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**Reading: Nehemiah chapters 1&2**

## **1 - Speaking with the Lord about His concerns**

This study opens for us some profound truths about the nature of prayer as conversation with God about His concerns. We shall see the following:

1. That all exchange between God and men and women depends upon the initiating revelation of a gracious God. A revelation first about Himself and His character, and then about the nature of the response which He requires to this revelation. This second matter is one of how we are to reciprocate; He sets or relation to Him and asks that we respond accordingly. Our reciprocating is His gift to us.
2. That there is a movement of revelation by God, which is followed by our trust in that revelation, and then there is a knowing of God Himself, registered both in Himself and also in us.
3. To be drawn into this revelation – response – movement is God's gift to us. And when it is received it draws us to be concerned about His kingdom and rule.
4. To know this way of living informs our conversations with Him. We are caught up in His purposes and exchanges with His people.
5. We are to know who we are in relation to Him first from seeing what He is doing with "us"; long before we are to personally consider who I am, myself.
6. This aligning of ourselves with the concerns [kingdom] of the King often affects our emotions. It makes our life and personal responses and concerns dependant upon the movement of the King's concerns.
7. The historical situations of the people of God are the setting in which we find ourselves. We trust that God is doing what is right and appropriate to His Mind in His dealings with us. Each of us finds our meaning and understanding in what He is doing with us.
8. Private prayer can be extremely corporate in its intent and focus. In this study of Nehemiah we are studying a man's private speaking with God about grave corporate matters. In this way he seeks first the kingdom of God and finds that all the rest is "added" to him.

## **2 - A man who was given to have kingdom concerns in his time**

Nehemiah was a man who, whilst serving the Persian King Artaxerxes in the capital city of Susa has his mind upon the matters of the God of Israel. He has opportunity to seek out information concerning

[a] the Jews who had escaped the slaughter of Jerusalem and also those who had survived the captivity,  
and

[b] concerning Jerusalem. [Neh.1.2]

Nehemiah was passionate about the matters in hand. This awareness in his heart is shown for, upon learning that the ones who remained in the province are in shame and deep distress and that the walls of Jerusalem are broken down, he wept and mourned for days [1.3-4]. He began to fast and pray before God. In this way he shows that he regards his own eating and life as of secondary concern to the matters which God has in hand. Being deeply moved in his emotions - he looks in the Scriptures and in the promises of God finds something which arouses his mind to action. At least enough to pray a prayer about.

**ACTION!** Notice and apply to yourself:

1. The importance of having one's mind set to see the direction of God's concerns in life.
2. Do not fear to be passionate and emotionally involved in the affairs of God - to see His will and to hasten it forward is a right drive and ambition. Such an intensity is the gift of the Lord to you about the matter.
3. To seek out information about the situation is an act of will - it implies that the man has a desire to see how things stand in the affairs of God's people. What a person wants to know about is often an indication of

what they are prepared to do something about.

4. When you are moved to compassion or disturbed, then it is important to go and seek what is the mind of the Lord. Kingdom people are those who do not move until they have enough of the mind of the Lord to pray and then look for the next step. This man did that.

### **3 - His approach and asking of God - Nehemiah 1.5-11**

#### **1. He understands that God is a King**

How this man approaches God is important for us in our praying. Nehemiah was a man who worked in the presence of a king himself. He understood that kings were to be approached with care.

**ACTION!** If you live in a democracy then you may have to change your mind here right away. For if your ideas of democratic government are influencing the way you approach God then you are off line before you begin. You may even have to repent of the way you have not approached God as a King in the past. We shall have to learn this approach carefully. Not because we are unsafe with our heavenly Father, but because He is a King and a holy One - even though we know He loves us.

