

Nehemiah 1:1 - 11

1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: 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 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." 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. 5 Then I said: O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, 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 house, 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. 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 O 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." I was cup bearer to the king.

I am directing your attention to the Book of Nehemiah for three reasons. The Book...

[i] shows how God intervened to restore a remnant of his people Israel in the 5th Century BC. His ways have not changed. He still acts on our behalf.

[ii] shows how God overruled dominant powers at that time to fulfil his purpose in the world. That has not changed either. He is still king.

[iii] provides models for prayer as God's people in any age relate to their true king

THE HISTORICAL SETTING [Approximate dates]

2000BC A special family came into existence with the calling of Abram [Abraham] to leave the colony of moon worshippers where he was born and proceed to a land which God would show him [the promised land]. Abraham's descendants were driven south to Egypt by famine where they became migrant workers of the 'sweat shop' variety. They cried out to the God of their fathers.

1250BC God provided an Exodus [ex = out of, hodos = way; ie 'way out] under Moses and twelve tribes of Abraham's descendants returned north into the promised land. A national identity as the sons of Israel blessed by God took shape in the period of the Judges [champions], Prophets [bringers of God's Word] and the Kings. Choosing earthly kingship rather than acknowledging God's rule led to the destruction of the Northern part of the kingdom by 721 BC.

587BC Babylonians from the east took the Israelites into exile again destroying the city of Jerusalem and the Temple within it; breaking down the civil and religious focus associated with their identity.

538BC God provided another Exodus following the defeat of Babylon by the Persians and put it into the heart of King Cyrus and his successors to send back the remnant of God's people to rebuilt both city and temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus asked only their prayers and loyalty. Small in number and sanctified by God's gracious intervention to save them from exile once again Israel [Judah] was poised to bear witness to the conquest of grace over affliction and disobedience.

Three stages emerged over the next century. History never moves swiftly.

[i] 538 - 516 Prophets Haggai and Zechariah influenced the rebuilding of the Temple [Ezra 1-6]

[ii] 458BC The scribe Ezra arrived to re-apply the Law given through Moses

[iii] 445BC Nehemiah was sent to re-fortify the city and made governor of Judah under leave from the eastern potentate King Artaxerxes 1 [464-423]

As God used Pharaoh in the Exodus from Egypt in the 13th century BC, so now he used Cyrus and his successors to achieve his purpose for his people in the 5th century BC . Papyri found as recently as AD 1962 [Samaria papyri] show the accuracy of the Biblical record.

1 THE PROBLEM [1:1 - 3]

About November / December 446BC ["Kislev"], that is some 13 years after Ezra had gone to Jerusalem it came to Nehemiah's attention [1:1] in Persia that people, city and temple were insecure. Serving in the influential position of "cup bearer" [food taster; hearers of most things etc] Nehemiah was well placed to seek the king's help. His response is stunning and wise. he spent the next four months in prayer! He did not approach his powerful earthly master until March / April 445BC ["Nisan" 2:2].

News was brought from Jerusalem by Hanani , "one of the brethren" [1:2] a "trusted one" [7:2], part of that remnant prophesied by Isaiah long before the event. He was a man of the future carrying the concerns of grace across the generations of disobedience and difficulty. He spoke of "great affliction and disgrace" [1:3] because the "walls of Jerusalem were broken down and the gates burned". Nehemiah would know of previous attempts to re-fortify the city which had been mercilessly crushed because enemies of the Lord and his people portrayed those efforts as rebellion against their foreign rulers. [Ezra 4:7-23]

2 THE PRAYER [1:4 - 11]

News of the problem seems to have overwhelmed Nehemiah at first. His legs weakened so that he "sat down" [1:4] and his heart was so troubled that "he wept". Real men do cry! He mourned for days, fasted and "prayed before the God of heaven". This was a whole man activity, mental, physical and spiritual. Four characteristics of this prayer commend themselves to us.

[i] His focus is God's Character [1:5]

You need to know the person to whom you are speaking. God is Mighty; the "God of heaven...great and terrible [awesome]". God is merciful keeping covenant with those who love him and obey his commands.

[ii] His purpose is Israel's need [1:6]

"See out need and hear our prayer" he asked. [also 1:11] . Your servant is praying for your servants the people of Israel. This prayer is not self centred. Nor is it a trivial exercise. he prayed "day and night". And the prayer begins with confession of the sins of God's people. Sin is a social disease, not merely some isolated, personal deviation from grace. "We have acted wickedly towards you" and not kept the laws given through Moses. [1:7]

[iii] His basis is scriptural principle [1:8 - 9]

Israel's loss of country and distinctiveness was a result of their disobedience to God. He said to the people whom he called and saved , "if you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the nations" [1:8]. Such is his might. But thankfully his mercy is also great. He also said, "if you return and obey I will gather you from the far horizon and bring you to the place I have chosen" [1:9]. Under this Old Covenant this was the Promised Land given first to Abraham. Under the New Covenant which binds us to God through faith in his Risen Son Jesus this land is heaven.

[iv] His encouragement is scriptural example [1:10 - 11]

Nehemiah pleaded like Moses had done long before [Deut 9:29]. He prays for "your servants...your people...redeemed by your great power".[1:10] Hear your servant [slave] and servants [little children] who delight in revering [fearing] your name [1:11]. Then the key request becomes evident. "Give your servant [Nehemiah] success before this man [the King of Persia]" [1:11] as I seek his powerful support to go and re-fortify Jerusalem.

At it simplest this prayer reminds us that the triumph of evil is assured when good men do nothing. More especially it shows how there is nothing which can prevent us sharing in the fulfilment of God's will, when we yield ourselves to him in meaningful prayer.