

O N E

NEHEMIAH 1

Does Anybody Really Care?

The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity."

George Bernard Shaw put those words into the mouth of the Rev. Anthony Anderson in the second act of his play *The Devil's Disciple*. The statement certainly summarizes what Jesus taught in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37); and it rebukes all those who fold their arms complacently, smile benignly, and say somewhat sarcastically, "Ask me if I care!"

Nehemiah was the kind of person who cared. He cared about the traditions of the past and the needs of the present. He cared about the hopes for the future. He cared about his heritage, his ancestral city, and the glory of his God. He revealed this caring attitude in four different ways.

1. He cared enough to ask (Neh. 1:1-3)

Nehemiah was a layman, cupbearer to the great "Artaxerxes Longimanus," who ruled Persia from 464 to 423 B.C. He is identified as the son of Hachaliah to distinguish him from other Jews of the same name (Neh. 3:16; Ezra 2:2). Nehemi-

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ah means "The Lord has comforted."

A cupbearer was much more than our modern "butler" (see Gen. 40). It was a position of great responsibility and privilege. At each meal, he tested the king's wine to make sure it wasn't poisoned. A man who stood that close to the king in public had to be handsome, cultured, knowledgeable in court procedures, and able to converse with the king and advise him if asked (see 41:1-13). Because he had access to the king, the cupbearer was a man of great influence, which he could use for good or for evil.

That Nehemiah, a Jew, held such an important position in the palace speaks well of his character and ability (Dan. 1:1-4). For nearly a century, the Jewish remnant had been back in their own land, and Nehemiah could have joined them; but he chose to remain in the palace. It turned out that God had a work for him to do there that he could not have accomplished elsewhere. God put Nehemiah in Susa just as He had put Esther there a generation before, and just as He had put Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon. When God wants to accomplish a work, He always prepares His workers and puts them in the right places at the right time.

The Hebrew month of Chislew runs from mid-November to mid-December on our calendar; and the twentieth year of Artaxerxes was the year 444 B.C. Shushan (or Susa) was the capital city of the Persian Empire and the site of the king's winter palace. No doubt it was just another routine day when Nehemiah met his brother Hanani (see Neh. 7:2), who had just returned from a visit to Jerusalem, but it turned out to be a turning point in Nehemiah's life.

Like large doors, great life-changing events can swing on very small hinges. It was just another day when Moses went out to care for his sheep, but on that day he heard the Lord's call and became a prophet (Ex. 3). It was an ordinary day when David was called home from shepherding his flock; but

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on that day, he was anointed king (1 Sam. 16). It was an ordinary day when Peter, Andrew, James, and John were mending their nets after a night of failure; but that was the day Jesus called them to become fishers of men (Luke 5:1-11). You never know what God has in store, even in a commonplace conversation with a friend or relative; so keep your heart open to God's providential leading. I attended a birthday party one evening when I was nineteen years old, and a statement made to me there by a friend helped direct my life into the plans God had for me; and I will be forever grateful.

Why would Nehemiah inquire about a struggling remnant of people who lived hundreds of miles away? After all, he was the king's cupbearer and he was successfully secure in his own life. Certainly it wasn't his fault that his ancestors had sinned against the Lord and brought judgment to the city of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah. A century and a half before, the Prophet Jeremiah had given this word from the Lord: "For who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem? Or who will bemoan you? Or who will turn aside to ask how you are doing?" (Jer. 15:5, NKJV) *Nehemiah was the man God had chosen to do those very things!*

Some people prefer *not* to know what's going on, because information might bring obligation. "What you don't know can't hurt you," says the old adage; but is it true? In a letter to a Mrs. Foote, Mark Twain wrote, "All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence; then success is sure." But what we don't know *could* hurt us a great deal! There are people in the cemetery who chose not to know the truth. The slogan for the 1987 AIDS publicity campaign was "Don't die of ignorance"; and that slogan can be applied to many areas of life besides health.