#### **2. He approaches God on the basis of previously revealed knowledge.**

Nehemiah keeps on referring to the objective witness of the acts of God in the past [1.5b,10] and also Nehemiah has a view about God's character which is revealed by God Himself in his Scriptures and His covenants and promises [1.5b,8,9,10]. In this way he deals with God in conversational prayer on the basis of what God has shown about Himself in the past. If you think about it we do the same with one another. We have an impression of one another and we bring that impression into every conversation we have between each other.

Just as each of us like to be dealt with on the basis of what we have revealed about ourselves, so does God - for really, we have learned this from Him!

#### **ACTION!**

1. This is important - we need to approach the Lord on the basis of what He has said about Himself. Too often we think of God as the way we like to imagine Him.

Indeed, in these days of "imaging" we are often asked by Christian leaders to "imagine" the Lord and then to speak to Him as if He is what we have imagined. In this way they are encouraging us to set up a mental idol and speak to that is if it is the Lord. There is no substitute for what God has said about Himself. Stay with the Bible - don't depart from it as the only reliable source book concerning the person and nature of God. If you have ever "imaged" something and then spoken to it as if it is the God of heaven then repent and change your mind. Ask forgiveness of the God of the Bible and renounce such a way of "talking/praying".

*DB: I see three problems with this "imaging".*

*First, it commits us to rely upon a mental technique for our relating to God rather than a relationship on the grounds that He has set.*

*Second, our "image" is derived from ourselves or other spirits and this commits us to working in the flesh rather than in the spirit with the aid of the Holy Spirit within us.*

*And third, the data of the Bible is to be the model for the way we think about God. Thinking about God in this way is different from making an image in our mind. We are not imagining that God is here simply using our subjective abilities, we are trusting that He is here and what He is like has been established on the objective grounds that He has said so. It is this latter revelation which our minds have understood.*

2. Commit yourself to become an avid student of the Old and the New Testaments. In this way, your knowledge of what God has said about Himself in various settings will increase. And, so your conversations with Him will be on sure ground and safety. It is just like swotting up on the royal personage before you have your interview. It is wise to do so - and it saves you from bad mistakes in dealing with the King.

### **3. He recognizes the holiness of God [1.5]**

He approaches God aware that there is no one like Him. He is a great and awesome God - a person-age Who is the God of heaven. Nehemiah wants the Lord to appreciate that he, Nehemiah, has a right view of Him. In this way he shows the Lord that he is approaching Him on the basis of the revelation which God has made about Himself.

We are in a different place to Nehemiah here - although the holiness of God has not changed, nor the awesomeness of His Person. When he speaks of the God of heaven, he understands that the Lord is inaccessible to the person speaking on the earth. We also approach God along the same pattern as Nehemiah, but upon the basis of the finished work of Jesus the Messiah, which in our time, is a completed work. We live in a different time slot - in the plan of God we live after the coming of the Son of Man. We also have the Spirit of Christ within us. When we consider the holiness of God and our unworthiness to approach, we rely upon the finished work of Jesus as the Victim whose blood has atoned for our sins. We understand that we are in a right relationship to the Father through the work of the Son, and finally, we have a High Priest in heaven alongside the Father who intercedes for us there.

But this death of Christ only serves to make us even more aware of the holiness of the Lord. For if the blood of His Son is only that which can bring us near - then He really takes the holiness of his Person seriously. Be impressed with this - in our day it is a lesson which is not often learned.

What Nehemiah understands here is that the nature of God does not change. He recognizes that the nature of this great and awesome God is that He "preserves covenant and loving kindness". Now this is not going to be the basis for "manipulating" God - that is something one never does to a King. But it is a grounds to appeal to a King on the basis that it is something to which He has pre-committed Himself. It is grounded on the fact that God cannot deny Himself. If He is like that then He may be counted on to maintain His character.

This becomes a grounds to have great confidence and trust in the Person of God. Where He has demonstrated his consistency before, is a place which affords a foothold to stand in conversation with Him which can increase boldness and faith. And there is a simple reason for this - God loves to be taken seriously about His Person. For He is Who he is - if you treat Him that way He will be honoured by your requests. He always does what brings Him honour, that is something which is right - it is appropriate. Glory belongs to Him alone.

