

**“Nehemiah: A Man Used By God”**  
*Nehemiah 1: 1-11*  
Rev. Min J. Chung  
(Lord’s Day Service, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017)

**Nehemiah 1: 1-11**

*<sup>1</sup>The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.*

*Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, <sup>2</sup>that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup>And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”*

*<sup>4</sup>As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup>And I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, <sup>6</sup>let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. <sup>7</sup>We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. <sup>8</sup>Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, <sup>9</sup>but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ <sup>10</sup>They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. <sup>11</sup>O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”*

*Now I was cupbearer to the king.*

**INTRODUCTION**

[Spoiler Alert] In *La La Land*, the movie concludes with two lovers not getting together. In the past twenty years many movies have had this ending. However, most of them do not portray it as a happy ending. In this movie it is. How can that be? Because both characters follow their dreams. There’s nothing wrong with that, but we need to understand it more biblically.

What is the difference between the dreams of this world and the calling the Bible describes? Dreams have no restriction- you can do whatever you want. Calling does. Calling balances my desire and what God plants in my heart to do, so that I do what I love, yet in the balance of God’s sovereignty and the restriction of how God is leading me. Of course, He is always leading us to His maximum glory and our maximum happiness. Dreams expect no hardships. The call expects hardship. Dreams of this world predominantly have happiness as the goal. Callings have the glory of God as the goal. As a result, though not necessarily in this world but in eternity, there

will be happiness. If a Christian is being faithful to His call, then he is living out his dream as we look into the Scripture. So we need to know what our calling is, which we will talk about today. Nehemiah is about a guy who helps Israel to build a wall around Jerusalem. What's the big deal about the wall? Today we use different means to protect our cities, like radars. However, in those days they only had walls. The safety of the nation depended on the existence of the wall. If an enemy captured a nation, the first thing they would do is destroy the city wall.

With no walls to protect the Israelites they were constantly being harassed, and their morale was low. The rich exploited the poor, and the same sins that had led them into captivity were being practiced again. Economic depression and spiritual ignorance further accentuated the disunity of the people. The torn wall was a disgrace to the people of God. They were saying, 'God has forsaken us.' The wall was a picture of the Israelite's faith in God.

At this juncture Nehemiah is going to appear. Nehemiah was probably born in captivity, growing up surrounded by the corrupting influences of the ancient Near East. He was a 1.5 or second generation Jewish- Babylonian or Jewish-Medo-Persian. He is introduced as a cupbearer for the king which is a unique position. He holds offices similar to that of a Prime Minister and Master of Ceremonies rolled into one, almost like a Cabinet member. Besides testing the king's wine, he was also responsible for guarding the king's sleeping quarters. The constant threat of assassination caused the king to lead a relatively lonely life. It was quite natural to gravitate towards a man of wisdom, discretion, and ability. The cupbearer could frequently exert great influence upon the king. It's incredible how he goes into a foreign nation, born as a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Jew, and ends in this position for the glory of God.

Finally during the reign of Artaxerxes, about 445 B.C., Nehemiah asks permission to return to Jerusalem. He leads the nation into rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. This was a task many believed to be impossible, but amazingly it is completed in 52 days. For many years, they could not build it, but when Nehemiah the leader went to the nation, it was completed in 52 days. This semester we're going to study this amazing book.

### Outline of Nehemiah

1. The rebuilding of the wall [1-7]

2. The renewal of the people [8-10]

Now that they've built the wall, there was an incredible revival of the people.

3. The restoration of the city [11-13]

We're going to see how God uses Nehemiah to expand His kingdom. From this we can learn three lessons of how to be used by God.

### **I. He cared — His heart was filled with the burden of the Lord [1-4]**

The name Nehemiah means 'the Lord comforts', and the Lord certainly uses Nehemiah to revive the spirit of the discouraged exiles and to bring them hope.

The month of Chislev is about the 9<sup>th</sup> month of the year- around November or December. In the wintertime, Susa was a nice place to be. It was like being on a vacation with the king. He had no

reason to be concerned about what's going on in Jerusalem. However, Nehemiah cares enough to ask Hanani the state of Judah. He hears the report about Jerusalem, and his heart moves so vividly as described in verse 4.

