

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Mission, Fueled by a Vision

(Studies in the Old Testament book of Nehemiah)

Desperate Prayer

(Nehemiah 1:4-11)

Study #2

Introduction: Crisis response (445 BC and AD 2018)...

It was the worst news imaginable, a nightmare come true.

Nehemiah was a Jew, living in the city of Susa, in Persia. And he had just received the worst news imaginable, a nightmare come true.

He listened as his brother, Hanani, told him how things really were, hundreds of miles away, back home in Jerusalem.

[1:3]...“The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire...”

Nehemiah heard - and was undone.

He had been under the impression that things were different, that things were far better.

He thought the city was healthy and that the people were thriving. With the temple in place, with Ezra re-establishing right worship, and with a century and a half to have recovered from the Babylonian destruction, Nehemiah had every reason to believe that all was well in Jerusalem.

But, no. The city was still a wreck and the people were still impoverished, shell-shocked, and a laughing-stock to outsiders.

So, what will this man do, now? His world has been rocked by Hanani’s report. How will he respond to this devastating news?

Our look into God’s Word this morning is a case study in crisis response.

Crisis happens.

In recent months, people here have gotten scary reports from their doctors, been involved in serious car wrecks, seen treasured relationships fracture, and life dreams go up in smoke.

With a 24-hour news cycle, you and I could easily get desensitized to crisis. Or we could get overwhelmed.

According to the three terrible “W’s” - Washington, Wall Street, and The Weather Channel - everything is always a crisis. (By the way, did you know that your taxes are due on Tuesday?)

It’s enough to drive us to distraction or depression.

Here at Northwest, we’re going to spend a few weeks looking at Nehemiah’s life and times to learn something about crisis and how to respond to it.

There are crises all around us - personal, societal, and congregational. And the way Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem dealt with their crisis has served many people and many churches very, very well as they have sought wisdom in moving forward.

It is my hope and prayer that the Lord will use our time in Nehemiah’s book to help us move God’s purposes forward, here.

So, Nehemiah got the terrible news about Jerusalem. We keep reading and learn of his initial response.

Hearts that Break with God's Heart (v. 4)

An Immediate and Emotional Response (v. 4a)

[4a] When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days

It is true that the time of his grief can be counted in days. But it can also be counted in months.

The opening lines of our book (1:1) set the scene in the Jewish month, Chislev (roughly, the November/December time frame). That is when Hanani came to Susa to give the Jerusalem report.

The first chapter ends with another time stamp marking the end of the season of grief, the month Nisan (March/April).

Over a period of four to five months, Nehemiah was consumed by grief about the condition of God's land and God's people.

For a variety of reasons, I had sort of a "blue" Wednesday this past week. It was nothing major. A few strands of life got tangled. I got sad. The end of the day brought a return to equilibrium through exercise and prayer. One sad day.

I've had seasons of "blue" that have lasted much longer than a day, and so have you.

You may know what it is to be so devastated by some personal earthquake that you "***sat down and wept and mourned for days***" - or for weeks or months. You were overwhelmed and undone.

We all know sadness and grief, so we identify with Nehemiah. The normal, human reaction to the realization that the world is broken is to "***weep and mourn.***"

Nehemiah was undone by news about the condition of Jerusalem.

Things were not as they should have been back home. By this time, the walls should have been rebuilt. The city should have been protected. Jerusalem should have been commanding respect from the nations.

But instead of being lights to a dark world, the Jews' condition invited reproach.

Nehemiah heard the news, took it all in - and did nothing. He took no action to remedy the situation. He simply gave vent to his broken heart and grieved.

But, over time, sooner rather than later I would guess, as he grieved, something powerful began to stir in his heart. He did something wise and strong. In his pain, he turned to the Lord.¹

Taking Grief to God (v. 4b)

[4b]... and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

As we will see as we move through the story, Nehemiah was an extremely practical man. He was a do-er. But, more than an activist, more than a busy man, he was God's man.

And following his initial pained response, we read a summary of the days, weeks, and months that followed Hanani's report of seeking the Lord in his grief through prayer - and fasting.

Interesting. He fasted. Just to review, to "fast" is to go without food, on purpose. Nehemiah intentionally went hungry, on and off, for five months.

Fasting is a time-honored practice spoken of throughout the Bible. Lots of people from different faiths - Jews, Christians, Muslims², others - have fasted. It's important that we understand what fasting is all about.

¹ See 2 Corinthians 4:8 for Paul's description of the same experience.

² For instance, Muslims fast during daylight hours during the month of Ramadan.

It's well-known that a reasonable approach to fasting can bring serious health and psychological benefits to most people. But, right now, we want to know how fasting impacts our life with God.