### **4. Nehemiah understands God's merciful Character - and so he asks for attention as he confesses his own sins and those of the people of Israel**

#### **[a] Nehemiah must know mercy.**

Just as the prophet Daniel said before him [Daniel 9.1-19], Nehemiah understands that "compassion and forgiveness" belong to the God of Israel. In our own understanding gleaned from the NT, we see that repentance is a gift granted by God [Acts 11.18].

It is the revelation of the mercy of God which leads us to confess our sins. For the confession is making public what is hidden. And when we do not hide our sins from God, but openly confess them, then we must be absolutely convinced of His acceptance of us "even though we have rebelled against Him". Nehemiah knows of the grace of God here- as his confession manifests.

How much more so do we have a boldness of access to God than Nehemiah. Our revelation is that as we live at a later date than he, we have come at a time when God has acted in Christ for the salvation of the world and has reconciled the world to Himself "not counting their trespasses against them" [2 Corinthians 5.19]. As we confess our sins then, we are taking God at his word of revelation of His mercy. We know He is not counting our sins and rebellion against us, so we bring our sins into the light.

#### **[b] Nehemiah is a corporate man - he stands personally before God just as he is aware that God is dealing with a whole people, of whom he has a part in their destiny.**

Notice here that Nehemiah is taking up his intercession on behalf of the people of Israel among whom he is counted himself. He confesses their sins, and his own. He stands in solidarity with the people. He is dealing with God's own work in regard to the Jewish people.

How much more so for us. We stand at a different time when God has made provision of a Saviour for the world. When we stand before God to pray for others, we are counting ourselves as found "in Him"

[Philippians 3.9] not having a righteousness of our own, but one which comes from God on the basis of faith.

Nehemiah then - in regard to Israel - as are we, - in regard to the world - makes supplication. He is not working out of a personal basis of his own arrived at with God. So it is also with us, it is on the basis that we are found incorporated into the people upon whom God has had mercy and has made provision for them to go forward with Him together. In our time, God has made provision for the salvation of the race of mankind, and we are declaring it to them in the preaching of the Gospel; seeing who it is that He calls to come and receive it to themselves.

We need this very corporate sense – it is the essential humility which acknowledges that we are before God “with others” and is the basis of our intercessory stance towards them.

**[c] The identification with Israel and confession of sins.**

Nehemiah identifies with the people for whom he is interceding. He understands that he stands with them before God. Notice that he does not identify with them because that is the way to move God but because it is a fact. Nehemiah does not pray as a Pharisee, removed from the people amongst whom he is placed. He is able to squarely stand with them because he is genuinely living with them in heart. This is where the genuineness of his heart felt commitment expresses his integrity. Later on, he shall see the people of Israel in their land confess their sins also en masse [chapter 9]. Nehemiah is the first to start.

**ACTION!** This is vital. If you will be serious in your praying for the people you wish, you must humble yourself under God's hand to receive the revelation from Him that as He has made provision for salvation for all, so He treats us in solidarity with them. We must not ever stand before Him to pray for them as if somehow we are not collectively identified with them and their condition.

**[d] His willingness to accept his personal responsibility in the sins of his people.**

This standing with the people of Israel was something, which, if Nehemiah understood they were in a position of being under the judgement of God then so was he. He didn't attempt to slip away from that. Once again, there is something here of personal integrity - if we think we can pray for others who stand under the severe censure of God then we must not pray as the hypocrite; we must understand that “I too”, am involved. So we ask forgiveness.

**ACTION!** This is a vital place for the church of God to stand as forgiven sinners. For, very often in the church there is a view of the outsider as someone who is in a less than best place with God, and often suffering from the results of their sins. And of course, this is the case - for God says so.