*<sup>4</sup>As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.*

'As soon as' meaning Nehemiah's heart so yearned for Jerusalem that when he hears the bad news, he is moved. As an Internet generation it's so easy for us to be moved because we can see what is going on in different parts of the world. But it moves us for a few seconds and then we keep going. It's hard for us to be deep in our sorrow because we are so shallow in our emotion and care. But as we think about Nehemiah, he sat down and wept and mourned *for days*. Not only did he have simple sympathy, but he had trust in God and he goes to God. It says, '*and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.*' Usually for us, we're out-of-sight out-of-mind. But for Nehemiah though Jerusalem was out-of-sight, it was in his mind. He was concerned, and praying.

It's difficult to find a person who holds a high position in the eyes of the world yet who is so tender before God. High positions are at times a vulnerable place to live. Each promotion endangers our spiritual life. But Nehemiah stayed low in his heart, humble before the Lord. He cared enough to weep. Sometimes weeping is a sign of weakness in this world, but for God's servants weeping is a sign of strength. It means you have the heart of God and you would weep for what God weeps for. The love of God is one of the most powerful things we can have in our hearts. Before you move for God, you need to weep with God. Weepers become helpers in the kingdom. He could've easily blamed his ancestors saying, 'Oh! It's because of the sins in our grandfathers and fathers' generation that we are in exile!' But he simply wept. He was a cupbearer with a heart for God. How can our hearts change so we can have a heart like Nehemiah's? Simple, we need to have a right relationship with God. He already has this heart of God before the news because he knew the Word, he knew how to pray, and he had a relationship with God. He is moved by the things that move the heart of God.

## **II. He cried out — His knees were bent for the people [5-10]**

What is your first response when a need comes to your attention? Often we either ignore or act, but Nehemiah prays. This prayer is the first of about twelve incidences of prayer recorded in this book. Prayer was his habit. Scottish novelist George McDonald said, "In whatever man does without God, he must fail miserably, or succeed more miserably." We have to learn how to pray.

Nehemiah's burden was focused on the people's great sin. But his burden was lightened by seeing the people's great God. We need to see our sin, but not get discouraged by it. We need to see God who is great and awesome, so that we will depend on Him, and by His grace and strength we will serve Him.

### **A. Praise — Who He is [5]**

*<sup>5</sup>And I said, "O Lord God of heaven,*

He gives the name of God and praises Him. This name of God means that God is the God of Israel, and that the God of Israel is the only true God in this universe. Though Nehemiah knew the human king personally, the human king was at best, a human. He knew that the human king was nothing compared to the God of Heaven. Godly leaders are prayer warriors who bring their seemingly impossible problems to the Lord. Nothing is difficult to God. We should bring our difficult problems to God not only because it's difficult, but because the greater the problem, the more glory that can go to God.

*the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,*

One central theme of the Old Testament is God's special covenant relationship with His people. God's benevolent love, protection, and loyalty to us are shown through this word. God is absolutely self-sufficient so He does not need us. When He comes and relates to us it's out of His grace and mercy. The word 'covenant' is almost always associated with the word 'hesed,' mercy, steadfast love. Covenant is closely related to God's covenant loyalty and his asking of us to reciprocate that kind of loyalty. God's people are to obey His commands which express His will. One author said, "Love and law are two pillars on which covenant rests." The mention of the covenant should always cause us to recognize God's faithfulness and our responsibility. When we are unfaithful to God, it's similar to breaking a marriage vow. That's why the word 'adultery' is used constantly in the Old Testament when God's people go astray. Nehemiah starts with this praise as he talks about God.

Some questions we can ask are, 'Why do we praise God? Why do we pray?' God already knows who He is, He knows what we need before we ask. We're not reminding Him of something He's forgotten. So, why? It is because that's who He is. When we praise Him, it reminds *us* that's who He is. It increases our faith; it reminds us that He's faithful, so we can persevere. It generates faith, love, and hope. It reminds us so we can continue to be faithful to Him, and continue to receive His grace and mercy so we can pray and depend on Him. We have to learn this art of praise.

