

CAN THESE WALLS RISE AGAIN?

Nehemiah 1

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We begin a new series together in the Book of Nehemiah. I'd always heard this is the appropriate book to preach from when churches go into discussing building programs. I think this book is going to have a more personal aspect. But I felt my heart drawn like a magnet to this book for our consideration. Today we'll look at chapter 1.

“The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev [which is probably November-December] 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 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. Then I said: ‘O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.” They are your servants and

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your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.’ I was cupbearer to the king” (Nehemiah 1:1–11, NIV).

As we look at the Book of Nehemiah I think some things will happen in our lives. If we’re in a position of spiritual defeat this book is designed by the Holy Spirit to give us a pattern out of spiritual defeat. There are many Christian lives that are much like the city of Jerusalem is described at the beginning of this book. Their walls have been broken down. Sure, there is salvation, but their walk with God, the fire that marked their life and your life perhaps when you became a Christian is not there now. You feel very desolated and defeated. This book is a paradigm of spiritual defeat.

This book also has been designed by the Holy Spirit to inspire us to attempt great things for God. Nehemiah is an ordinary person, cupbearer to the king. He’s not a minister, not a priest. He’s not a prophet. He’s not king. He’s a layperson. The Lord challenges him to some efforts on behalf of the name of the Lord. He rises to that challenge. I believe as we look at the Book of Nehemiah we could be challenged in our life as well to do and accomplish great things for God. And see God do great things in our life individually.

This book also instructs us by providing patterns in obtaining success in our walk with God. If we’re simply challenged to the greatness of the walk with God and the greatness of doing things for God but don’t know how to do that, we fall short. This book has provided a beautiful pattern for us to actually obtain what we seek from the Lord.

I. It’s very difficult to begin approaching Nehemiah without some perspective of the history that lives behind the Book of Nehemiah.

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I have a temptation here. I tend to be interested in these sorts of things and yet the recitation in a public setting can be a string of dates and ancient kings and the like which quickly put sleeping gas on us all.

But just some moments of historical review for this book. The backdrop of the book is the fall of Jerusalem occurring in 586 B.C. The reason why that is important is as we open this book the walls of Jerusalem are down. There's a reason why they were down. One hundred forty-one years before the Book of Nehemiah opens, there was a sack of the city by the Babylonians who conquered the city and led away captives. Second Chronicles 36 describes in detail the siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and its destruction and the awesome devastation that happened in the city. Jeremiah also tells us. And he lived during that time of that awful devastation. It was a horrible time. Jerusalem lay in ruins for a century plus.

Sometimes when we review these historical books of the Bible they seem to be coming close together. If we put Nehemiah in 1979 to help give us a schematic chronological structure of the book, then the fall of Jerusalem occurred in 1838. That's a long time ago. That would be Nehemiah's equivalent to the fall of Jerusalem.

God's people went into exile after the fall of Jerusalem. Psalm 137 describes what that exile was like where the Jews in Babylon sit down by the river of Babylon and hang their harps on the trees and weep and say, "We cannot sing the songs of the Lord in a strange land." Babylon isn't a real power for long. After the conquest of Jerusalem, Persia takes over in the year 539 (our time calendar). Some forty years down the road Persia has conquered Babylon. God's people begin a return to the land. That return is in three phases. The first return to the land is accomplished by a man named Zerubbabel. His story is told in Ezra 1-6. He starts coming back

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with about fifty thousand in the year 1886 (our time calendar). He managed after twenty years to rebuild the temple. That's about the extent of his accomplishment.

In the year 1966 (our time calendar), about fifteen years before Nehemiah, or 458 B.C. biblical time, Ezra comes back with a company of about two thousand people. And Ezra manages to restore worship in the temple, which had fallen into ruin even though the temple had been rebuilt. Ezra also manages by instruction of the word of the Lord to purify family life.

Then Nehemiah comes back in 45 B.C. His purpose is to rebuild the walls of the city and to cause the city to prosper again.

We ask the question as we look at Nehemiah 1 today, "Can these walls rise again?" Look at this book not simply from its historical perspective but continually the personal perspective that it bears upon us. We ask the question. Nehemiah is confronted first with the problem.

