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# NEHEMIAH 1:1-4

Nehemiah Series

[PRAYER] Father, we need your grace as adults to handle life challenges, as children to deal with the challenges that we face, parents, couples in marriage, those who are struggling in various areas of loneliness or discouragement, those who are trying to make decisions. Lord, we come today and we ask that you'd enable us to put some of those things aside. Or maybe you're going to speak to us through the message today to apply your Spirit's power to those areas of our lives. I ask, Lord, that you would speak to us today. Use your word to help us experience you more, to get to know you more today. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Well I don't know if you had the chance to read the book of Nehemiah yet. It will take you maybe a half hour, forty-five minutes to read through the book. It's thirteen chapters. And as you do, you're going to see why we teach verse by verse on Sunday morning. Because that's what happened in the passage. You're going to see that Ezra did that. You're going to see why we stand when we read God's word. They did that in the passage. You're to see why we stand when we sing songs of praise to the Lord. You're going to understand why we have fellowship lunches. All this is in there in this book, so I encourage you to read through it and try to understand what God is doing in that passage.

Now this morning as I introduce the book of Nehemiah I want to start with a different verse, a verse that is not out of the book of Nehemiah. It's out of the New Testament. Because it really describes what's happening in Nehemiah's heart. So would you stand with me, please, as I read Ephesians 2:10. It says this: *For we are God's handiwork (or creation or His craft), created in Christ Jesus (for a purpose, that is) to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* He opened the doors. He has prepared them in advance. That's an amazing verse of scripture and I think that's what Nehemiah is getting in his own mind.

So why don't you go ahead and have a seat.

Before I can enter into Nehemiah 1, I have to take you back into the history or the Jewish people so that you understand the place that Nehemiah has in world history and certainly in Jewish history.

Let's go all the way back to Abraham. Because God said to Abraham, "I'm going to give you a multitude of descendants. So many that it's more than the stars of the sky or the sand on the seashore." And He said, "Through you all of the nations of the earth will be blessed." He was referring to Jesus Christ coming through that line, that Jesus Christ would die on a cross, be buried, and be raised from the dead so that we could be blessed, we could have eternal life

personally. That was a promise made back to Abraham and that was the birth of the Jewish people, the Jewish nation as it were, and they became God's chosen people.

So God had His hand on them. When He brought them out of Egypt (they made it into Egypt and then back out of Egypt), God had His hand on them and He led them through the wilderness with a cloud that they followed. He guided their path because He cared about them every day. Every day He would provide for them manna because He loved them and He cared for them. He would protect them from their enemies. He would lead them to water. He gave them shoes that didn't wear out. God cared for these people. They were His chosen people.

Eventually they entered into this Promised Land, this special place in all of geography, this Israel, which is the Palestine, the Promised Land. They entered in and they started to occupy the land. During those many years at the very beginning, there weren't any other leaders except that occasionally God would raise up what we call judges, but they were really heroes is what they were. They would conquer the Midianites or the Canaanites, and they would rescue the people. A demonstration of God's care for His people that He sent rescuers or heroes to help them in their times of trouble. It wasn't long before kings came along.

Our first king was King Saul and then the second king was David. David was a man after God's own heart. He was a general and he had to fight the battles and remove the Philistines from their influence. But David had such a heart for God that he wanted to build God a house, a temple as it were, but God said, "No, David. Because you've been a general and you've been involved in all this bloodshed, I don't want you to be the one to build my temple. I'm going to leave that to your son Solomon." But David did amass all kinds of natural resources for Solomon to use to build that temple. And when he built it it was the most magnificent structure around. People would come from all over the world to see the temple. It was so beautiful. Gold all over the place, bronze, purple cloth. I mean it was just a magnificent building.

So we had the chosen people of God that were cared for. And we had the Jerusalem, the Holy City. In the middle of Jerusalem we have the Temple Mount. The same place where Abraham had offered his son Isaac is the Temple Mount. And then we have even the Holy of Holies, that special place that represented God's presence among the people. These were God's chosen people.

Now it's very helpful for us to look back on Old Testament history, to study the Old Testament. The reason we do is because we get a bigger picture of who God is. It's very interesting what Peter says as he's writing his book. He describes these things about God in terms of us. That we are *a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*

So as we study the Old Testament and we see how God cared for His chosen people, we understand how much God loves us and cares for us. We look at that and we appreciate it. We take those special care qualities of God, His compassion, His mercy, His love, and we accept that as our own and understand that God cares for us in that very special way.

Unfortunately the people of Israel got distracted. Their hearts turned to other gods. They started serving idols and they got into things that were distracting them from their love for God. And any of us can do that in our own lives. Anything can become an idol in our hearts that takes us away from our love for God. Oh it could be a job, it could be a bank account, it could be things involved in our children, it could be a family itself could become an idol and take us away from our love for God.