Sadly however, for those who have tasted of the grace of God there is a temptation [and it is that!] to regard the others as less than ourselves in relation to the Lord. This is not the case; the grace of God is extended to “whosoever will”. Let us understand that to have the joy of the Lord does not mean that we are ever in a place to look down on another human being - it is the reverse. Jesus is the Saviour of the world. It is the nature of the free grace of God in experience that leads us to have an identity and compassion with others who have a Saviour but as yet are living in a way they will not come to Him. Let us keep that!

**5. Nehemiah pleads God's word and promise. [1.8,9]**

He quotes to the Lord the penalty for unfaithfulness which He stated as it is recorded in Leviticus 26.33. It is among a list of things the Lord will do to his people if they desert Him. In other words, Nehemiah accepts that they are in this predicament as a result of their own action in the light of the Lord's threatened penalty. Notice that the penalty was consistent with the action of the people to turn from Him. In this way Nehemiah is stating that the situation has come about at God's word in response to their own action. Such a penalty was part of the covenant which God had made with them. There were blessings as well as cursings - and this is why Nehemiah calls God one who “preserves the covenant” [1.5].

You see, it is precisely because he has an awareness of the overall activity of God that Nehemiah is informed in his praying. He knows that God has committed Himself to Israel. He understands that the commitment is in the form of an everlasting covenant. So he is confident that, even if there are times in which he can see the whole of the nation enduring difficulty which comes about at the hand of the Lord he is still full of trust. For he is content to fall into the hands of the Lord. He understands that discipline

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is not a final matter with a merciful God Who fathers them.

But he sees something else - for, because they are bound to the Lord in covenant, it is possible, under God's mercy that they will find a place of repentance, and then there is a way back to being useful to the Lord once again as a good witness to the nations. So he quotes back to the Lord that possibility. The curse had taken the form "if ..." [1.8], the blessing can come about if they will change for there is a "but if..." [1.9] and he quotes Deuteronomy 30.2-4 to the effect that the Lord promised to bring them back from the places where He had scattered them.

**ACTION!** We need to understand the whole of God's purposes and where the history of the world is tracking in such a way as we can perceive the agenda of the Lord. He has given us enough information about this. Do study the Scriptures to understand this agenda. In this way, we are asking the "kingdom questions" before we get to pray. We are already having it settled in our will that we want to do the kingdom thing - it is what the King wants - which informs our prayers.

### **6. He pleads the work of God already accomplished**

Now, here is the same thing in another form. For, because Nehemiah has an understanding that God has a plan, he is able with power to state the past things of the plan as accomplished and then to agree with God about not losing the overall goal [1.10]. And he does this by quoting Moses' words about what God had done during the time he saved the Hebrews from Egypt. Nehemiah refers to the time when Moses was pleading for the Lord to forgive the people for making the golden calf whilst he was on the mountain. The quotation is made from Exodus 32.11 and Deuteronomy 9.29 - both quotations refer to the same event. In this way Nehemiah is appearing before a King and saying to Him, "Look what you have accomplished already... now, see how important this people and the covenant you have with them are in your sight for you have done this much for them."

In reminding God of the covenant relationship they have, in which God reveals Himself and Israel responds to that revelation, Nehemiah pleads the relationship as one initiated by God and Himself as the basis for it going forward. If it were not that God is engaged with Israel in this gracious and merciful way, then there would be nothing to plead. But He is, and they are seeing already His desire that there shall be a "but if..." - the matter of their present rebellion is not final, because they are in covenant with a merciful God Who has taken the initiative to open that relationship and also to maintain it.

### **7. He makes request for conditions to be right for the taking of his first step. He is looking for guidance to go on.**

Having asked for attention again, Nehemiah then reminds the Lord how it is that the one asking and those who are with him are those "who revere" God's Name.