Nehemiah asked about Jerusalem and the Jews living there because he had a caring heart. When we truly care about people, we want the facts, no matter how painful they may

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be. "Practical politics consists in ignoring facts," American historian Henry Adams said; but Aldous Huxley said, "Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored." Closing our eyes and ears to the truth could be the first step toward tragedy for ourselves as well as for others.

What did Nehemiah learn about Jerusalem and the Jews? Three words summarize the bad news: remnant, ruin, and reproach. Instead of a land inhabited by a great nation, only a remnant of people lived there; and they were in great affliction and struggling to survive. Instead of a magnificent city, Jerusalem was in shambles; and where there had once been great glory, there was now nothing but great reproach.

Of course, Nehemiah had known all his life that the city of his fathers was in ruins, because the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem's walls, gates, and temple in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:1-21). Fifty years later, a group of 50,000 Jews had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city. Since the Gentiles had hindered their work, however, the temple was not completed for twenty years (Ezra 1-6), and the gates and walls never were repaired. Perhaps Nehemiah had hoped that the work on the walls had begun again and that the city was now restored. Without walls and gates, the city was open to ridicule and attack. See Psalms 48, 79, 84, and 87 to see how much loyal Jews loved their city.

Are we like Nehemiah, anxious to know the truth even about the worst situations? Is our interest born of concern or idle curiosity? When we read missionary prayer letters, the news in religious periodicals, or even our church's ministry reports, do we want the facts, and do the facts burden us? Are we the kind of people who care enough to ask?

2. He cared enough to weep (Neh. 1:4)

What makes people laugh or weep is often an indication of character. People who laugh at others' mistakes or misfor-

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tunes, or who weep over trivial personal disappointments, are lacking either in culture or character, and possibly both. Sometimes weeping is a sign of weakness; but with Nehemiah, it was a sign of strength, as it was with Jeremiah (Jer. 9:1), Paul (Acts 20:19), and the Lord Jesus (Luke 19:41). In fact, Nehemiah was like the Lord Jesus in that he willingly shared the burden that was crushing others. "The reproaches of them that reproached Thee are fallen upon Me" (Ps. 69:9; Rom. 15:3).

When God puts a burden on your heart, don't try to escape it; for if you do, you may miss the blessing He has planned for you. The Book of Nehemiah begins with "great affliction" (Neh. 1:3), but before it closes, there is great joy (8:12, 17). "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Ps. 30:5). Our tears water the "seeds of providence" that God has planted on our path; and without our tears, those seeds could never grow and produce fruit.

It was customary for the Jews to sit down when they mourned (Ezra 9:1-4; 2:13). Unconsciously, Nehemiah was imitating the grieving Jewish captives who had been exiled in Babylon years before (Ps. 137:1). Like Daniel, Nehemiah probably had a private room where he prayed to God with his face toward Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10; 1 Kings 8:28-30). Fasting was required of the Jews only once a year, on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29); but Nehemiah spent several days fasting, weeping, and praying. He knew that somebody had to do something to rescue Jerusalem, and he was willing to go.

3. He cared enough to pray (Neh. 1:5-10)

This prayer is the first of twelve instances of prayer recorded in this book. (See 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 9:5ff; 13:14, 22, 29, 31.) The Book of Nehemiah opens and closes with prayer. It is obvious that Nehemiah was a man of faith who depended wholly on the Lord to help him accomplish the work He had

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called him to do. The Scottish novelist George MacDonald said, "In whatever man does without God, he must fail miserably, or succeed more miserably." Nehemiah succeeded because he depended on God. Speaking about the church's ministry today, the late Alan Redpath said, "There is too much working before men and too little waiting before God."

