

## Dr. Tiberius Rata, Ezra-Nehemiah, Session 6, Nehemiah 1-2

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This is Dr. Tiberius Rata and his teaching on the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. This is session 6, Nehemiah 1-2.

Okay, open to the book of Nehemiah. We're in chapter one. So, we looked at Ezra and now we're going to Nehemiah. Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries.

We'll see that they will be together in one place at a great worship service that we will look later. But chapter one starts introducing us to Nehemiah. And we'll see here in chapter one how he hears the bad news, how he feels the bad news, how he shares the bad news.

And we'll see for the rest of the book, he will meet the problems that he sees. He will meet the need and he will accomplish what God has called him to do. But the book opens up with him hearing the bad news about Jerusalem.

Chapter one, verse one,

**1** 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, **2** 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. **3** 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."

So just like with Ezra, where we see a physical restoration and a spiritual restoration, the same is true for Nehemiah.

But Nehemiah, we start also with a physical and spiritual restoration. But here he hears about the physical destruction of Jerusalem. And again, just like we have the Ezra memoir, we have the Nehemiah memoir.

Nehemiah also writes sometimes in the first person. The 20th year here mentioned is the 20th year of the reign of Artaxerxes and Nehemiah chapter two, verse one. There he is the first made Susa the capital of the Persian Empire in 521 BC.

And again, this is where Nehemiah is at this time. Now the walls of the city represented the first line of defense for any cities. Jerusalem wasn't the only city that had a city wall.

If you look at ancient cities like Nineveh and Jericho, they all had walls of protection. But since the destruction of the wall in 587 BC, basically nobody rebuilt the wall. Remember when Ezra came, the first thing they did was rebuild the altar and then the temple, but they did not rebuild the city wall.

This is where Nehemiah comes in. There is not a full reconstruction accomplished yet. And I like Hanani.

Hanani doesn't minimize the problem. He doesn't say it's not that bad. He doesn't ignore the problem.

He doesn't deny the problem. He tells Nehemiah exactly how things are. And that's a very important part of ministry.

We need to identify the problems. And Hanani cared enough to report the problem. And Nehemiah, again, we see like Ezra, he's a man whose heart is sensitive to the needs of the people.

And we see here in verse 4 that the fact the man of God not just hears the bad news, but he feels the bad news. Like Ezra before him, 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.

We live in a world where the world considers weeping a sign of weakness. But in the Bible, weeping can be a sign of care and concern. Jeremiah wept.

Jesus wept, and Paul wept because they all cared about people.

And they were deeply concerned about the fallen condition of the world. And here we see a window through the heart of Nehemiah. We see here in his soul that he weeps when he hears the bad news.

And a godly leader is strong enough to weep. But he combines the weeping with prayer. The book of Nehemiah will record 12 of these prayers.

But I have a feeling he prayed more than that. It's just 12 recorded prayers here. I like what R.A. Torrey wrote about the importance of prayer.

He wrote, and I quote, "It was a master stroke of the devil to get the church and the ministry to lay aside the mighty weapon of prayer. He does not mind at all if the

church expands her organizations and her deftly contrived machinery for the conquest of the world for Christ. If she'll only give up praying. He laughs softly as he looks at the church of today and says under his breath, you can have your Sunday schools, your social organizations, your grand choirs, and even your revival efforts, as long as you do not bring the power of Almighty God into them by earnest, persistent, and believing prayer."

Nehemiah not just combined prayer with care, but he combined prayer with fasting. And again, the importance of prayer and fasting comes very clearly. John Chrysostom, one of the greatest preachers of the fifth century, tells us why fasting is hard.

He writes, and I quote, "Fasting is as much as it lies in us, an imitation of the angels, a condemning of things present, a school of prayer, a nourishment of the soul, a bridle of the month, it mollifies rage, it appeases anger, it calms the tempest of nature, it excites reason, it clears the mind, it disturbs the flesh, it chases away night pollutions, it frees from headache. By fasting, a man gets composed behavior, free utterance of his tongue, right apprehensions of his mind. And again, we are reminded of what Jesus says, then they will fast."