II. We look at the problems that may be in our life or about us in the body of Christ and we ask, "Is there a problem? Are walls down?"

It may be very well possible that in your own personal life walls are down. If we think of the city of Jerusalem for a moment as a geographical layout the temple itself would be inside the city walls. The temple had been restored by Zerubbabel decades before. But somehow the walls had never been rebuilt.

We don't have appreciation for walls in our culture. When I lived in the orient I lived in walled cities. When the gates were shut at night you didn't come in. People were hung at the city gate and their bodies were on display as a warning to people coming into the town that they'd better not break the law in this town.

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The walls and the gates were signs of safety and security. And when walls are down then the city is easily taken. Anybody could come in and do anything to the inhabitants of the city. Jerusalem had great walls but its walls were in ruins.

I think on a personal level, without overspiritualizing this text of Scripture, it may be for us a pattern that happens when in our life, so to speak, there is a spiritual temple but the walls are down. That is to say, we may have a personal walk with God because of a born-again experience so that in a sense there is as temple in our life. But in terms of the defenses of our life to temptation, to the onslaught of the enemy, in terms of disciplines in our spiritual life, in terms of morals in our Christian walk, in terms of attitudes we bear in these areas on the walls of our personality there may be tremendous deficiency. In fact, those walls may be down and you find yourself as a Christian looking at things in your life that you couldn't believe you would have done when you first started walking with the Lord. Yet the walls are down.

We have to become aware of the problem first and let the Holy Spirit sensitize us to the presence of downed walls in our life if we are to ever go on from there and see the Holy Spirit restore what He wants to.

There is a tendency that exists in our lives that without a constant concern for what the Spirit is seeking to do in our life, without a constant checking of temptation, and without a constant discipline of prayer and coming to the Word and coming to the Lord, all of a sudden we look around and our life is full of weeds. Or in Nehemiah's language, the walls of our life are down. Tozer said, "Every farmer knows the hunger of the wilderness, that hunger that no modern farm machine, no improved agricultural methods can quite destroy. No matter how well-prepared the soil, no matter how well-kept the fences, no matter how carefully painted the buildings, let the owner neglect for a while his prized and valuable acres and they will revert again to the wild and

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be swallowed by the jungle or the wasteland. The bias of nature is toward the wilderness. Never toward the fruitful field.”

Some of you may be living now with walls of your life surrounded by ruin. It all began very slowly—a loose piece of stone or mortar or a crack in the wall, a hole, and then an entry was made. Then the walls came down; the enemy gained access.

You have to examine this; I can't. But are the walls down in your life? If we look around in the body of Christ, if we look for walls that are down in our life or we begin looking at how we can minister in the body of Christ, it's not hard to look around and see walls down all over the place. Churches that do not model the character of Christ. No vision or no love for the lost. Churches marked by strife and struggle, beset with doctrinal extremes. Exclusive societies. In some cases lack of leadership. In some cases dictatorial leadership. Within this church there are walls down. Walls down of service, walls down of opportunity, walls down of fellowship. At times we live for self-fulfillment rather than a call to duty.

I think it is the crying need of our time to somehow balance in our culture and our day the need for self fulfillment and the call to duty.

III. As we see needs in the body of Christ we would do well to follow Nehemiah's pattern.

When he becomes aware of walls that are down, walls that he was meant to do something about, Nehemiah does not immediately initiate any great plan to do anything about the walls that are down. He simply begins to ponder over the problem, to weep over the problem, and to pray over the problem.

