

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 8/25/10

Series: “Facing the Past, Moving Ahead for God’s Honor: Nehemiah”

Current study: Nehemiah 1:1-4 “Things Aren’t What They Used to Be”

Things aren’t what they used to be.

Is that a good thing or a bad thing? It depends on what things *used to be*, right? If you said that in 1950s, right after the depression and the second world war, you’d probably be saying it with a smile, “Things aren’t what they used to be!”

So it depends on what it is you’re remembering, what the *used to be* is in your mind. The reality is, it’s often hard to pick up the pieces and move on with life. That’s true if the past was pleasant (we want to live in the past) or painful (we don’t know how to get beyond the past).

Thankfully, the Word of God addresses in a sufficient way the things we face in life. We are not unique, nor are the situations we face unique. So says 1 Corinthians 10:6 & 11. “These things happened as *examples for us...*”

There are many reasons we need the Old Testament. Most of all, it points us to Christ and provides the backdrop for the redemption story. It also teaches us about God and His character and what pleases Him. But as 1 Corinthians 10 indicates, we find examples in the OT, and we need examples. We need to learn from those who’ve gone before us and faced situations similar to ours.

Like facing a broken world. And the tendency to live in the past. And the need to do a new work for God in difficult circumstances. God’s people faced all of this in the book of Nehemiah.

This evening we’re beginning a new series on the Old Testament book of Nehemiah. Our aim is to do an inductive, discussion-oriented study of this important book which we’re calling, *Facing the Past, Moving Ahead for God’s Honor: Nehemiah*.

Why Study Nehemiah?

Nehemiah is a fast-paced historical narrative that addresses a variety of important subjects. First and foremost, it teaches us about *God*. Through its pages we’re get to know God better by watching how God has worked in the past to fulfill His redemptive plan for the world.

What’s more, this book addresses several key themes which are relevant for us.

Discuss: Like what? Nehemiah is the record of a building project. It presents how God’s people worked together under the leadership of Nehemiah to accomplish an immense task in a short period of time.

Thus, Nehemiah teaches us about the following:

- Leadership, the need for leadership, and the marks of a godly leader
- Trusting God in the face of challenges
- Teamwork
- Dealing with opposition
- Living for God in a time of restoration (when the “glory days” are gone)
- And much more!

The Main Character of the Book: Nehemiah

The book begins, “The words of Nehemiah, son of Hachaliah.” What do we know about Nehemiah? Look at the following verses...

1:1 Who was his father? Hachaliah

1:1 When did he live? The first event in the book occurred in the month of Kislev in the twentieth year. The twentieth year of what? According to 2:1, it was the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes I which would have been in 445 or 444 B.C. Thus, Nehemiah lived during the fifth century B.C.

Discussion: What was happening to God's people, the Israelites, at this phase of their history? Here are some key dates...

8th century B.C. – Isaiah announces that judgment is coming

722 B.C. – Northern kingdom goes into captivity

605 B.C. through 586 B.C. – Babylon takes southern kingdom captive

The Jews experience the promised 70 year period of captivity.

559-530 B.C. – Restoration of the Jewish exiles began under Cyrus

Discuss: Why did the exiles return? See Ezra 1:1**

Application: Nothing happens by chance. Even the hearts of kings are in the hands of the Lord!

516 B.C. – Temple rebuilt

458 B.C. – Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in the seventh year of Artaxerxes I

445 B.C. – Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem

1:11 – What was his occupation while in exile? Cupbearer to the king

Why would a king need a cupbearer? To make sure the king's drink had not been poisoned!

Discuss: What does this fact indicate about Nehemiah? He was trustworthy. He had an important political position. Nehemiah can teach us how to honor God when you're working for a pagan employer. He shows us how to take our "religion" to work with us.

Nehemiah ended up becoming governor of the Jewish community once he returned to Israel. It was a tough time to lead. The country was in shambles, the economy horrible, and the critics numerous. Yet Nehemiah honored God in spite of the difficult challenges. We can learn a lot from his example about how to glorify the Lord while in a hard situation.

Note: Originally, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were one book (in the Hebrew Bible). Some scholars feel that the person who compiled this book also was the author of 1 & 2 Chronicles.

The Background of the Book

The Jews began returning to their homeland almost one hundred years before Nehemiah hit the scene. One of the first things the Jews did was to rebuild the destroyed temple (Solomon's), a task which they completed in 516 (it's called Zerubbabel's temple). You can read about this rebuilding project in Ezra 1-6.

There's a 60 year gap between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7. It's after that 60 year span of time that Ezra arrived in Jerusalem. Ezra 7-10 describes the ministry of Ezra. Ezra was a priest and a teacher of the Law of Moses (see his lineage and credentials in Ezra 7:1-6).

Nehemiah, on the other hand, took the Word of God to the secular arena. He was a civil servant and a *godly* one. Ezra taught the Word. Nehemiah put it into practice in the secular arena as we'll see.

A Look at Nehemiah 1:1-4

Two things happened to Nehemiah here...

Nehemiah faced a problem (1-3).

Q: Where was he at the time? In the citadel of Susa

a. Here's how he learned of the problem (2).

Hanani and some other Jewish brothers told him. Who was Hanani? A Jew that had been living back in the Promised Land.

Q: What did Nehemiah ask them about? Two things—how the remnant was doing since they returned home, and what the condition of Jerusalem was.

Discuss: What does the subject of Nehemiah's question indicate about Nehemiah?

b. Here's what the problem was (3).

The problem was threefold...

- i. The Jewish remnant was in great trouble.
- ii. The wall of Jerusalem was broken down.
- iii. The gates of Jerusalem had been burned.

A broken wall doesn't mean much to us, but it was a big deal then. Why so? Proverbs 25:28 says, "Like a city whose walls are broken down is a man who lacks self-control."

II. Nehemiah responded to the problem (4).

How? He did three things...

a. He sat down and wept.

Why? This was more than just hearing news about a bad situation back in the "old country." For instance, if I heard that things were rough in Hanover, Germany, I'd be concerned—since that's where my ancestors used to live 150 years ago. But I have no remaining connection there.

This was not just a humanitarian concern for Nehemiah. Though he himself hadn't lived in Israel before, and though the exile had occurred almost 150 years before, Nehemiah was concerned. Why?

Whose reputation was at stake? God's was. What happened to Jerusalem was a reflection on God. What happened to the Jews reflected on the reputation of God.

b. He mourned, fasted, and prayed.

You can tell a lot about a person by noting what makes him weep. But Nehemiah didn't just weep. He also fasted and prayed.

Q: What's the reason for fasting?

Q: Nehemiah also prayed. To whom?

Q: For how long did he weep, fast, and pray? Verse 4 says for some days.

Discuss: What lesson do you see in Nehemiah's example?

What did Nehemiah say when he prayed for those days? We're not told. But after praying for days, Nehemiah prayed a specific prayer which we're given next.

c. Then he prayed a specific prayer (5-11). We'll look at it next time.

Application:

1. *God uses His people to accomplish His work.*
2. *What may be problems to us are opportunities to see God work.*
How do you see this illustrated in Nehemiah 1?
3. *We ought to be gripped by the things that affect God's reputation.*
Like Nehemiah was.