

GODLY COURAGE

Nehemiah 1:1 – 2:4

Last week I introduced us to Nehemiah—a cupbearer for a king. The Elephantine Papyri, discovered in 1903, confirm the historicity of the book.

Much of the material in the book must have come from Nehemiah's personal diary because it is so frank and vivid in reporting the good and the bad. The book shows us that Nehemiah was an extraordinary man of godly courage.

Some of us, if not all of us need a good dose of godly courage. Nehemiah was King Artaxerxes of Persia's cupbearer. Sounds exciting until you realize he was supposed to keep the king from being poisoned.

Probably he was also a trusted advisor and friend, and was one of the few people allowed in the king's presence when the queen was also present.

We don't know a lot about him. We know that he had a keen interest in Jerusalem. Though probably he had never been there, all his life he'd heard about the City of God.

Solomon's Temple was there. It was the center of theocracy—a nation led by God. Jerusalem was crucial to the Great Commission of the Old Testament.

It should have been a place of dignity, a town of respect, a place to worship God—a place the rest of the world would understand as special.

We can worship God in many different places—storefronts, gymnasiums, and so on. But a church facility should be attractive, neat and inviting. The community should know that it's a special place of worship.

When Hanani, his brother (v. 2) visited, Nehemiah asked about Jerusalem. He wanted to hear good news. He hoped everything was okay, that the city was prospering and the walls rebuilt.

What he heard broke his heart (v. 3). The survivors were in trouble, living in disgrace. The walls were broken, the gates burned. The news was God's transforming call on his life.

1. Nehemiah was a Godly man

Nehemiah 1:4(NIV) When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

This may be the most important verse in all of Nehemiah. When he heard about the condition of Jerusalem Nehemiah wept, he mourned, fasted and prayed.

What caused God sorrow caused Nehemiah sorrow. What brought joy to God, was joy to Nehemiah. His heart was tuned to God. Nehemiah's heart beat with the heart of God. I pray our hearts beat with God's heart.

Last week I showed you what we are going to do in our remodel. It is long overdue. We have talked about this for years.

We are excited about our new worship center. It will be very nice. The preschool and children's teachers will be thankful that we no longer travel down their hallways. It will be wonderful to have a true recognizable entrance—maybe our visitors won't get lost.

But here's the thing—our remodel should be out of a sincere desire to honor God—a beautiful place to worship and to bring the unchurched to hear about the Savior, Jesus Christ.

With a heart for God, each one will pitch in to help pay for this place, and we will serve Him to our full capability. Without a heart for God we will hold ourselves back—our billfolds will stay in our pockets, our service will be limited.

You cultivate a heart for God through knowing what He says and how he thinks. You say, "You preachers are always telling us to read the Bible more. It's getting old. Move on to something else."

No!! It's only there you discover His will. In the pages of this book you discover how to have a successful marriage, how to be a good parent, how to relate to others and on and on and on.

Americans are spending big bucks for just this kind of advice. But the Bible is not advice, it's the truth—God's truth. When we learn God's heart and cultivate our heart for Him life gets good—not easy—but good.

Nehemiah heart was broken. He sat down and cried—not just for a few minutes—he cried, mourned, fasted, and prayed for days.

His heart was broken because he knew God’s heart. God’s heart was broken because of the condition of the Holy City—the place that represented Him to the world.

What causes God’s heart to break?

God’s heart breaks because of the millions of lost people He has commissioned us to share the Gospel with. His heart breaks by our complacency: When we become satisfied and comfortable.

When we are more attuned to the world than we are with Him. When our job, family, entertainment, and school are more important than Him, His heart is broken.

God’s heart is broken by apathetic and lethargic Christians who just don’t seem to care about His church.

God’s heart is broken over mediocrity by Christians. Mediocrity is an “It’ll do,” attitude. It’s trying to get by on the very minimum.

It’s satisfaction with the status quo. It’s the kind of thinking that says, “It was good enough for me, it should be good enough for you.”