He sits down and cries, as the text tells us. Those walls had been down for one hundred forty-one years. I'm sure Nehemiah was aware in an historical sense that the walls of Jerusalem were

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down. He knew that Zerubbabel hadn't rebuilt them. He knew that Ezra hadn't rebuilt them. But I think for the first time here Nehemiah has become personally aware that the walls were down. It may be that you can look at walls down in your life and let it go. Then suddenly the Spirit strikes fire with our life as we become aware of walls down. As we do that, we become responsive to walls that are down. Nehemiah sinks into a deep depression. He is concerned. We can be traumatized by disaster, traumatized by problems. It requires, I think, for us as people of God living now to want to be especially sensitive to the Lord for those areas where He's calling us to be alert to personal walls in our life or walls in the body of Christ that are down. So often the problem is so overwhelming there seems like there's absolutely nothing we can do. The only thing we can do at the beginning is weep. But as Nehemiah becomes aware of the problem and weeps over it, he begins to see walls of faith arise through prayer; verses 5–11 tell us of Nehemiah's prayer. I would say this is such a fundamental design of the Holy Spirit in the Book of Nehemiah to tell us what to do when we see problems in our life or in the body of Christ. The first thing is not to offer any solution. The first thing to do is take it to the Lord in prayer and begin to get His perspective on what's going on.

An anonymous writer wrote, "I wish that there were some wonderful place called the Land of Beginning Again. Where all our mistakes and all our heartaches and all our poor selfish griefs could be dropped as a shabby old coat at the door and never be put on again."

I think that's what prayer does. It affords that opportunity—the land of beginning again. If we are to begin again it can only be done as we come to the Lord in prayer. What is prayer to the Lord? What constitutes prayer? Nehemiah is a man of prayer. Throughout this book we'll see prayer after prayer in this book. Here in his prayer is a classic example of pattern praying. The first example in his prayer of how to pray is remembering who God is: "Oh LORD, God of

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heaven. The great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of love to those who love him and obey his commands” (verse 5).

I see first of all that Nehemiah focuses in prayer not on the problem but on the character and nature of God. This is so critical and where I so often fall short. I want to bring immediately to the Lord the problem. But the problem is what is pulling me down. What needs to pull me up is the nature of the God that I serve. Nehemiah is a captive person. He is a servant of the king but he is not of the nationality of the king. He is in pressed labor even though it is favorable labor—a cupbearer to the king. But even though he is captive to someone else in another nation and his people are in captivity, he acknowledges the God that he serves.

Remembering in our time when the walls are broken down who God is, is the way to begin to see the walls arise. If we forget who God is, that indeed He is the sovereign Lord and has all power, we fall short and cannot rebuild. It is God who is great.

This great prayer that is lifted to God about His sovereignty and greatness comes from a man who is living nine hundred miles away from the temple of Jerusalem. Nine hundred miles in ancient standards of travel would be like trying to go to China today. It took four months to get from where Nehemiah was in captivity back to Jerusalem. The place was in ruins but he saw who God was.

Jeremiah in Jeremiah 33:3 shows this same example of prayer in the midst of devastation remembering the greatness of God. “Call unto me and I will show you great and mighty things which thou knowest not.” Where is Jeremiah when he’s praying? He is in prison. He has been in prison for years. Yet God is saying to him, “Call unto me and I will show you great and mighty things.”

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In Acts 4:24, when Peter and John have been thrown in prison for their faith and come out and they meet with the other Christians, they begin to pray. They don't focus on the problem. They say, "O sovereign Lord who created the heaven and the earth," and that undergirded their faith by remembering and recalling the greatness of God.

I have got to as a person get away from the complex when I deal with personal problems and when I deal with what God is calling me to do in my ministry, I've got to get away from that sense of inferiority which approaches problems from the standpoint that says, "I'll probably fail." I think there comes a time when an inferiority complex, as much as I poke fun at it, ceases to be funny. It becomes a matter of whether or not we are going to give in to a lie. Or whether we're going to give in to the greatness of God and his restoring ability. When the emphasis is upon me, upon you, and not upon God, we are destined to weakness rather than power.

But Nehemiah, through remembering God and who God is and His power, is aligning himself with God. And whoever aligns himself with God is armed with all the forces of the invisible world and is bound to win. He remembers God's great power and he remembers God's great covenant love for His people. God loves His people and Nehemiah says God loves His people who obey him. The kind of love that Nehemiah says God has for His people is not the sort of love that comes across the television tube, "I love you." It is the kind of love that you experience when you go to an altar in a marriage and commit yourself for better or for worse to someone for the rest of your life and you say in that, "I love you." It's that kind of personal, direct, covenantal love.