We haven't addressed fasting here in a while. So, here are some things to consider if you've wondered why anyone would ever consider fasting, or if you might consider fasting.³

FASTING...

One required day of fasting for the Jews - the Day of Atonement

The Jews of the Old Testament were required to fast one day out of every year. Only one day.

Scripture commanded every Jew to fast on the Day of Atonement, from the evening of the 9th day of the seventh month (Tishrei) until the evening of the 10th day (sunset to sunset).⁴

Some Jews fasted at other times, but these were voluntary fasts that the Jews determined to observe, usually for excellent reasons.

- Over time, they came to hold regular fasts to remember times of tragedy.⁵
- They fasted when seeking the Lord about certain things, as Daniel did, when he sought to understand some of Jeremiah's prophecies.⁶
- They fasted in times of great distress, calling out to God for intervention, as Nehemiah does here.

The Bible lists lots of people who fasted.

³ Some of the passages that address fasting in the Bible include the following: 1 Samuel 7:6; 2 Samuel 12:16; 12:21-23; 2 Chron. 20:3; Ezra 8:21; 8:23; Neh. 1:4; Psalm 35:13; Isaiah 58:4-6; Daniel 9:3; Matthew 4:2; Matthew 6:16-18; Luke 18:12; Acts 13:2-3; 14:23.

⁴ The term used is "*humble your souls*" and is understood to involve fasting.

⁵ There are four fasts mentioned in Zechariah that commemorated events surrounding the fall of Jerusalem. The prophet dismissed these fasts as having become meaningless ritual.

⁶ Daniel 9:3 - *So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth, and ashes.*

Lots of New Testament heroes and heroines fasted

We know that EVERY faithful Jew of the Old Testament fasted on the Day of Atonement. But there are many "fasters" listed in the New Testament, too, including:

Anna (a godly widow mentioned at Luke 2:37);
Jesus (Matthew 4 records His forty days fast in the wilderness, at the end of which came His temptation from Satan.);
the disciples of John the Baptist (Matthew 9:14);
the leaders of the church at Antioch (Acts 13);
the elders in the just-planted churches of Asia Minor (Acts 14:23);
the apostle Paul.

Reasons to fast

These people didn't fast to get God to love them or to love them more. But they would all agree that fasting brought blessing.⁷

Sometimes, they fasted for discipline's sake.⁸

Fasting is a marvelous way to gain mastery over the body's appetites. In America, we can be tempted to "*live to eat.*" Fasting will train us to "*eat to live*", a much healthier relationship to food.

Fasting is also useful as an aid to focusing on God. While fasting, we remember the God who sustains us, especially at mealtimes.

⁷ Jesus did say that fasting motivated by a desire for God's will and presence does bring reward. [*Matthew 6:16*] *And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. [17] But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face [18] so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.*"

⁸ Richard Foster lists the following "spiritual disciplines" in *Celebration of Discipline: Disciplines of Abstinence*: Solitude, Silence, **Fasting**, Frugality, Chastity, Secrecy, Sacrifice; *Disciplines of Engagement*: Study, Worship, Celebration, Service, Prayer, Fellowship, Confession, Submission.

Or, in times of distress fasting reminds us, *“There are things going on around me that are more important than my daily bread.”*

Nehemiah engaged in regular fasting during the five months between Chisleu and Nisan, after hearing from Hanani about the desperate situation back home in Jerusalem.

As he deprived his body of its regular nutrition, he became focused on what was, for him, primary. The well-being of God’s people living in God’s city.

He wanted something from God so badly - Jerusalem’s restoration - that he refused food to show to God how badly he longed for this thing.

It’s important to note this. Fasting is a way to demonstrate how badly we want something from God, and we see it in the Gospels.

Once, the father of a young son emerged from a crowd, falling on his knees before Jesus, with a desperate plea.

[Matthew 17:15] “Lord, have mercy on my son, for he is a lunatic (literally, “moon-struck”, a term referring to the symptoms of epilepsy), and is very ill; for he often falls into the fire, and often into the water. [16] And I brought him to Your disciples, and they could not cure him.”

Jesus cast out the demon that was causing the problems with a word.

Then, the disciples, who had been trying to help the boy, asked, ***“Why could we not cast it out?”***

[20] And He said to them, “Because of the littleness of your faith; for truly I say to you, if you have faith as a mustard seed, you shall say to this mountain, “Move from here to there,” and it shall

move; and nothing shall be impossible to you. [21] [BUT THIS KIND DOES NOT GO OUT EXCEPT BY PRAYER AND FASTING.]⁹”

According to Jesus, the disciples’ failure was not due to a failure of theology or technique. It was because of a lack of seriousness.