God’s heart is broken by negative and critical Christians—church members who have become so into their selfish selves that they have forgotten God’s calling on their lives and to their church.

They are critical of anything they don’t agree with. They have forgotten the higher purpose of supporting God’s work because it is “His work.” The example of Nehemiah has a lot to teach us.

2. Nehemiah was a praying man

Nehemiah 1:5-6a(NIV) 5Then 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, 6let 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.

With the first words out of Nehemiah's mouth (v. 5): "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God," Nehemiah was settling the issue of God up front.

God is great. God is powerful. God controls nations and destinies. God allowed Israel to be exiled because of their disobedience.

"God, we've made a mess out of our lives and we've made a mess of our nation. But you, God, you haven't changed. You are great and awesome."

Nehemiah knew that God could bring them out and restore their lands and rebuild Jerusalem. In deep, heart-broken prayer he settled the issue of who God was.

You know why this was important? Because later, when things really got tough and enemies arose against him, he would never question God and would stay the course. He was a praying man.

3. Nehemiah was a confessing man.

Nehemiah 1:6b-7(NIV) 6bI confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. 7We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

He confessed his sins and the sins of his nation (1:6b-7). They had acted corruptly. They were disobedient. They hadn't kept God's commandments. They broke God's heart.

I'm afraid we often have a genie in a bottle concept of God. If we need something or are in trouble, God will bail us out. God is not a genie in a bottle! A lot of the bad things in our lives are consequences of our own doing.

The starting place is to repent and to confess our sins before God—to repent of those things that we do and don't do that break His heart.

God wants to see a change of direction in our lives so that He can show us great and mighty things. And He will, right in our church, when our hearts are right with Him.

4. Nehemiah was a trusting man.

Nehemiah 1:11b(NIV) Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king.

He asked for success (v. 11). Look very carefully now at what Nehemiah did. “Lord, as far as I know, and to the best I can, I’ve made my heart right with you.

I have cultivated my heart for you. My heart is broken over what I know breaks your heart. Now, I pray for success.”

5. Nehemiah was a bold man.

Nehemiah 2:2-5(NIV) 2so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.” I was very much afraid, 3but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my fathers are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?” 4The king said to me, “What is it you want?” Then I prayed to the God of heaven, 5and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my fathers are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

Now there’s a concept (v. 4b)! When faced with a difficult situation he prayed for boldness. It was a capital offense to let his personal life interfere with his duties to the king. Nehemiah was risking his very life here.

In 1:1, Nehemiah’s brother, Hanani, came to visit in the month of Kislev (Nov.-Dec.). In 2:1, it is the month of Nisan—equivalent to our March-April.

Nehemiah had been praying to God for four months. He was asking God to do something about Jerusalem. And God was saying, “I’m going to, Nehemiah. You will be my instrument.”

And Nehemiah was saying, “But God, I’m just a cupbearer.” How many times have you said to God, “I’m just a...”?

Nehemiah could have been sentenced to death by showing his sadness in front of the king. For four months Nehemiah, with this tremendous burden on his heart, pasted a false smile on his face and ministered to the king—until this time.

When the king asks why he is sad, Nehemiah was very afraid—he had reason to be. He gulps, says a quick prayer to God (v. 4) and, at the risk of his life, tells the king the burden of his heart.

He was “very much afraid” (v. 2b). Not only did he put his life on the line by letting his emotions show, but he had the God-given boldness to ask for time off to rebuild Jerusalem.

This wasn't a two-week vacation he was asking for, and both he and the king knew it. To rebuild the walls of Jerusalem would take a lot of time.

Yet Nehemiah knew it would be better to lose his life than not to be obedient to God.

Application:

The time came when Nehemiah had to put it all on the line. It is time for us to risk for God—not being foolish or foolhardy—but that we so cultivate our hearts for God that we move out in faith, willing to risk it all, just as he did.