## **B. Confession — Who I am [6-7]**

Verse 6 talks about confessing of his sins. We want to focus on this phrase, 'which *we have sinned against you.*' Two words: 'You' and 'We'.

'You.' All sins are against God. When we sin against a human being, we need to apologize and reconcile relationships with one another. However, ultimately when we sin against other people, we sin against God. It's like stealing from the mailman. When you steal from the mailman, you are really stealing from the person who sent the mail. When we sin in general against the law of God, it is a sin against God.

Nehemiah's prayer begins with confession, recalling all the past sins of Israel saying, 'we have all sinned against God.' He knows this was the cause of exile. Israel had not

responded to God's gracious covenant in the way outlined in the verse 5. As he prays and repents for his sin against God, he uses the word 'we' not 'they,' identifying himself with the sins of generations he didn't even know. It would've been easy to look back and blame his ancestors for the reproach of Jerusalem, but Nehemiah looks within and blames himself. He includes himself as well as the generations before him.

What the Bible is saying is that we're so intertwined because we are all sinners before God. We bear the sin nature as well as we have all personally sinned. This does not negate personal repentance. When we sin, we need to personally repent. However, then we need to pray with and for each other so that justice can happen. Nehemiah does not exclude himself or members of his own family in his confession of sin. A true sense of the awesome holiness of God reveals the depth of our own sinfulness.

In the midst of our problems, we often think that we need to organize, but what we really need to do first is agonize. We repent so that we can hate sin and we can love God and represent Him and live for His glory. Repentance is not a negative thing, but an embracing of the tears of God. God is crying because of our sins. When we repent, we are embracing His tears, the blood of His Son, so that we can be cleansed. As soon as sin is gone, He is pouring His grace on us. Repentance is one of the best things we can do as a Christian. The depth of our spirituality is equal to the depth of our repentance, so we have to know how to do this.

### **C. Promises — What He wants [8-10]**

Verse 8 talks about discipline. Nehemiah is referencing Old Testament Scripture. He talks about why they're in exile (discipline). Then in verse 9, he talks about restoration, and in verse 10 he prays.

<sup>8</sup>*Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,*

'Remember' is covenant language, and the phrase, '*I will scatter you among the peoples,*' is constant throughout the Scriptures.

Leviticus 26: 33 "*And I will scatter you among the nations...*",

Deuteronomy 4: 27 "*And the Lord will scatter you among the peoples...*"

Deuteronomy 28: 64 "*And the Lord will scatter you among all peoples...*"

Why does He scatter, why does He discipline us? So that we can be restored! Restoration comes in verse 9.

<sup>9</sup>*...I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.'*

This is also based on the Old Testament Scripture.

Deuteronomy 30: 3 *then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you.*

Whenever we sin God wants us to repent and come right back. He disciplines us so that we can repent, but He always restores us, which shows the resurrection power of Jesus Christ.

Then Nehemiah prays for the people in verse 10.

<sup>10</sup>*They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.*

Here, using the Scripture he prays for his people. We are to pray for people who do not know God, the nations and the world. But it is absolutely necessary that we pray for God's people, our brothers and sisters in Christ. Because when God's people are living as they should the nations will become more righteous. God will use His people to reach the nations.

Ephesians 6: 18 *praying at all times in the Spirit, with all prayer and supplication. To that end, keep alert with all perseverance, making supplication for all the saints,*

Nehemiah is praying based on the Word of God. His prayer shows how much he mastered the Word of God, therefore how much he was mastered by God. Many people pray according to the Word but they fail to persevere in their prayer. We need to pray day and night and persevere until God brings change in our lives. It is prevailing prayer that makes the difference. Imagine what would happen if Christians around this country started confessing to God their sins, and their family's sins, and their nations' sins. This is what would happen:

2 Chronicles 7: 14 *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

Notice it talks about the people of God, Israelites- spiritual Israelites (Christians). 'Turn from their wicked ways', meaning repenting. Often what we do is we blame others. The Bible says they're not the problem, we are the problem. We need to repent of our sins, then He's going to change us, and He will use us to change the land.