They failed to free a young boy from the grips of a demon because they lacked a willingness to exert great energy. They may have prayed. Their prayer may have been half-hearted. They didn’t fast.

Nehemiah took the terrible situation of Jerusalem with the utmost seriousness and showed that seriousness by months of prayer and fasting. Jerusalem’s ruin and his hope for its revival meant so much to him that he went without food.

Extreme caring shows itself by extreme sacrifice.

We give time and money and energy to the things we care about. When we’re confronted by a situation that begs for God’s intervention, where if God doesn’t come through, we’re sunk, we would do well to follow Nehemiah’s lead.

About what do you care so much that you would be willing to devote meaningful time in fervent, desperate, passionate prayer? About what do you care so much that you would gladly miss a few meals?

Would it be health concerns for loved ones, concerns for the spiritual health of someone you love, concerns for our nation? Would you pray and fast for God to heal a broken relationship?

There are desperate situations here, begging for fervent prayer.

Would you consider praying and fasting about:

⁹ These words (v. 21) do not appear in most early manuscripts of Matthew’s gospel. But they do reflect a very ancient tradition and are therefore included in most editions of the English Bible. In Mark’s recounting of the story, he mentions prayer, but not fasting.

the fervor with which we, around here, take next steps and help others do the same?

the passion with which we pursue life-changing relationships?

the loving zeal with which we bring our friends to Jesus?

the wise and God-honoring use of an historically significant amount of money represented by the land sale?

Today could be a day of new beginnings when it comes to the way you respond to the crises of your life.

You've what Nehemiah did in response to his personal earthquake. Now, you, put on Nehemiah's shoes. Be God's Nehemiah at this time, in this place, in your setting.

Fully enter in to the state of the way things really are. Go ahead. Sit down and weep and mourn. Pray. Skip a meal - or meals - to fix your focus on God.

That fourth verse of Nehemiah is a mouthful. It describes Nehemiah at prayer. Then (and we are so grateful for this), he provides us with a summary of his days, weeks, and months of prayer.

You'll notice that the primary focus at the beginning is God.

Prayer: First Things First (vv. 5-11)

Worship God (v. 5)

[5] I said, "I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments..."

Nehemiah reminds himself that the God he serves is great and awesome.

- Jerusalem might be in ruins, but God is great and awesome.
- The Babylonian captivity was awful, but God is great and awesome.
- Enemies are real, but God is great and awesome.
- Fixing what is broken will be hard, but God is great and awesome.

Or, for us...

- ...my health may be deteriorating, but God is great and awesome.
- ...my financial health is shaky, but God is great and awesome.
- ...people I love may reject me, but God is great and awesome.
- ...the state of my family is shaky, but God is great and awesome.
- ...the needs in the neighborhoods around our church are weighty, but God is great and awesome.
- ...the condition of the nation is troubling, but God is great and awesome.
- ...armed conflict with adversaries may threaten, but God is great and awesome.

When Nehemiah begins to pray, he begins NOT with his need, but with a recognition of God's awesomeness.

Regretfully, I need to be reminded of this. I can be so quick to barge into God's presence, without taking time to recognize to majesty and the enormity of the God to Whom I am speaking.

When we pray, we are addressing One who is great and awesome. He is due our reverence. He is due our worship, first.

Nehemiah's prayer moves from the worship of a great and awesome God to a recognition of his own un-greatness. Here, he confesses his sin.

Confession (vv. 6-7)

Corporate solidarity (v. 6a)

[6] "let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins¹⁰ of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You..."

¹⁰ Sin here is the Hebrew *chata*. This word signifies "missing the mark." Judges 20:16 - anything less than a bull's eye.

I understand if it strikes you as odd that Nehemiah is here confessing the sins of the nation of Israel, sins that he himself didn't commit.

But, this confession of sin aligns with the message of the Bible that, *"We, the people of God, are united here and now and we are united despite the passing of centuries. We are in this thing together."*

We rejoice when someone has a victory. We mourn when they suffer a loss. We admit to a shared guilt when someone sins.

In late January, I attended the EFCA Theology Conference. It was held at Northeast Bible EFC in Garden Ridge and the theme was Compassion, Justice, and Reconciliation.

I was especially impacted while listening to Trinity Seminary professor Doug Sweeney give a historical overview of American Christians and the subject of slavery.

- I was sobered to learn that Jonathan Edwards, a renowned New England theologian and pastor in the 1700's, owned slaves.
- I was sobered to learn that most of the leading evangelical theologians and pastors and evangelists in the years leading up to the Civil War said next to nothing about the subject of slavery.
- I was sobered to learn that in the years since the Civil War, some of the most ardent proponents of segregation were Christians.
- It was sobering to be reminded that America had two "Great Awakenings" - spiritual revivals! - and slavery continued unabated.

