles) in order to repair the walls of the city, walls that had been destroyed by the Babylonians 150 years before Nehemiah's time (along with the Jerusalem temple).

Nehemiah's official title in the Persian court was "cupbearer to the king." But this was no mere servile position. Rather, Nehemiah was far more like *Chief of Security, the Head of the Secret Service, or FBI*. And his gifts would have been integrity and administration: you could trust him personally, and you could trust that he could get the job done -- whatever needed to be done.

And then out of the blue his life changes! God placed on his heart a profound grief for the broken walls of Jerusalem, and then the burden of leading the charge to repair those walls so that God's people could live there in peace and safety, and grow spiritually together.

The idea itself (both the location and the particular responsibility) was outside his comfort zone - -not something he did: he was a cupbearer, not a construction site supervisor; and he lived in Susa, a place of comfort, luxury; while Jerusalem, if he had to live there was in disrepair! The call was to a different way of life. AND YET, for all that, the gifts that God wanted him to use were the ones he'd developed over the years in the Persian court: gifts of

- Planning
- and Enlisting workers
- and Organizing locations and schedules
- and Dealing with setbacks and oppositions
- and Inspiring teams to get the work done
- Persevering until the job was done! Complete! Finished!

And so Nehemiah heeded the call!

- He obtained the permission of the king for a leave of absence
- He went to Jerusalem
- He planned, enlisted, organized, inspired and, despite setbacks, finished the rebuilding of the walls in 52 days!

Job Done! Complete! Finished! In some ways the story of Nehemiah is a profoundly secular story,

- It's not the story of a person called into the priesthood or pastoral ministry!
- It's just the story of a construction project with bricks and mortar -- in a secular world filled with intrigue and danger and destruction

But, of course, the story is not “merely secular”: it’s more than that. God’s name weaves its way through the opening chapters.

And the very first chapter sets the scene by sharing with **us that what energized and empowered Nehemiah** was not just his sense of call from God to this project, *but his ongoing relationship with God -- expressed primarily in prayer: in an ongoing conversation with his maker in which he was both (1) remarkably humble and (2) remarkably confident*

Nehemiah’s humility was expressed

- in the fact that he prayed at all!
- in the brokenness of his heart
- in his belief in the Greatness of God
- and in the confession of his sins

Let me read from Ch.1:4-7

⁴When I heard that the walls of Jerusalem were in ruins
I sat down and wept, and mourned for days,
fasting and praying before the God of heaven.
⁵I said, “O Lord (1) God of heaven, the (2) great and awesome God
who (3) keeps covenant and (4) steadfast love
with those who love him and keep his commandments;
⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open
to (5) hear the prayer of your servant
that I now pray before you
day and night for your servants, the people of Israel,
confessing the sins of the people of Israel,
which we have sinned against you.
Both I and my family have sinned.
⁷We have offended you deeply,
failing to keep the commandments, the statutes,
and the ordinances -- that you commanded your servant Moses.

Here’s this man, who could have seen himself as self-sufficient, a self-made man, justifiably proud of his own accomplishments (rising up to great prominence in a foreign court) with no need to pray at all.

Here is this man who could easily have been consumed with his own achievements or glory and honor.

But – what we find -- is that he’s consumed, instead not with his own but with God’s glory!

So, Nehemiah is humble enough to pray -- and when he prays, he’s humble enough to acknowledge, up front, first of all, who God is, and that before the standard of God’s righteousness -- like everyone else – he’s messed up! he’s a sinner. He prays:

“Both I and my family have sinned, we have offended you deeply, failing to keep your commandments, statutes and ordinances.”

He’s not full of himself, not defensive, but truthful.

In fact – like so many of the saints in Scripture, Nehemiah doesn’t cover up the darker or weaker side of his character.

- In the Old Testament there's Abraham (who has trouble telling the truth) and King David (who commits adultery and murder)
- and in the New Testament there's Simon Peter (who is boastful yet scared), and the Apostle Paul (always believing he's right!).

They all mess up. And yet God loves them and uses them in his service!

In Nehemiah's case, on one occasion (as we read) he was so angry and frustrated with the people blocking his way forward that he pours it all out before God in prayer: he wants them judged by God! He wants them out of his way! And he tells God so: HE'S NOT VERY NICE!! In prayer, he releases all his pent-up emotions to God (taking it out on God as many of the Psalms do! God can take it! In fact God would prefer we take it out on him than on each other)

So he knows himself, he knows the truth and its sad side.

- **He's humble.**
- **But he's also confident!!** He doesn't get stuck in the dirt for long!

He doesn't wallow in self-recrimination. He doesn't get stuck in guilt and blame. But he uses prayer to balance out his confession of weaknesses and failure with a remarkable confidence he has in God: both in the character of God and in the promises of God

Let me read again from Nehemiah 1 – (1:5, 8, 9):

O Lord (1) God of heaven,
the (2) great and awesome God
who (3) keeps covenant
and (4) steadfast love with those who love him
and keep his commandments;
⁸Remember (*a command that he dares say to God*)
the word that you commanded your servant Moses,
'If you are unfaithful,
I will scatter you among the peoples;
⁹*BUT if you return to me*
and keep my commandments and do them,
tho' your outcasts are under the farthest skies,
I will gather them from there
and bring them to the place (Jerusalem)
at which I have chosen to establish my name.'

This is what God has promised, and Nehemiah, no longer humble, speaks and prays as if he is almost wagging his finger in God's face, as if to say:

I'm holding YOU (God) to account! You have to deliver! You have to keep your promise! You've promised that if we turn to you in penitence, you'll restore your people and your holy city SO, DO IT!

There's almost be a touch of cockiness or arrogance in this way of speaking to God, except for the fact that Nehemiah realizes that, God really did make a promise! And that ***if he dares to speak to God this way, then***

- ***He needs to be the one willing to be the instrument through whom God carries out the work.***
- ***He needs to be willing to be in the front of the battle!***

Let me read again, Ch 1 v.11

¹¹O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant,
and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name.
Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy
in the sight of this man, the king!”

- He knows that he’s the one who has to bring the matter to the king
- He knows that God has brought him this powerful political connection for this precise moment
- and he knows that he has no control over the outcome of anything he does.

And so he commits his life – filled with weakness into the hands of a promise-keeping sovereign God in prayer.

Which brings us back to you and me, and where you and I are today, in relationship to Nehemiah – both in his relationship with God as a whole, and the sense he has of God’s purpose in his life.

- Do you know, like Nehemiah, *that sometime God needs to move you out of your little world, comfort zone in order to use you?*
- Do You Know *that sometimes God has to show you that right where you are you may possess all the gifts and experiences and skills for God to use you?*
- Do you know that *sometimes God’s projects look very secular to begin with? but that God works his purposes out in every realm, religious or secular: it’s all his?*
- Do You Know that *if you really want to find your life adding up to something then there’s no better place to start than with prayer?*
 - Prayer like Nehemiah’s that reflect our weakness and God’s grandeur! Humble prayer, yet strangely confident prayer?
 - Prayer that acknowledges who we are, without pretending -- warts and all
 - Prayer that believes that God really is the God of heaven, great and awesome; who makes promises and keeps them – and who first listens . .

May God give each of us

- a relationship with Him, like Nehemiah’s
- and a sense of purpose and tasks,
that bring a song to our hearts
and deep meaning to our lives!
and glory to the God of Heaven!

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2017 All Rights Reserved.

To listen on line go to: <http://nationalpres.org/sermons>
To watch full services go to: <http://www.ustream.tv/channel/nationalpres>

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800