That's the sort of love that Nehemiah reminds himself of. God is not out there somewhere in the distance shouting towards over the horizon of space from some distant planet, "I love you!" His love is personal and individual. He has an interest in us, as Nehemiah is saying, "God is

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interested in me. Your eyes are attentive and Your eyes are open to the prayer Your servant is praying. I'm not praying into space. I'm not praying to four walls. God, You hear and You're aware of me." He steels himself for his problem by remembering at the outset of his prayer who God is.

Then in the later part of verse 6 and 7 he repents of his sins and the sins of his people. Nehemiah does not take a better-than-thou attitude. He does not say, "I confess the sin of those Israelites that they have committed against You. They have acted very wickedly against You." No.

Nehemiah involves himself in the confession and uses the personal pronouns "I" and "we." He has had his responsibility to share as well. We never really come out of the walls of desolation that we are in unless we begin to take responsibility that we have had some involvement in the problem. One of the things we find so easy to do is to scapegoat when things go wrong and say "It's their fault...If you had the family that I had...If you came from the church that I came from..." All these things may have been perfectly true but somewhere in life we have to take the responsibility and come to God with an honest and clean confession of our own failure and of our own sin.

Nehemiah takes that responsibility. It is a purging and cleaning moment. When he has repented of his sin he goes on. He does something so tremendous here. He rehearses God's promises in verses 8–10. He remembers and he asks God to remember: "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses." Moses lived a thousand years before Nehemiah. So when Nehemiah is saying, "God, remember Moses," he's going back a thousand years in time. In Deuteronomy 30 and Leviticus 26, Moses had prophesied that when God's people, if they went into exile because of sin, if in that exile they would repent, God would bring them back. All Nehemiah does in this moment in his prayer is to remind God that a thousand years before He had made that promise.

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Now His people were in exile and they were going to cash in on that promise and take God at His word and ask Him to bring them back. What powerful word! He expected God to be faithful to His word.

When we come to the Lord and confess that the walls of our life are broken down or that some things of ministry that God has alerted us to have a problem, when we confess that it has been partly our responsibility for the problem and the walls being down we can say, “Lord You have said, ‘If My people which are called by My name will humble themselves and pray then I will hear from heaven and I will heal their land. I will forgive their sin.’” Isn’t this what the Lord assures us that He will do when we come to Him? We remember what God will do if we put our trust in Him.

Nehemiah, in his prayer, closes it by expecting success. He says “Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man” (Nehemiah 1:11). He is reaching for success. He is expecting that when he comes before the king that indeed he will meet with favor. He does not walk away from his prayer saying, “The prayer hasn’t made any difference. I’ll just go back the way it was before.” I believe that Nehemiah, since he prayed for many days (we’ll actually find he prayed for about four months before he ever talked to the king about his problem) I think that he had written this prayer down about the first week of his crying and praying and every day he prayed this prayer. I think it was a pattern prayer for him. I think he prayed it, memorized it and prayed it many, many times. He kept saying at the end of the prayer “Today might be the day that God will give me success. Give Your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.” He continued to build himself up.

It may be in your life and in my life we may need to do the same kind of thing. To begin to look at the walls that are down in our life then come to the Lord in prayer—writing out a prayer—

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remembering who God is in the midst of our dilemma. And bringing to Him our confession of our involvement in the problem and then rehearsing back what God has told us He would do if we confess and come to Him on our knees and then expecting when we have done that for God indeed to work. I know of no better way to rebuild the walls of discipline and character and morals and attitudes in our own personal life than through such an intensity and earnestness as this before the Lord. Give Your servant success.

Someone has said, "God cannot do something unless we work. He's filled the hills with marble but He's never built a cathedral. He filled the mountains with iron ore but he has never made a needle or a jet engine. He leaves that to us. We must work. We must take the materials that He gives us. If God then has left many things dependent upon man's thinking and his working why should He not leave some thing dependent on our praying. He has done so. Ask He says and you shall receive. There are some things that God will not give us unless we ask."