Nehemiah heard the bad news. He feels the bad news. But now we see that he shares the bad news with God.

He turns in prayer to God. As I said, Oh, Lord, and I said, Oh, Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments. Let your ears 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.

Again, just like Ezra. He identifies with his people.

He recognizes who God is: the great and awesome God who keeps covenant. God is not just the God who makes the covenant. He's the God who keeps the covenant.

Verse eight.

**8**Remember the word that 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 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.' **10**They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. **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.

See, Nehemiah doesn't say, Okay, there is a need. Now let's get to work. No, before he does that, he again, he goes to God in prayer.

He shares the need with God. And if we were to take apart this prayer, we see that he exalts God because God is great. And it is in this prayer that he confesses sin, both private and corporate sin.

He affirms that God is the God, not just who makes covenant, but the God who hears our prayers. And he's the God who forgives sins. Nehemiah, like Ezra, is humble, and he confesses sin.

And now we will see that for the rest of the book, Nehemiah, who sees the need of reconstruction, shares it with God. He will meet the need and God will use him to accomplish this purpose and especially to rebuild the city wall. But verse 11 tells us that he was the cupbearer to the king. That was a very well-paid, well-respected position at the royal court, at the Persian royal court.

Sometimes we think, well, he was just there as a waiter. That was not his job. Actually, documents tell us that to be the cupbearer to the king means that you were the most trusted person, because you would actually drink the wine first to make sure it's not poisoned.

And then the king trusted you more than anybody else. So, it was a very trusted position. And Nehemiah gives all that up, because he wants to go help his people rebuild.

Nehemiah's attitude reminds us of Jesus Christ, who saw our need for salvation and gave up the glory of heaven to come and live on this earth, to become poor, and to die for our sins. So, Nehemiah is kind of a finger pointing towards the coming of Christ, who will do that for us. The question is, what will we do? How are we involved in the work of ministry? And to illustrate that, I want to remind you of a story that I heard about here in America, back when people still used these types of carriages to travel.

There were horse-drawn carriages. And I heard about a guy who wanted to travel from one place to another, and he went to get tickets. And the lady asked him, what kind of ticket do you want? First class, second class, third class? And this man was a little surprised because he looked at the carriage, and all the seats were the same.

So, he said, well, give me a third-class seat; since it's the cheapest, I'll get a third-class seat. Well, the first-class passengers, the second-class passengers, and the third-class passengers all made it into the carriage. But as they were driving along, they came to a hill.

Well, the driver of the carriage stopped the carriage and said, first-class passengers, stay in your seats. Second-class passengers get out and walk. Third-class passengers get out and push.

See, that's the difference. And I want to argue that today, in the church, we need third-class passengers. Not the ones that just sit around, not just the ones that walk around, but the ones that push and do the work of the ministry.

That's the kind of man Nehemiah was. But everything starts with his sensitive heart, with him sharing the work with God in prayer. And then again, we'll see for the rest of the book, this man, Nehemiah, will accomplish the work of reconstruction.

And God will use him in a great way, just like he used Ezra. And again, we are visited in the beginning of chapter 1, looking at his heart. And then we will see how he leads.

But first of all, the man of God has a sensitive heart. This is how chapter 2 starts.

Then I was very much afraid. **3** I said to the king, "Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"

Again, remember, Nehemiah wasn't just the king's cup bearer. He was a very trusted person in the Persian court.

And it was part of the etiquette of the court that if you work in the presence of the king, you should be joyous. You shouldn't be sad. But the heart of Nehemiah shows on his face the sadness that he has.

And Artaxerxes recognizes that. He sees the sadness of his heart. And Nehemiah, when he says, let the king live forever, again, it's a very common form to address the king.