While listening to Dr. Sweeney, I had a sense of guilt. And it was not so much that I, a white man, felt badly because other white men had oppressed non-whites. It was that my fellow Christians had not stood up to stop a human atrocity.

In what we just read, Nehemiah has in mind idolatries from the days of Moses, moral atrocities from the days of Jacob, rebellions in the wilderness, and the murders of prophets.

It was these things that led to the discipline of God in the first place. His ancestors aren't around to make confession, so Nehemiah, their descendant, confesses for them.

Later - and not much later - Nehemiah will take strong action. I don't know whether at this point he had any thoughts about being a part of the solution to Jerusalem's problems. At this point, though, we do know that he has identified himself as a part of the problem.

He continues to confess and gets more personal.

Personal culpability (vv. 6b-7)

[6b] "...I and my father's house have sinned. [7] "We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

Going back a generation or two or three rather than centuries, he is thinking now of things that his father and grandfathers and great-grandfathers might have done to have helped Jerusalem, so far away, to no longer be a reproach.

He is thinking of things they could have done, but didn't.

And then he turns the spotlight on himself. There's that big "I" in verse 6. He's being completely honest here.

He's asking himself, *"Over the course of my life, have I done everything I might have done to further God's purposes? While serving in the king's court here in Susa, have I used every opportunity to help my people in Jerusalem? Have I done all I could to shine for You, Lord, here?"*

He asks those questions and has to accept the answer: *"No, I haven't done all that I could."*

He didn't wag his finger at *"all those bad people"* out there who were responsible for the predicament in which Jerusalem found itself.

He has made a “searching and fearless moral inventory” to quote our friends in AA. And Nehemiah, this God-fearing Jew, has been found lacking.

He included himself in the big club of people who have failed to work for God’s glory and Kingdom. He can’t claim innocence in Jerusalem’s sorry condition and he knows it.

Then the prayer takes on a different tone. Having confessed, Nehemiah turns the corner and reminds God of His promises.

Remembering God’s Promises (vv. 8-10)

[8] “Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘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, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.’ [10] “They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.

The presence of this part of Nehemiah’s prayer tells us volumes about the man.

One, it tells us that he was a man of the Book. He had given himself to learning God’s Word.¹¹

He’s referring to passages from Deuteronomy (chapter 30) and Leviticus (chapter 26), passages he had probably memorized. And knowing these promises from God helped Him know how to pray for his people.

Two, it tell us that he trusted in God’s faithfulness to do what He promised He would do.

He reminds God of what He said would happen if the Jews rebelled. Well, they did rebel and they were “*scattered*” from the Promised Land.

But God had also promised that if the Jews returned to God and obeyed Him (i.e. - repented), He would bring them back to prosper in Palestine.

Nehemiah knew God to be a God of His Word.¹²

He has realized through his meditation and mourning and praying and fasting and seeking God that the need of the hour is repentance. He starts the ball rolling and humbles himself before God.

And he finishes up his prayer with something very specific. He asks for something that will change his world.

Without a very smooth transition, Nehemiah moves from praise to confession to reminders of God’s warnings and promises - to a bold request.

Pleading with God (v. 11)

[11] “O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man.”

Conclusion:

We don’t know enough, yet, to know what this request is all about. Who is “*this man*”? What is Nehemiah asking God to do? Where do things go from here?

¹¹ In fact, he quotes Scripture all the way through the book, as he reminded God of His Word at various critical points.

¹² Nehemiah believed that God was approachable, that His heart was for His people, that He was good (Better than we would ever dream He is!), that [*Hebrews 11:6*]...*He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*

Next Sunday, we will learn. In fact, next Sunday, we'll see the beginning stages of his mission.

What we need to see this morning, though, is that the mission was launched with PRAYER, the best manifestation of dependence there is.

What I want us to see today is that Nehemiah faced crisis. He faced it and then turned to face God.

And in this, he models how you and I are to face the crises that confront us. Crisis comes to all of us in a variety of ways. We can deal with it in a variety of ways.

We can refuse to acknowledge the presence of a crisis and continue on, *status quo*.

OR, we can do as Nehemiah has done:

- Recognize the crisis;
- Enter into the grief and sadness of how desperate our situation is;
- Turn to God in prayer (enter into a week of specific, bold prayer) and in fasting (would you prayerfully consider joining me in missing a few strategically placed meals this week for the crises of your life? Of our church? Of our world?)

Prayer isn't the only thing that needs to happen when there are pressing needs, and it isn't usually the last thing that occurs when a crisis hits.

But Nehemiah points the way forward for us to address the pressing concerns that face us. First things first: PRAYER!