Nehemiah comes and asks. He is confronted with the problem and he takes the problem to prayer.

IV. The last phrase of verse 11 tells us that he is in a position where God can use him about the matter for which he has prayed.

He says, "I was cupbearer to the king." Whether this involved him being prime minister or simply the kind of a person who enjoyed the king's intimacy, because he was the person closest to the king, he tasted the food before the king ate it. So if anybody was trying to slip something to the king the cupbearer would die first. I don't know if I'd particularly enjoy that kind of work. It'd be like everyday facing the lions all over again. If you're going to have that kind of occupation you have to live prepared to die.

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Nehemiah knew he was in a position of counsel to the king. It may very well be that God could use him in the solution of the problem.

That had a tremendous impact upon my life. Former president of Evangel College, my friend and brother in the Lord and a man I look up to great deal, he was my boss, Dr. J. Robert Ashcroft; he used to say on many occasions when we had prayed about something, whether it was in a large group or just a small group of us praying together, he'd say at some point, "Remember you are part of the answer to your prayers." I could never at first figure out what he meant. Then it began to dawn on me. We pray for someone else's salvation, for example. Then the Lord may be saying to us, You've been praying for that person's salvation. What are you to do? Are you to write a letter, give a witness? You're part of the answer to your prayer. You're part of the resources God will use in bringing the answer.

Nehemiah sees himself in this position where he has potential to act. The former chaplain of the United States Senate prays a word that I think would be a description of Nehemiah and of the person who is ready to have walls rebuilt in their life. He says, "I am only one but I am one. I cannot do everything but I can do something. What I can do that I ought to do. And what I ought to do by the grace of God I shall do."

As we have shared today, have you perceived need, problems that need to be addressed in your life or in the body of Christ? Are you ready to take that need or problem to the Lord in prayer, in the kind of praying that Nehemiah represents? When you have taken it to the Lord in prayer are you now positioned ready to act and do whatever God speaks to you to do seeking His face that He might give you success?

Closing Prayer

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As I come to You today, Father, I speak on behalf of this congregation. I give to You first our praise. We remind ourselves of your greatness. We remind ourselves of the power of Your Word, which speaks to us, this distant word of millenniums, which You by Your Holy Spirit have quickened to our hearts today. We praise You for Your Word. No other ancient book speaks to us. Your Word is living and alive. We praise You for that. We praise You that You are aware of each one of our lives. If we were to envision our lives now as a city in which there was in the center a temple representing our relationship with You by means of the new birth and the shed blood of Christ on the cross, the outside are the walls, the one aspect of our life which find us coming in contact with the world, with family, with other people, with temptation. We would now, Lord, take our place to simply view in the heavenly places and look down upon our life and see if there have been walls in our life that have been breached by the enemy. In fact, gates and sections of the wall that have been out so long that we have become accustomed to the raid of the enemy against our soul. Sins for which we used to feel conflict now only bring a twinge of regret and memory. We confess those walls that are down by virtue of the sin that has settled in our life. We confess those areas of our life where walls are down because of broken relationships. We confess where walls are down because of broken disciplines and we remember You Lord, how You have taught us that when we see these things in our life when we are in exile, when we can no longer sing a song to You because we are in a strange land, the strange land of nonvictory in our lives, we come to You, Lord God, and we ask You to build anew in our life. As we confess to You Lord, we claim that word of Yours which tells us that if we confess our sins You are faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. That word which says, "If my people, called by My name will humble themselves and pray then I will hear from heaven, forgive their sin and restore their land" (2 Chronicles 7:14). We recall what You

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will do for us. We think of this as well, we for Your body. For this church. That it is Your desire. It is Your Word that has said, "I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). Lord, we praise You that You are building Your church. If we were building it, it would be in bad shape. But You are building it and we praise You that what You build, You build well. We ask Lord that in our individual lives, in our experience in the body of Christ and in the body of Christ all over the world, that You will give us success. That Your name and Your cause and Your people will in the Spirit prosper and succeed in the calling which You have given to us. Grant this Lord, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.