This prayer begins with *ascription of praise to God* (1:5). "God of heaven" is the title Cyrus used for the Lord when he announced that the Jews could return to their land (2 Chron. 36:22-23; Ezra 1:1-2). The heathen gods were but idols on the earth, but the God of the Jews was Lord in heaven. Ezra often used this divine title (5:11-12; 6:9; 7:12, 21, 23), and it is found four times in Nehemiah (1:4-5; 2:4, 20) and three times in Daniel (2:18-19, 44). Nehemiah began his prayer as we should begin our prayers: "Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name" (Matt. 6:9).

To what kind of a God do we pray when we lift our prayers to "the God of heaven"? We pray to a "great and awesome God" (Neh. 1:5, NKJV; and see 4:14, 8:6, and 9:32), who is worthy of our praise and worship. If you are experiencing great affliction (v. 3) and are about to undertake a great work (4:19; 6:3), then you need the great power (1:10), great goodness (9:25, 35), and great mercy (v. 31) of a great God. Is the God you worship big enough to handle the challenges that you face?

He is also a God who keeps His Word (1:5). The Lord had made a covenant with His people Israel, promising to bless them richly if they obeyed His Word, but warning that He would chasten them if they disobeyed (Lev. 26; Deut. 27-30). The city of Jerusalem was in ruins, and the nation was feeble because the people had sinned against the Lord. (See Ezra's prayer of confession in Ezra 9 and the prayer of the nation in Neh. 9.)

The greater part of Nehemiah's prayer was devoted to *con-*

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fession of sin (1:6-9). The God who promised blessing and chastening also promised forgiveness if His people would repent and turn back to Him (Deut. 30; 1 Kings 8:31-53). It was this promise that Nehemiah was claiming as he prayed for himself and the nation. God's eyes are upon His people and His ears are open to their prayers (1 Kings 8:29; 2 Chron. 7:14). The word *remember* is a key word in this book (Neh. 1:8; 4:14; 5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31).

Note that Nehemiah used the pronoun "we" and not "they," identifying himself with the sins of a generation he didn't even know. It would have been easy to look back and blame his ancestors for the reproach of Jerusalem, but Nehemiah looked within and blamed himself! "We have sinned! We have dealt very corruptly!"

A few years ago, when the "media scandals" brought great reproach to the church, I wrote in my book *The Integrity Crisis*:

To begin with, the integrity crisis involves more than a few people who were accused of moral and financial improprieties. *The integrity crisis involves the whole church*. I am not saying that people didn't sin, nor am I preaching "collective guilt," whatever that is. I only want to emphasize that, in the body of Christ, we belong to one another, we affect one another, and we can't escape one another. The press did not create the crisis, the church did; and the church will have to solve it (Nashville: Oliver-Nelson, 1988; p. 18).

When one Jewish soldier, Achan, sinned at Jericho, God said that "the children of Israel committed a trespass" and that "Israel" sinned and transgressed the covenant (Josh. 7:1, 11). Since the sin of one man was the sin of the whole

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nation, it brought shame and defeat to the whole nation. Once that sin had been dealt with, God could again bless His people with victory.

How do we know that God forgives our sins when we repent and confess to Him? *He has so promised in His Word.* Nehemiah's prayer is saturated with quotations from and allusions to the covenants of God found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. He certainly knew the Old Testament Law! In Nehemiah 1:8-9, he reminded God of His words found in Deuteronomy 28:63-67 and 30:1-10, just as we remind the Lord of His promise in 1 John 1:9. Nehemiah asked God to forgive His people, regather them to their land, and restore them to His favor and blessing.

This humble prayer closed with *an expression of confidence* (*Neh. 1:10-11*). To begin with, he had confidence in the power of God. When the Bible speaks of the eyes, ears, and hands of the Lord, it is using only human language to describe divine activity. God is spirit, and therefore does not have a body such as humans have; but He is able to see His people's needs, hear their prayers, and work on their behalf with His mighty hand. Nehemiah knew that he was too weak to rebuild Jerusalem, but he had faith that God would work on his behalf.