What Nehemiah now asks is that the first step in his plan which he has might now happen. [And he has a way forward for when the king asks [2.5] he does know what he is asking]. On the basis that if God granted him compassion in the sight of "this man" [i.e. the King Artaxerxes] then he would proceed.

#### **Notice how practical Nehemiah is.**

**First**, he has an idea that what he wants to do is to rebuild Jerusalem's walls. This would serve the King of Kings.

**Second**, he recognizes that he is a slave to the Persian King. Which means -

**Third**, that if he is to accomplish this idea, then he shall need it to become the project of the Persian King. For the permission of the Persian is necessary for Nehemiah to act - being under his authority. Notice he doesn't seek his freedom from the king so that he can act himself. His corporate understanding helps him here. He is not a man wanting to do the will of God who is cluttered by some side agenda which has benefit for himself. And this is his genius - he believes that God is such a King of kings that He can actually cause His agenda to be effected through the word of Artaxerxes. In this way Nehemiah is a man who demonstrates that God has the nations His hand and that He can use them to do His will.

**Fourth**, he understands the court protocol. He is not in position to speak to the king unless the king should speak to him first. But, astonishingly, he can speak to the King of kings about this Persian king of Artaxerxes is under God's kingly authority. He who prays to the merciful God of Israel has an open door to



the authorities of the world.

**Fifth**, although Nehemiah lives personally appreciating the compassion of the King of kings, he is subject to the limitation that he is, at this point, in need of compassion from the Persian king. For, unless he has that, it is unlikely that a Persian king will agree to the re-building of the fortress of a people who his people have conquered in the past. Such an act is contrary to the interests of the empire.

This helps us understand that it is by the stooping of God to initiate relation with us that we have been granted a right access to Him. It was first experienced in Israel with the covenant initiated by God with them [Abraham] and in these last days by the incarnation of the word of God in Jesus Christ. God has come and stooped to us so that out of His poverty we might become rich in access to Him in intimacy and knowledge of God. It is prayer which is the expression of this very graciousness and mercy.

So, Nehemiah's prayer is for the chain of events to begin where it must - he needs the compassion of a king before he can begin. It is this first link in the chain which is the request he makes to the Lord.

Nehemiah is prepared to become the answer to his own prayer. He is actually prepared to do the work - all he is asking is, that God should grant him the start off, so that he can have the confidence that he is on the right track. And then, he shall prove it, step by step, that the plan he has in his mind has actually come from God Himself. The book is a record of that plan.

## **4 - How Nehemiah watches to see answers to prayers**

### **1. It may be what seems to be a very trivial thing**

We have seen how Nehemiah is shut up to being unable to do anything unless his earthly master will allow it. He has also asked the Lord for Artaxerxes to show him compassion. He now goes on with his service to the king for four months. [In the Babylonian calendar from Chislev [1.1] [which is November-December in our calendar], to the month Nisan [2.1] [March-April] in the same year of Artaxerxes' reign [the twentieth, which would be 444 BC] he waits for the answer of his prayer to show. He is a patient man and he cannot act anyway until he gets that first break. The king's compassion for him and then his interest.

This was not a casual matter for Nehemiah – it was his grand matter before God, and became his life's work.

### **2. God uses the past consistency and godliness**

Notice how the consistent happiness of Nehemiah in the service of the king had established a perception in the king's mind concerning Nehemiah's normal disposition. Behind this is a commitment by this Hebrew slave to faithfully serve the master he had. For he understood the plan of God and comprehended why his people were in exile. Nehemiah's sadness then, was all the more noticeable to the king, that he was compelled to remark on it to seek out its cause. See then, that it is the faithfulness of Nehemiah over a long period of time to be contented in the service of the king that God used to grant him compassion to Nehemiah.

Nehemiah's former contentedness arose out of his acceptance of the slavery as the mind of the Lord for that time. Now he has a burden of the sorrow of Jerusalem's ignominy on his heart – so he has become sad. Notice that his personal emotions and countenance are governed by the knowledge of the mind of the Lord about the state of things, not his own reflection of his own feelings about himself. Truly a kingdom man!

