



WEEK 1: WHEN PASSION BECOMES PERMISSION

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Study Notes

BACKGROUND:

Jewish tradition identifies Nehemiah as the primary author of this historical book. It covers a period of about 14 years and records the reconstruction of Jerusalem's wall. Together with Zerubbabel and Ezra, Nehemiah leads the restoration and renewal of Israel in the land after the people's captivity in Babylon. This link to The Bible Projects video serves as a great introduction to the study: <https://thebibleproject.com/explore/ezra-nehemiah/>



"The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." (2 Peter 3:9)

Nehemiah, continues the ongoing biblical theme where God takes the initiative to reconcile humanity to himself. God desires to have a people set apart to himself, so that through them He might bless all of humanity. He begins with a covenant relationship with Israel. They do not live up to the covenant, the Law, and suffer the predetermined consequences announced by the prophets. His chosen people would be carried into exile by the Babylonians. God uses Babylon as a instrument of correction and discipline. But He always remains faithful, and despite their disobedience and rebellion, He brings them back into the land, as He promised.

THE STRATEGY OF CAPTIVITY

Like many imperial nations, Babylon would carry away the young, those who were the strongest, the best, and the brightest. They would assimilate them into Babylonian culture, making the empire stronger and more culturally intelligent. Only the old, the ignorant, or the poor would have remained in the land. Nehemiah was the offspring of Israel's best, and the book begins with him:

*"In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 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, and also about Jerusalem. 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." **When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days, I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.**" (Nehemiah 1:1-4)*

THE CUP BEARER, PRIVILEGED IN EXILE

Despite being an exile who was assimilated into Babylonian culture, he holds to the promises of God and takes Israel's covenant seriously. His language, dress, diet, and lifestyle were all distinctly Persian, but in his heart was Hebrew. As the King's Cup Bearer, he held a unique position that went beyond bring the king his cup.

- It was a prominent and prestigious position, requiring high character.
- It was an honored and trusted position. Poison was an effective means of assassination in the Ancient Near East, so anyone who served the king food or drink was a trusted official.
- A cup bearer was typically cultured and knowledgeable. He could be called upon to advise the king, like in Genesis 41 where the cup bearer advised Pharaoh about Joseph.
- He had a close relationship with the King, who knew him well enough to noticed his countenance (Neh 2:2 why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart.).

AN ORDINARY MAN WITH AN EXTRAORDINARY HEART

We should not apply super hero status and super human attributes to Nehemiah. He isn't described as a spiritual giant, nor is he a special messenger. We are not even told that he has construction skills, strategic vision, or that he possesses ability as an organizational leader. These unfold in the course of the narrative, but he is accessible to all of us. There is no prophetic foretelling of him as a great leader. His role, while important, wasn't particularly unique. There are parallels with us.

- While doing the mundane, the everyday tasks of our lives, we're closer to the miraculous than we think, whether we're a "cup bearer" or a mechanic.
- Maybe you're not necessarily placed in a position where you like your job. Maybe you're there to use your influence to reach others, and God has put you there.
- God uses all manner of people and all manner of work. He is not limited by your vocation.

Consider Esther's situation, and how it speaks to placement for a purpose:

"For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?" (Esther 4:14)

Consider also how Paul's words from Colossians applies, if we really believe God has placed us for a purpose:

"Whatever you do in word or deed, do it heartily as to the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father" (Colossians 3:17)

- Nehemiah shows the potential impact of ONE PERSON in the hands of God can have on a nation
- God is looking for a person with a heart that is moved by what moves His.
- The local church, filled with such people, is the hope of the world.

This sermon was originally preached on the Sunday following the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination. He did not start out to be a world-changing, Nobel Peace Prize-winning (1964), internationally famous public figure, and civil rights leader. He started by listening to God's heart for oppressed people.

AVAILABLE AND SELFLESS

"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." When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days, I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven." (v 3-4)

Nehemiah cared enough to ask about his people. He wasn't self-focused within his secure and privileged life. His heart was for God's people, their traditions, and Jerusalem. He had great affection for a people and a place that he did not know personally, but was connected to anyway. He cared about their present needs and their future hopes. **Like Nehemiah, we need to let the Lord burden us with what burdens Him.** 99% of God's people do not have an up-front role in a large, influential church. They will serve Him in and through the tasks of everyday life. In fact, most are "sent" exactly where they are right now. We're all servants who have been positioned for purpose.

PASSION CAN OFTEN BE PERMISSION

Pay attention to what makes you weep, what frustrates you, what angers or disturbs you. Often, that's exactly what God is calling you to address. Nehemiah's heart was captured by what he heard of Jerusalem and God's people, and he experienced a strong internal response. What do you see? What drives a passion in you?

- Passion can be an indication of calling/purpose, but it requires godly wisdom...
...allowing the Lord to search us (Psalm 139:23-24)
Speaking of a hard heart: "...the heart is deceitful above all things." (Jer. 17:9)
- Misuse of passion is not an argument for disuse. Passion can be God's leading us.
- Nehemiah was driven to lay aside privilege, comfort, and security to meet the needs of God's people

- A genuine faith produces more than personal piety. It manifests as good works and fruitfulness.
- Loving God means loving those created in His image!

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (Mark 12:30-31)

PERSONALLY RESPOND TO THEIR NEED

Answering the call of God requires personal investment and personal sacrifice. Consider Jesus’ words as he tells the Parable of the Good Samaritan:

“He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, brought him to an inn and took care of him. 35 The next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper. ‘Look after him,’ he said, ‘and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.’” (Luke 10:34-35)

Nehemiah is a “type.” Though a common man, he illustrates the mission of Jesus, who always rescues, resurrects, and restores those who respond to Him. We all have a calling to join Him on His mission to remake broke people. But, a personal response puts our comfort and continuity, or stability, at risk. Even so, the call to all who follow Jesus is explicit:

*“Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people’s sins against them. And **he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.” (2 Cor 5:17-20)***

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. Do you understand your assignment from God? If so, what is it? If not, how will you discover it?
2. What assignment and purpose does your community see in you?
How has God sued them to affirm or guide you. They could be a small group, a sports team, a coach, or a mom’s prayer group, etc.)
3. Ask yourself: Am I, have I been, fulfilling the purpose of God where He has placed me?
What answer do you come up with
4. What do you see in your broader community that raises your passion? What makes you say, “That shouldn’t be like that!” What makes you ask, “You want me to do what, Lord?”
5. How do you see the local church as the hope of the world?
6. How would you apply the lessons of this message though business, the arts, or community involvement, for example. In what other areas of common human life do you see application?