We see that in 1 Kings 2:3, and 6. It is assumed that the king knew Nehemiah's Jewish ancestry. Therefore, Nehemiah appealed to the king's sympathy, not by mentioning Jerusalem or the temple, but by mentioning my father's graves. It's very interesting.

By painting a tragic picture of Jerusalem lying in ruins with its gates destroyed by fire. William states that respect for ancestral tombs was universal in the ancient Near East, especially among the nobility and the royalty. But we see again, just like in the case of Cyrus, that God moves the heart of the king.

In this case, God moves the heart of Artaxerxes. Remember Proverbs 21, verse 1. The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord, he turns it wherever he will.

And this is exactly what we see here in again, the king's heart is moved by God. Verses 4-6.

**4** Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven. **5** And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it." **6** And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time.

God caused the king to discern that behind Nehemiah's sad heart was an unfulfilled yearning. And before answering the king's direct question, what are you requesting? Nehemiah prayed.

Again, we see Nehemiah as a man of prayer.

**7** And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah, **8** and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.

Again the motif of God's hand being upon someone. Just like God's hand was on Ezra, now God's hand is on Nehemiah.

Nehemiah understands that whatever is happening here is not because of his wisdom. It is not even because of the king's generosity, but it is because God's sovereignty is there. Nehemiah takes advantage of the king's generosity by asking for these letters to the officials.

And the king's heart was the stream of water in the hand of the Creator God, who is sovereign over both creation and history. But that is not enough. We see that the man of God here challenges others to join him.

Like Ezra, Nehemiah knows that he cannot do this by himself. He needs to encourage others to join him. Verses 9 and 10,

**9** Then I came to the governors of the province Beyond the River and gave them the king's letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. **10** But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant heard this, it displeased them greatly that someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel.

We are not told how long it passed from the king's edict until when Nehemiah went back. Josephus, the Jewish historian, actually says it took five years. We don't know.

What we do know is that Nehemiah's journey was made saved by God's protection. And when he gets there, chapter 2 verse 11,

**11** So I went to Jerusalem and was there three days. **12** Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. There was no animal with me but the one on which I rode. **13** I went out by night by the Valley Gate to the Dragon Spring and to the Dung Gate, and I inspected the walls of Jerusalem that were broken down and its gates that had been destroyed by fire. **14** Then I went on to the Fountain Gate and to the King's Pool, but there was no room for the animal that was under me to pass. **15** Then I went up in the night by the valley and inspected the wall, and I turned back and entered by the Valley Gate, and so returned. **16** And the officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, and I had not yet told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the rest who were to do the work.

**17** Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." **18** And I told them of the hand of my God that had been upon me for good, and also of the words that the king had spoken to me. And they said, "Let us rise up and build." So they strengthened their hands for the good work.

That's a great sign of a leader who understands the need and encourages and challenges others to join in.

And again, just like in the case of Ezra, Nehemiah has opposition.

**19** But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite servant and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they jeered at us and despised us and said, "What is this thing that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" **20** Then I replied to them, "The God of heaven will make us prosper, and we his servants will arise and build, but you have no portion or right or claim<sup>a</sup> in Jerusalem."

Remember, opposition is not necessarily a sign that you're doing something wrong.

Many times, opposition is a sign that you're doing something right. And that's exactly what was the case here in the case of Nehemiah. First, we are told only Sanballat and Tobiah are opposers, but now they're joined by Geshem the Arab.

So just because opposition increases doesn't mean you're not doing the work of God. Nehemiah, the man of God, showed his superior leadership qualities by not answering their questions directly. The book of Proverbs says, Sometimes you are to answer a fool according to his folly, but the next verse says, Don't answer a fool according to his folly.

Which one is which? Well, we need God's discernment to know when to answer and when not to answer. That is very, very important. In this case, Nehemiah does not answer directly but goes on to do the work of God.

We need to learn from Nehemiah. The leaders need to identify the need and we need to develop a vision for the future. But we also need to inspire workers to stand firm and work faithfully in the midst of opposition.

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