**ACTION!** Stay faithful even in hard places and trust the purposes of God for you and His people. Be prepared to bend to the purposes of the Lord.

### **3. When the answer comes we must walk forward; often accompanied by fear**

It is no small thing for a slave to be trained to serve the king. Particularly a Persian king. The king could not be approached normally by anyone within the court without being summoned. Indeed, the penalty for arriving in the court of the king without being summoned was death, unless he held out his sceptre and recognized you. How much more then, for the servants who waited on the king to maintain silence and just serve. So for a servant to initiate a conversation with the king was a breach of protocol and would be costly.

So, if the king should initiate a conversation with a servant, this is a major happening! And it was a favourable conversation - the king is actually enquiring about the state of mind of his lackey. It is a very clear answer to the prayer which Nehemiah prayed. He could hardly have missed it. But it had this corollary, once begun the conversation had to be handled with care. Only the question asked could be answered - the king controls the conversation. The king asks for the reason for the sadness on Nehemiah's face - it is this question which is answered. He is very much afraid; for he speaks of matters which could be taken as seditious. He is a Hebrew, he is expressing his sadness at the state of the capital city of his homeland; he could very easily be taken the wrong way. The Babylonians had flattened the city it is true, but the Persians are the controllers now of the Babylonian empire. Artaxerxes could see a rebel here in his own court. Nehemiah is encroaching on matters of state.

#### **4. You walk forward uttering arrow prayers to God**

The next move is that the king, still controlling the conversation makes an opening which indicates that he has taken Nehemiah's request in a compassionate way. He has not seen a rebel, he has read his heart.

**ACTION!** Right here we need to see something awesome. If God looks on the heart, and Nehemiah has prayed that God would grant him compassion in the sight of the king, then this prayer is only answerable by God if Nehemiah's heart is uncluttered and true. For otherwise, the king would have discerned a rebel - which his natural bias would have looked for.

Our heart needs to be true in these places where God grants us opportunities for which we have prayed. Otherwise, we will be compromised or misread.

The king indicates he is ready to grant a request - it is the nature of king's to work this way. He is opening the conversation for the servant to initiate what will happen in the kingdom. This is a significant move - it is the king, who is normally protected from other people putting their will before him by protocol, opening the door for that to happen. But in the spiritual realm, it is the king of Persia opening his will to the possibility of a servant of another King to achieve that other King's purposes. Hence Nehemiah prays to the God of heaven. He shoots up an arrow prayer and presses forward.

The movement from there is accomplished by a prayerful man who recognized his moment in history because he recognized the answer to his prayers. The king asks for a time - Nehemiah can set him one. Perhaps he had thought that out in advance or he trusted for the spur of the moment as he went forward trusting God to guide his mouth. Either way the source was God for He had put the desire into Nehemiah's heart in the first place.

He is asking the king to "send" him to Jerusalem. This is appropriate for he is a servant, and the king is simply now hearing what his steward thinks he needs to accomplish the purpose in hand. Nehemiah asks for the king's provisions to be made - and he achieves that for it is axiomatic that if a king of Persia sends someone then he also funds them.

#### **5. When the way is opened by God, you give Him glory**

In 2.10 Nehemiah finds that over one conversation all the freedom to work under the king's provision is given, the financial arrangements are made, and he is charged with the doing of the task. His prayer has been fully answered - he now states that he hasn't lost track of the perspective he began with. He says, "And the king granted them to me because the good hand of my God was upon me."

**ACTION!** There isn't a place at the moment where God is opening doors for you and you are forgetting that it is his show is there? Repent and make certain that you give Him glory.

## ***Our Head's Way for Us: Part 2***

### ***9. Seeking first the Kingdom - a reading in Nehemiah 1-2.***

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