When these people got involved in idolatry and they started moving away, God raised up prophets, and these prophets would warn them, “You’ve got to stop doing this. You’ve got to turn back. Repent. Get rid of the idols. Go back to God and love Him with all of your heart.” And sometimes they did. Isaiah predicted doom on the people, but also restoration. That if you don’t turn then what’s going to happen is these other countries are going to come in and they’re going to take you away into exile.

Isaiah prophesied this and the people continually got involved in the wrong things. They didn’t turn their hearts to the Lord. So in 586 B.C. we see the Babylonians coming in and destroying Jerusalem, this beautiful city of God, the Holy City. They took the temple apart to get the gold. They knocked all the stones down and the temple itself was in ruins and the city was in ruins. The Babylonians had a practice. When they would conquer a city, they would take thousands of people from the city (from the conquered land) and they would take them back to Babylon and they would incorporate them into life there it try to assimilate them there. And they would send Babylonians over to the conquered area in order to live there.

So in this case we know in the Bible of the stories of people that were taken. People like Daniel and Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego were people that were taken out of Jerusalem, out of Judah, and taken back to Babylon, and then they happened to rise up into the kingdom and were significant and important people in the interactions of the kingdom. We read about them in the book of Daniel.

When the Babylonian Empire fell shortly after this, the Persian Empire took over. And when the Persian Empire took over then now you have still these Israelites, these Jewish people, in and among and including Esther. You remember Esther. She becomes the queen. Queen Esther. She was a Jew that God raised up into this high level of the kingdom for such a time as this to protect her people. You can read about that in the story of Esther.

There are three restorers that came back and brought restoration back to Jerusalem. These are pilgrimages of people who were exiled who wanted to come back. Three of those restoration pilgrimages returned. The first one was under Zerubbabel. Zerubbabel’s goal was to rebuild the temple itself so that people could have a place that they could worship God. He did. He rebuilt the temple. It was nothing near as significant as the temple that Solomon had built. But that temple that Zerubbabel built was a helpful landmark. It moved them closer in their understanding of God and relating to God back as they had before.

It's interesting that Herod during the time of Christ he really went to work to build this temple and took Zerubbabel’s temple and made it into a magnificent temple during the time of Christ. That was the first return to build the temple.

The second one was Ezra. He came back and his heart was for the people. He was a Bible teacher. He taught verse by verse through the Bible. I'm not exaggerating. You can read that in the book of Nehemiah. Ezra is talked about and he was interested in restoring the hearts of people. And how do you do that? You get them in touch with God's word. When God's word meets the heart of a person, it has the potential to change that person's heart. That's why the scriptures say – *I will hide God's word in my heart (so that it will change my behavior) so that I won't sin against you.* Ezra knew that, so he's bringing back to them God's word and reading it publicly and teaching them about it.

A contemporary of Ezra was Nehemiah, who also brought a group back with him and his goal was to rebuild the walls. He was quite a man. The Bible tells us that Nehemiah was the cup-bearer to the king in the city of Susa that we're going to see. That was his job. He was the cup-bearer. That doesn't mean he walked around carrying a cup all of the time. What it means is that he was like a governor. He was like a second in command. He was the one who was going to do significant work. He had access to the king. He lived in a posh environment. Very nice what Nehemiah did and how he lived. He gives us his testimony and he shares with us how he moved from where he was in this very nice executive place to going to Judah and rebuilding the walls. His firsthand testimony is recorded in our passage that we're going to look at.

But before I look at this, I want to ask the question about tragedy. Why does tragedy come into our lives? Because it is true that sometimes tragedy comes into our lives for no fault of our own. That sometimes tragedy exists because we live in a broken world. Sometimes a person gets sick just because disease exists in our world. It's not because they did anything wrong. Sometimes catastrophe comes into a person's life because of things that happen that are beyond their control. Not all tragedy, not all disaster happens in a person's life because of their own personal sins. Sometimes it's their ancestors who have sinned and made mistakes. And because of that, the children then suffer. So one of the reasons why tragedy comes into our lives is to do with just the fact that we live in a broken world. It's just a part of life, living here on earth.

But a second reason that tragedy comes into our lives is because we cause it ourselves. We make bad decisions, we do foolish things, we make mistakes, and in the course of that bad things happen. You can't drive 100mph down the road, a car flips over, and then say that's God's fault. Okay? There's sometimes when we make mistakes and that's why it's so important to understand God's grace and His mercy. Because God wants to rescue us from any of the mistakes we have made and bring restoration and healing into our lives.

