

We today live in a spirit-less nation. In most situations, if you mention to someone that God is doing something in their lives, they will look at you funny. In most situations, it is understood that man is running the earth and that man is in control of everything that is going on. The idea that God is in charge is basically frowned upon, even laughed at.

In the mid-1900's, philosopher D. Elton Trueblood called Western culture a "cut-flower society": we exhibited a certain cultural strength and power but it was a passing beauty because our spiritual roots had been severed. Today we struggle with the things going on around us and the only time we even think of God is when we want someone to blame for something. My goal over the next few weeks, and longer, is to try to get this group of people to move back to a proper mind-set: one that recognizes God in the world and desires to get closer to Him. Feel His power, feel his love. We're going to begin by taking a quick look in history at a man named Nehemiah. We find his story in the Book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament.

But let's first have a quick history of Israel: After Moses led the people out of Egypt, Joshua brought them into the Promised Land. First the nation was led by God, using occasional Judges to save them and lead them. Then Saul, David and Solomon ruled as kings over them. After Solomon, the nation was divided into two parts, the northern part, which was called Israel, and the southern part, which was called Judah. A couple of centuries passed and Israel was taken into captivity by the Assyrians. A couple of centuries later, Judah was taken into captivity by the Babylonians, who had by that time overtaken the Assyrians. At this point, there is no longer a Jewish nation as they have been dispersed throughout the land.

After a period of time, a man named Zerubbabel is allowed to go back to Jerusalem along with a group of people and rebuilds the Temple. Less than a century later, Ezra returns with a second group and we pick with Nehemiah 13 years after that.

We read in **Nehemiah 1:2-4** "that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire." When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven."

A couple of interesting facts about this passage. We see Nehemiah asking how things are going back in his homeland, in Jerusalem, and his brother tells him that things aren't going well. He says that they are in great distress and reproach or another version says trouble and shame. This word, reproach or shame, in the Hebrew is *cherpah*. It means disgrace, reproach, shame. It implies that this comes from doing something you ought not to be doing. From sinning, if you would.

Nehemiah's heart was broken because of the situation of the city. His response to his brother's report is one of mourning. What is he mourning? Our initial thought is that he is mourning over the situation of the city. They are in trouble. Things aren't going well. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down. This means that they are open to any people group coming in to the city and overtaking it. We've seen movies about how battles used to occur around the city. The first step of an invading army was always to overcome the wall first, then the rest of the city would fall. Jerusalem has no walls, so the city was easy picking for anyone.

However, we soon find out that this is not the reason for Nehemiah's mourning. How do we know? We look at his prayer. In Nehemiah 1:5-11, we get to see what his prayer concern is. And his concern is not for the safety of the city or for the walls to be built or for any such thing but instead, it is for the forgiveness of their sins.

So we see that Nehemiah was saddened by the sins of his people. So much so, he mourned. We read that he sat and wept and mourned. To him, this report that his people were in shame, reproach, disgrace – *cherpah* – was like hearing of a death. One of the things we need to recognize here is that Nehemiah had a heart for God. When he saw that his people did not have that heart, he mourned as if someone died. He knew that it was as life-losing to sin and be apart from God as it is to physically pass away. He knew that spiritual death was as real as physical death.

But to Nehemiah's credit, he didn't sit and weep and mourn and then curse God or question Him. Instead, he fasted and prayed. The model that Nehemiah gives us here is one that we should not only recognize but remember and use. When things are not going well for us, how easy it is in this day and age to sit and cry and mourn and then blame God for everything bad that has happened to us. But we have a choice – we can make ourselves victims or we can try to do something about it.

We see that Nehemiah decided to do something about it – he brought it before God with prayer and fasting. Sounds like a cop out, doesn't it. Anyone can do that, but that doesn't solve anything. Well, it might be true that anyone can do that – God is always available for us to go to with our problems – but do we do it? And does it result in any tangible difference? Let's see what happened to Nehemiah.

He gets permission from the king to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the city. He gets to Jerusalem and begins work on building the wall. All the time they are building, they are in fear for their lives because the people of the surrounding areas do not want the wall to be built. So Nehemiah and the people of Jerusalem build the city literally with one hand holding a sword and the other building the wall.

This is one of the great miracles of the Bible, though not spoken of much because it is seemingly not supernatural – but it is if you look at it from a realistic point of view – how can these people rebuild the wall around the entire city while fending off enemies - in only 52 days? In **Nehemiah 6:15-16**, Nehemiah states that it was only done with the help of God. We need to recognize that this is a way that God performed miracles

because most of his miracles today are performed this same way – God working hand-in-hand with people doing things that should never be able to be accomplished. Nehemiah is proof positive that if we bring our concerns to God and trust Him to take care of us, He will – even miraculously!

