

“Conviction”
Nehemiah 1:1-1
Nehemiah: Rebuilding a City & People for God
Mercy Hill Church | January 8, 2020

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.” ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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, ⁶ 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. ⁷ We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. 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.

Big Idea: The start of anything significant always begins – continues, and ends – with prayer. Prayer is a (spiritual) response and a reflection of our convictions.

Historical Context of Nehemiah (v.1)

- **When?** Month of Chislev = November/December, 20th year (~445 B.C) during the rule of the Persian king Artaxerxes
 - 722 B.C.: Northern Kingdom (Israel) conquered by Assyrians
 - 586 B.C.: Southern Kingdom (Judah) conquered by Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar
 - Temple is destroyed and Jewish are exiled mostly to Babylon (cf. Daniel 1) or Egypt
 - 539 B.C.: Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great conquers Babylon
 - 536 B.C.: Cyrus allows Jewish people to return and start rebuild the temple (cf. 2 Chronicles 36:15-23, Ezra 1-2) – only a small remnant of Jews returned.
 - 522 – 486 B.C.: Persian king Darius the Great (cf. Ezra 6:6-12)’s decree leads to the completion/rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem
 - 465 B.C.: Artaxerxes becomes king of Persia) until 424 BC. – during which the book of Nehemiah starts (cf. Nehemiah 2:1)
- **Where?** Susa – not the capital but the winter palace of King Artaxerxes
- **Who?** Nehemiah (means, “the Lord comforts”), born and raised in Persia to Jewish parents; cupbearer to King Artaxerxes.
- **What?** Book of Nehemiah is about the rebuilding of God’s city (walls of Jerusalem) (cf. Nehemiah 1-7) and the rebuilding (or reforming) of God’s people (cf. Nehemiah 7-13).

1. A Conviction for God's Purposes (vv.2-4a)

- A visit from Nehemiah's (biological?) brother from Judah (v.2a) will become a major turning point in Nehemiah's life – and the people of God.
- Nehemiah inquires Hanani of two things (v.2b)
 - 1. How is God's people?
 - 2. How is God's city (i.e. Jerusalem – where the temple of God is located)?
- Hanani's response to both questions is filled with bad news (v.3):
 - 1. God's people are in, "great trouble and shame"
 - 2. God's city is in ruin, "the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are destroyed"
 - Past efforts of rebuilding the temple and the walls of Jerusalem were not without opposition from others (cf. Ezra 4:4-6, 7-24)
- Nehemiah's immediate response of grief (re: "sat down," "wept and mourned for days") reveals the deep conviction, concern and care he has for God's city and God's people – God's purposes – despite the far away (~1,000 miles!) Nehemiah is from Jerusalem.

2. A Conviction to Pray(er) (vv. 4b-11)

- While Nehemiah's initial response to the tragic news was grief, his subsequent response is one of prayer (and fasting)
 - Fasting throughout Scripture often is accompanied with prayer in different circumstances from confession/repentance, seeking guidance, worship, mourning, strengthening of prayer, etc. (cf. 2 Samuel 1:12, Daniel 9:3-5, Joel 2:12-13, Jonah 3:5-9, Luke 2:37, Matthew 17:20-21, Acts 14:23)
- 3 common responses to being (spiritually) convicted
 - 1. "Charge ahead with passion" – but no plan (nor prayer): Notice Nehemiah doesn't just jump into action right away to solve the problem
 - 2. "Be moved, but not move": Notice that Nehemiah doesn't just go back to life as before – as if he never heard the news about the condition of Jerusalem and the people there, as if he never wept or had his heart convicted.
 - 3. "Charge ahead – in prayer with a purpose...and a plan": Notice Nehemiah charges ahead in purposeful prayer (which leads to a plan as we'll see in Nehemiah 2).
- Oswald Chambers quote: "Too often we treat prayer as the preparation for the work of the church. Do you not see? Prayer *is* the work of the church."
 - The importance of prayer throughout the book of Nehemiah (cf. 2:4, 4:4-5, 5:19, 6:14, 9:1-38, 13:14, 31)