But there's a third cause of tragedy and problems that happen in our lives, and that is the very hand of God acting as a loving Father, disciplining those He loves to bring Him back to Himself and to dedicate their hearts to Him. Your theology must be able to include this understanding of God and who He is. Because He's not content to allow us to go off on our own way. There are times when God as a loving Father comes in and disciplines us.

That's what Isaiah said would happen to the Jews if they didn't respond and these other countries are going to come in. But Isaiah also said I want you to know that God is merciful and compassionate and He will bring you back. So the story that unfolds in Nehemiah is a prophetic

story, a fulfillment of Nehemiah coming back now to the words that Isaiah himself had prophesied.

So we now look at Nehemiah's testimony. It says – *The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: In the month of Kislev.* Now that's only going to be important, that's the ninth month of their year, that's going to be important in chapter 2 when it talks about the month of Nisan. So we know there's a four-month period of time here. We'll use that information later. *In the twentieth year* (that's the twentieth year of the kingdom), *while I was in the citadel of Susa...*

Let's pause for a moment and let's look at some geography so we understand where in the world we're actually talking about. I want to show you a picture of the Persian Empire. In fact let me draw your attention to some of the locations here. Do you see Susa is here? This is the place we're talking about. I want you to know that this is modern day Iran, all of this area here. This over here is Iraq. That's where Babylon is, modern day Iraq. And notice that Jerusalem is over here. The distance between Susa and Jerusalem is about 900 miles. About the same distance takes you to get from here, Robbinsville, to Orlando. In a chariot or a horse it's going to take you a month-and-a-half probably for you to get down there. So it doesn't happen very quickly. Just think in terms of the time frame of the day.

While we're at it, let me just point out that this is the Persian Gulf. You know that this place right in here is the Strait of Hormuz where today you're reading in the news about the tankers that are being held up. This is a very important strait because the oil that's generated here comes out of the gulf. And do you see this little triangle right here? This little triangle has right on the side of it a town that we have now in modern day called Dubai. That's where I'm going on a mission trip with my grandson in November. I know that's a parenthesis, but I just want you to see where we are in the world. That's what we're talking about. The Persian Gulf is a very important place. All of this is the Middle East. Israel is over here in this particular area. We are now in this city of Susa.

*Hanani, who was a Jewish man, came from Judah with some of his friends or his brothers* (brothers because they're Jewish people) and came back to Susa. Nehemiah is in this strategic place where he gets to hear the news. News didn't happen through the internet. It happened in the marketplace. It happened in the gates of the city and it happened often with the king so the king could know what's going on. Nehemiah is hearing this information about what's happening somewhere, so he wants to know more information.

*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.* These are people that may have lived in Judah, that had survived during that time. The children of those people that were taken away or the children of people that were killed. Or just some of the kids that were there growing up in that new area. What's going on in their lives? It could also be that thousands of people now have come back to Judah. He was very interested in how are they doing? What's going on in their lives? They've survived their exile and I want to know about Jerusalem itself.

*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."*

I'm sure the story is much broader than that. Give me some examples. Tell me what's going on. He heard stories about families that were struggling, stories about people feeling anxious, about the invaders that would come by, people that were troubled about various things. And it did something to his heart.

This is where I wanted us to spend some time today, just pondering our own hearts. Because something happens here in the heart of Nehemiah in his own personal testimony where he moves from one place to another place. A place in his heart where he decides he's going to take action, he's going to do something different, he's going to be a difference maker.

Notice what it says. *When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.* Something happened in Nehemiah's heart here. Nehemiah moves from a person in executive privilege in a physical kingdom and says, "I want to be working in the kingdom of God." He moves from a guy who says, "Hey I've got all kinds of things doing well for me. I'm living in a great place to a place," that says, "I'm going to make some sacrifices in my life and I'm going to serve God in a very special way in my own life." He moved from being on a career track that was a great career track and he said, "I want to invest my life in something more. I want to make a difference."

I think we all want that. I just want to pray that for all of us in our own hearts, that we want to serve the Lord with all of our hearts. That doesn't mean that you leave where you are and you move to Africa or something. Some of you may. That would be great. If you do, we'd love to support you in that work. I think that what it means is that something happens inside of our hearts. That as children we're not just thinking about ourselves, we're thinking about other people. We're doing something more because we're interested in God's kingdom, not just what we want for ourselves. As we're going through adolescence, young people are starting to think more about what it means to serve outside of myself and to put God first in my life.

Nehemiah has gone through something here that is really important. He says, "I want to be a difference maker in my life. I want to make a difference." It would be sad for him to get through all of this, end of his life, nice things going on, and to say, "Wow, I've been climbing the ladder of success and my ladder is facing the wrong wall." I want to serve God with all of my heart. I think in order for us to catch this idea that happened in Nehemiah, we have to have the same kind of heart that he has. We have to get in touch with the needs that are going on around us.