#### **D. Requests – What I want [11]**

Nehemiah just talked about what God wants, now he'll talk about what he wants. He's going to ask for resources so that he can build the wall. The only problem is that in Ezra King Artaxerxes said he would stop Israel from continuing to build the wall. For him to

change the law was nearly impossible during that time. Nehemiah was risking his life by making this request. This is what he's praying for in verse 11.

*"O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."  
Now I was cupbearer to the king.*

Can we pray for success? Well, it depends on what your definition of success is. If you're seeking worldly success, He might give you a different answer. But if you're seeking for the success for the will of God to be fulfilled in your life, we will be invincible until the will of God is fulfilled in our lives. We may or may not see it, but God's will will be done and we can pray for success for His glory.

Presumably the prayer as a whole in this passage represents a possibility of a summary of all Nehemiah might have prayed over several months. About four months will pass by between chapter 1 and chapter 2.

### **III. He chose — His feet were moving towards his call [11]**

I want to emphasize the phrase '*Now I was cupbearer to the king.*' I thought he was just talking about his identification, but as I meditated I think he's saying, 'For this specific occasion, God put me in this position. Just as Esther said, 'For such a time as this, God made me a queen so that I can save my people.' He's thinking about his calling. Nehemiah *chose* to get involved, he is receiving his call. He will pray for four months without giving up. Nehemiah prayed and became the answer to his prayer. Sometimes we criticize and talk about others and we do not act and we leave. But what we need to do is pray and agonize to the Lord, so we can act through His power and we stay in our calling. If this is true, then no-immediate answer to our prayer can be the best answer we can receive. So that it's not someone else who becomes the answer to our prayer but us. Proof of true prayer is that we can make ourselves available to be the answer. As we pray for the needs of this world, we might become the answer to our own prayer. May God raise up Nehemiah's in our day. The Church has seldom been in greater need for such leaders.

A few comments about your calling, just to give you a framework. At CFC, we see through the book of Ephesians teach that there are three daily callings from Ephesians 4-6.

#### **A. Daily callings — Family, Work, and Local church**

Ephesians talks about how Christ has placed us in a certain family, work or what you study, and local church. That's your calling.

#### **B. Work calling — Ability, Affinity, Advice, and Opportunity**

How can you determine your work calling? Think about your ability, what you can do well. Think about your affinity, where your heart moves, what you enjoy and love. The reason why you might love it is maybe because you're good at it, or God might be

convicting you about it. Advice- ask those already in the occupation. Opportunity- what doors open up? Consider these four things, and it will help you determine your work calling.

The Word of God gives us a burden. We can see all these things in Nehemiah's life- he had ability, affinity, advice, opportunity. He receives the advice of God's Word, and when he seeks for opportunity God uses him to change the nation and the world for the His glory.

## **Conclusion**

[Shows a picture of Pastor Min's first sermon note from the first service at CFC]

This is the sermon note I used to preach at the first service at this church. It's just one page. The title of the sermon was, 'In Search of the New Testament Church' on Acts 2.

In 1983 I was a sophomore in college. I was part of a college group, and we were praying together and sharing what God was convicting us of. I remember saying this, it was burning in my heart, 'God's going to use this campus. I believe God will bring revival to this campus.' I don't know why God gave me that conviction, but I kept praying about it. Then seven years later in 1990, God called me to this place. Whatever little prayer I offered up, I actually became the answer. One morning prayer I was praying and God gave me Matthew 9:36-39: <sup>36</sup>*When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.* <sup>37</sup>*Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few.* <sup>39</sup>*Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."*. That phrase, '*the workers are few*,' burned in my heart and the Lord convicted me that CFC will produce workers for the kingdom. That became our vision statement and then He told us to pray, 'ask the Lord of the harvest to send out workers.' This became the foundational passage at CFC.

You can see Jesus did exactly what Nehemiah did- Jesus cared, looking at the people who were harassed and helpless, Jesus cried out and prayed, and Jesus chose the path of the cross so that we could be saved and He can be glorified. I received this passage right here 27 years ago. I'm still here; ready to go into 28<sup>th</sup> year with you all. Whatever your calling is, receive it and let's be faithful until the end.