He also had confidence in God's faithfulness. "Now these are Thy servants and Thy people" (v. 10). In bringing Babylon to destroy Jerusalem and take the people captive, God chastened the Jews sorely; but He did not forsake them! They were still His people and His servants. He had redeemed them from Egypt by His great power (Ex. 14:13-31) and had also set them free from bondage in Babylon. Would He not, in His faithfulness, help them rebuild the city?

Unlike Elijah, who thought he was the only faithful Jew left (1 Kings 19:10), Nehemiah had confidence that God would raise up other people to help him in his work. He was sure

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that many other Jews were also praying and that they would rally to the cause once they heard that God was at work. Great leaders are not only believing people who obey the Lord and courageously move ahead, but they also challenge others to go with them. You can't be a true leader unless you have followers, and Nehemiah was able to enlist others to help him do the work.

Finally, Nehemiah was confident that God would work in the heart of Artaxerxes and secure for the project the official support that it needed (Neh. 1:10). Nehemiah couldn't simply quit his job and move to Jerusalem. He was an appointee of the king, and he needed the king's permission for everything he did. Furthermore, he needed the king's provision and protection so he could travel to Jerusalem and remain away from his post until the work was completed. Without official authority to govern, an official guard for the journey, and the right to use materials from the king's forest, the entire project was destined to fail. Eastern monarchs were absolute despots, and it was not easy to approach them or convince them. But "the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases" (Prov. 21:2, NIV).

Too often, we plan our projects and then ask God to bless them; but Nehemiah didn't make that mistake. He sat down and wept (Neh. 1:4), knelt down and prayed, and then stood up and worked because he knew he had the blessing of the Lord on what he was doing.

4. He cared enough to volunteer (Neh. 1:11)

It has well been said that prayer is not getting man's will done in heaven but getting God's will done on earth. However, for God's will to be done on earth, He needs people to be available for Him to use. God does "exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that

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works *in us* (Eph. 3:20, NKJV, italics mine). If God is going to answer prayer, He must start by working in the one doing the praying! He works in us and through us to help us see our prayers answered.

While Nehemiah was praying, his burden for Jerusalem became greater and his vision of what needed to be done became clearer. Real prayer keeps your heart and your head in balance so your burden doesn't make you impatient to run ahead of the Lord and ruin everything. As we pray, God tells us *what* to do, *when* to do it, and *how* to do it; and all are important to the accomplishing of the will of God. Some Christian workers are like Lord Ronald in one of Stephen Leacock's short stories who "flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions."

Nehemiah planned to volunteer to go to Jerusalem to supervise the rebuilding of the walls. He didn't pray for God to send somebody else, nor did he argue that he was ill-equipped for such a difficult task. He simply said, "Here am I—send me!" He knew that he would have to approach the king and request a leave of absence. Eastern kings' word meant life or death. What would happen to Nehemiah's plans if he approached Artaxerxes on the wrong day, when the king was ill or displeased with something or someone in the palace? No matter how you look at it, Nehemiah was facing a test of faith; but he knew that his God was a great God and would see him through.

The king's cupbearer would have to sacrifice the comfort and security of the palace for the rigors and dangers of life in a ruined city. Luxury would be replaced by ruins, and prestige by ridicule and slander. Instead of sharing the king's bounties, Nehemiah would personally pay for the upkeep of scores of people who would eat at his table. He would leave behind the ease of the palace and take up the toils of encouraging a beaten people and finishing an almost impossible task.

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And with the help of God, *he did it!* In fifty-two days, the walls were rebuilt, the gates were restored, and the people were rejoicing! And it all started with a man who cared.

Abraham cared and rescued Lot from Sodom (Gen. 18-19). Moses cared and delivered the Israelites from Egypt. David cared and brought the nation and the kingdom back to the Lord. Esther cared and risked her life to save her nation from genocide. Paul cared and took the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Jesus cared and died on the cross for a lost world.

God is still looking for people who care, people like Nehemiah, who cared enough to ask for the facts, weep over the needs, pray for God's help, and then volunteer to get the job done.

"Here am I, Lord—send me!"