Then in chapter **8:1, 5-6**, we read that one of the first things they did after the wall was built was to gather around as one to listen to the reading of the scriptures because they had not heard it before. When they heard the Word of God for the first time, they all stood up and when Ezra read the words, they all bowed low and worshipped God.

Let's recognize what these people are going through. They are experiencing the Word of God for the first time. See the respect they show? They stand when the book is opened. They bow when the words are read out loud. These people were experiencing a spiritual renewal. They began as a people in sin and they now are a people giving their lives to God. Earlier, I mentioned that our goal for the next few weeks was to try to become spiritually renewed. What can we learn about spiritual renewal from Nehemiah and the people? What are the steps to spiritual renewal?

First, we must recognize our sin. Nehemiah recognized his sins and the sins of the people and repented. We need to do the same. Are you thinking, "Well, I don't have to do that because I haven't sinned"? Let's take a quick look at the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20).

- 3 Do not have other gods besides Me.
- 4 Do not make an idol for yourself,
- 7 Do not misuse the name of the LORD your God,
- 8 Remember to dedicate the Sabbath day:
- 12 Honor your father and your mother
- 13 Do not murder.
- 14 Do not commit adultery.
- 15 Do not steal.
- 16 Do not give false testimony against your neighbor.
- 17 Do not covet your neighbor's house...or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Can we say that we've never done any of these things that we're told not to do? And to be honest, Jesus makes it even tougher when he says that if anyone has even lusted in his heart, he has committed adultery and that if anyone is angry at someone, they are subject to judgment as if they murdered. (Matt 5:21,27). We can see that we are all sinners. We need to realize that.

- "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23)
- Do not bring your servant into judgment, for no one living is righteous before you. (Psalm 143:2)
- As it is written: "There is no one righteous, not even one;" (Romans 3:10)
- Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. (Romans 3:20)

- Clearly no one is justified before God by the law, because, “The righteous will live by faith.” (Galatians 3:11)

Once we make that recognition, we next have to go to God. Nehemiah went to God in prayer and repented. The only way we will be able to be saved from this sin of ours is to recognize that only God can save us. That’s why He sent us His son. We are only saved through Jesus:

- For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)
- Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies" (John 11:25)
- Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)
- "By grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8,9).
- "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him" (Revelation 3:20).

After we come to God and repent of our sins – repent meaning to go in the opposite direction from them, to change our minds to think not the way we want to, but to think the way God does – then we can now bring ourselves to a place of relationship with Him. We now need to become Christ-Centered and God-loving. Will we allow Christ to sit on our throne or are we going to sit on it and try to rule ourselves. We’ve already tried it and we have failed miserably. If we were president of our lives, we would have voted ourselves out of office by now. There is only one person who can rule our lives well and that is Jesus. Will we make him our Lord over all and the King of our lives? This is the next step. Nehemiah gave his life over to God and let God take control. Next thing you know, Nehemiah is in Jerusalem, the wall has been rebuilt and the people are now worshipping God. Talk about turn-around. But it can only happen if we allow God to be in control. Are we ready to hand over the reigns?

Finally, once we recognize the need to be Christ-centered and God-loving, we need to work at becoming holy. Yuck – the ‘W’ word. Unfortunately, work is necessary. We need to become holy and only a disciplined life can become holy. Are we ready to be disciplined? What do we need to do to become holy? Well, there are many disciplines that we can engage in, but the best place to start is by reading the Word of God, spending time in study, dedicating time to prayer and meditation.

Next week, Jonathan is going to be discussing these disciplines. But, in the near future, we will be doing the Experiencing God course. There is discipline needed to complete this course. It will not always be an easy experience. But if we discipline ourselves to the time and study needed to complete the course, we will come away with a better understanding of God and hopefully a spiritual renewal.

Until next week, let's begin to prepare ourselves and let's see if we can start by either spending a set amount of time each day with God or by reading a chapter a day of His Word.

Become Holy

- Read the Word
 - o Spiritual renewal has always come on the heels of a renewed reverence and hunger for the Word of God.
 - o We need to understand what God's Word is. 2 Timothy 3:15-17 says about the Bible: "from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to *make you wise* for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is *Godbreathed* and is useful *for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness*, ¹⁷so that the man of God may *be thoroughly equipped* for every good work.
 - o We will not experience spiritual renewal until we develop a reverence for the Word of God.
- Daily study time
- Meditation
- Prayer