4 Aspects to Nehemiah's Prayer

- **Aspect #1: A Conviction of Who God Is (vv.5-6a): Adoration**
 - D.A. Carson quote: "Effective prayer is the fruit of a relationship with God, not a technique for acquiring blessings."
 - Nehemiah doesn't pray to an abstract or generic god. Rather Nehemiah knows very clearly to whom he is praying to – who God is
 - 1. "LORD" – Yahweh, the personal, covenant name of God
 - 2. "God of heaven" – Transcendent nature of God, "supreme power and dominion"

- 3. “Great” & 4. “Awesome” – God as exalted, glorious, distinct from other Ancient Near East gods, and worthy of worship
 - 5. “Faithful” – God as immanent, relational, personal loyal and steadfast (“hesed”) in His love because of His covenant with the people of Israel.
 - Nehemiah also knows who he is – in light of who God is – a servant of God and prays with reverence and humility (v.6b)
- **Aspect #2: A Conviction of Corporate & Personal Sin (vv.6b-7): Confession**
 - Nehemiah knows the bigger picture (and history) of Israel: Israel was conquered by Assyria and then by Babylon because of Israel’s sin – despite countless warnings from God via prophets.
 - Notice Nehemiah doesn’t separate or distant himself into “those people” and “me” – but rather counts himself and includes himself – “...confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against You. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. We...” (v.6b-7a)
 - Sin: disobedience of God’s commands – both in action (sins of commission) and inaction (sins of omission) as well as in attitude (heart). Ultimately, sin is failure to worship and love God and to love others. While one can and does sin against others, all sin trickles up to and against God.
- **Aspect #3: A Conviction of God's Promises & Redemption (vv.8-10): Thanksgiving**
 - Nehemiah knows, remembers, recalls and prays the Word of God -- quotes verses from Torah (cf. Leviticus 26:33, 39-42; Deuteronomy 12:5, 9:29).
 - In doing so, Nehemiah remembers and holds onto the promises of God’s Word – more specifically, that God is a God of redemption and His covenant promises.
 - Nehemiah remembers and recalls that Israel was never a great nation or people – but God chose them in His grace, mercy and sovereignty. God redeemed (i.e. rescued and saved) them out of the hands of Egypt
 - Today, we are – or can be – redeemed by God’s grace and mercy and love through Jesus Christ. The gospel, the good news, is that though you and I are all sinners and rightfully deserving of God’s judgment and wrath, you and I can be forgiven of our guilt and freed from our shame because Jesus took on that guilt and shame for you and I on the cross.
 - This is a promise God made which you can hold Him to keep!
- **Aspect #4: A Conviction of God's Power & Provision (v.11): Supplication**
 - Nehemiah knows and believes God not only hears his prayers - -but is also able and capable of answering his prayer. In fact, it is only God who can bring to fruition whatever plans Nehemiah has in mind -- “...give success...grant him mercy...”
 - Nehemiah prays to God because he knows it is only God who is powerful and able to provide – not himself, not King Artaxerxes or anyone else.
 - Nehemiah believes God’s power exceeds even the power of King Artaxerxes and that even Artaxerxes is under God’s sovereign rule - “...in the sight of this man” (v.11b)
- Nehemiah’s prayer is a good model of how and what to pray. In fact, when Jesus taught His disciples to pray (i.e. the Lord’s prayer) it’s similar and parallels several aspects of Nehemiah’s prayer (cf. Matthew 6:6-9).

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Reflection Questions

- When was the last time you cried or wept? What are the things which burden or weigh on your mind or heart? What might this reveal about the values or priorities of your heart? Have you ever mourned over the condition of the church/Christians and the world today?
- When you face difficulties, discouragement, and disappointment, who (or what) do you typically turn to -- why?
- Why is it easy for things/people to be, "out of sight, out of mind"? What are ways you can better keep God's purposes, God's people and God's mission in your mind (and your heart)?
- What aspects of Nehemiah's prayer are things you can incorporate into your prayers? What aspects of Nehemiah's prayer come easier for you to pray -- and which aspects of are more difficult? Why?
- What ways does Nehemiah's response (and prayer) serve as an example to you? How does it point you to Jesus and the Gospel?
- Even though our church's annual "Week of Prayer" concludes today, what are ways you, your family and our church can continue to be steadfast in prayer in this new year?