Notice the words that are used here. *The wall of Jerusalem is broken down.* Notice the word *broken*. There are a lot of broken people right around us. They are broken. They need restoration. And we have the answer. We know what that answer is. Applying that answer in the midst of the brokenness of our lives is challenging for any of us. Broken. *Gates have been burned with fire.* The gates were the way that people would interact with others. People would come into the gates; they'd go out of the gates. People would come to sell things. People would come to visit. It was the relational component of the city walls. I think that some people today say, "I've been burned." I've really been burned in relationships, at work, or in family life. And God in the midst of that wants to bring restoration.

It says that they were *in great trouble and disgrace*. Something in the midst of that churned in Nehemiah's heart for him to say, "I want to serve the Lord. I want to do something about this."

The key verse in Nehemiah is the one in Nehemiah 2:20 that says this: *The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding*. I love that verse. That's what we're doing here at Calvary Chapel Living Hope. I know some of you are coming here because you are rebuilding in your own heart and life. Some of you are coming here because you're eager to rebuild in the lives of others and serve with us here at Calvary Chapel Living Hope.

Let me encourage you. When you come to church on Sunday morning, don't come with your cup empty, ready to get it filled up. Come with your cup full already. Spend some time praying at home, worship the Lord at home, read the Bible at home so that when you come here on Sunday morning you're ready to contribute to the lives of the people and do the rebuilding. Because God of heaven will give us success. We are His servants and we'll start the rebuilding.

Which takes me back to the very verse we started with. Because I'm convinced that this is what Nehemiah understood and grasped. It's like the lights went on inside of his heart. I can only pray that in our hearts the spiritual lights would come on and say you know what? There's something more to this life. I want to do more. I want to get involved in what God is doing in the rebuilding of lives.

Paul says to the Ephesians – *For we are God's handiwork*. We are God's creation. He made us unique and special. He's given you talents and abilities and skills, burdens, thoughts, ideas that are part of His handiwork in your life. And we're *created in Christ Jesus to do good works*. We have a purpose. The purpose in life is not just to have fun, just to enjoy life, just to live our lives and have security. The goal in life is to serve Jesus Christ. That is our goal as disciples. We're to serve Him, to do the good works.

And then I love this next part: *which God prepared in advance for us to do*. God's going ahead of Nehemiah to open the doors of what's going to happen. It's not going to be easy. This book of Nehemiah is not one of those passages where we see miracles that God changes things instantly. We see a lot of hard work. We see the human component of working for the rebuilding that needs to take place. God is doing something powerful in the midst of all of this, but there's a lot of human activity going on at the same time. We're going to be amazed at all of the activity that takes place. But God is opening the door. *God prepares in advance what He's going to do*. Let me say it this way. Imagine what God is arranging behind the scenes so that you can do more than you ever thought possible. What is God doing right around you? So that the doors are opening so that you can contribute to the rebuilding of walls, the restoring of gates, the helping of people who are in trouble or feeling disgraced.

There's just this weakness and we're going to see that in the midst of this Nehemiah is going to have the people stone by stone building new walls. As they do it, something is going to happen inside of their hearts as well. God does this in the church in a way that's described here because God has given us each spiritual gifts. He describes it as we all come together with these gifts, unique ways of looking at ministry, and then we come together and form one body. Peter

describes it actually as a building with living stones that come together. We form this wall, we form this sense of identity of who we are because we're serving God with all of our hearts.

I want to encourage you to ask God what does He want you to do to? As you start this fall, as you start moving forward in this school year, what is God calling you to? If you want to have this same kind of shift that takes place in Nehemiah's heart, it has to start with the needs of people. When you realize that our world is a broken place, there are people right around you in classes, at work, in your neighborhood that just think they know what they're doing, but they're hiding in a path that is broken and they need help. We're going to be part of that solution. I'm eager to do that with you. Let's look forward to what God's going to do in our lives as we continue on and recognize that God is creating this kind of holy frustration in our hearts that says this is not my home, I'm just passing through. And while I'm passing through, I'm going to serve the Lord with all of my heart.

Would you stand with me? Let's pray together.

[PRAYER] Lord, I pray that you would give us a fire burning in our hearts to serve you 100%. Don't let us get distracted like the Israelites did with the idols in our lives. Help us, Lord, to serve you in a way that draws attention to your grace and mercy that rebuilds and restores. Lord, we thank you for these restorers that are mentioned in your word and for all the teams of people that worked with them. Lord, together and independently we serve you. We ask you to work in our lives to rebuild. Give us the grace to share with others in that rebuilding process as well. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen.