

Title: "Nehemiah: Stepping Out In Living Faith"

Text: Nehemiah 1 – 2:10

Turn with me again today if you would to the Book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament.

-Nehemiah will be the last person we focus on as we conclude this series on "Living Faith in 3D."

-As we did with Daniel and Esther, we will spend two weeks with Nehemiah, this Sunday and next Sunday.

-And then I will do one final "wrap up sermon" to bring this sermon series to an end on Father's Day,

-as we move into our summer schedule with one service at 10am.

We heard the first part of Nehemiah's story in the earlier reading today from Chapter 1.

-I am going to read the first 10 verses of chapter 2 now,

-and then we'll unpack his story in the sermon.

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So I don't know if you noticed it during the reading,

-but Nehemiah lived in the same City of Susa in the Kingdom of Persia as Esther did.

Susa was one of the Capital Cities of the enormous Persian Empire that extended from Northern Africa all the way to India.

-And Nehemiah probably knew Queen Esther and her uncle Mordecai.

-But it is now about 15 or 16 years later, and guess what?

-Queen Esther's husband, King Xerxes, was assassinated by one of his own attendants while he slept in his bed one night.

And we don't know what happened to Queen Esther or Mordecai after that,

-but Xerxes' son, Artaxerxes, is now ruling as the King of Persia.

-And Nehemiah, who like Esther and Mordecai was Jewish, is serving as the Cupbearer to the King.

And that might not seem like a very important position to us,

-but in the ancient world it actually was.

The King's cupbearer was a very trusted member of the King's court.

- He was the one who would choose and taste the wine, and often the food, that was served to the king.
- And because poisoning the king's food was one of the ways a king could be assassinated,
  - the person who checked his food prior to serving it had to have the king's complete confidence.

So when Nehemiah says at the end of chapter 1, "I was cupbearer to the King,"

- he is saying that the King had found him to be trustworthy, loyal, reliable, and incorruptible.
- And as such, the Cupbearer was usually more than just a taste tester in a King's court.
  - He was also usually a trusted advisor to the King.

Now the story of Nehemiah's place in biblical history begins like this:

- In the month of December in the 446BC, Nehemiah received a visit from one of his brothers.

And that brother had come to Susa from Jerusalem.

- The Jews had actually been allowed to return to Israel under King Cyrus of Persia many years before.
- But many Jews, like Mordecai and Esther and Nehemiah, had stayed in Persia, and not gone home.
  - By this point, the City of Susa WAS their home, and they had important jobs in the government of Persia.
  - So they stayed.

But as we see here, Nehemiah had family members who had gone back to Israel.

- And what we also see here, is that Nehemiah still cared deeply about his native land, and his people, and his God.

He hadn't forgotten his identity or his faith or his people.

- In fact, he longed for the welfare of his nation, and was passionate about upholding the honor of his God.

And so when his brother shows up for a visit, Nehemiah can't wait to hear the report of how things are back in Israel.

The only trouble is, the report is not good.  
-His brother told him that the cities were still in ruins.  
-And the people were experiencing great trouble and disgrace.  
-And the wall of the City of Jerusalem was still a pile of rubble.

And when Nehemiah heard these things, it says he sat down and wept.  
-In fact, he then went into mourning and fasting for days, and spent some serious time in prayer.

And the prayer that Nehemiah prayed is written out there in chapter 1, and it is a rich and heartfelt prayer.  
-In fact, as we are learning to pray the Bible, Nehemiah's prayer is one that you can simply take and pray yourself.  
-It's a prayer that begins by acknowledging who God is.  
-And then it's a prayer of repentance as Nehemiah acknowledges the sinners that he and his people are.  
-And then it is a prayer of intercession for his people, who are suffering.  
-And finally it's a prayer of supplication asking God to show him what God wanted him to do in response to this news from Israel.  
-It's a great model of prayer for all of us.

But you know what?  
-You might think that Nehemiah got this report from his brother, and then prayed this prayer for a few minutes, and then went right into the king to do something about it.

But it doesn't happen that fast at all.  
-He is actually praying about this for 3-4 months before he does anything.  
-He gets the report from his brother in what we would call December, and in chapter 2 he goes in to talk to the King in what we would call March.

That's quite a while that he is praying and listening and seeking discernment.  
-And I would imagine from my own experience, that when he first began praying, he probably had no idea how God might want to use him to help his people.

- Initially he probably had no intention of leaving his job as Cupbearer to the King in order to go back to Israel and get involved in a rebuilding project.
- Just like you or me, he probably initially thought there wasn't much he could do to help.

But perhaps slowly, over the course of those 3 months, God began to work on Nehemiah's heart and mind,  
-calling him from prayer and concern to actual service,  
-calling him to step out in faith and trust God to use him.

Now, there is another thing you need to know about this 3 month period of mourning and praying and fasting for Nehemiah.  
-It was hidden from the king all that time.

This is why it says here in the first verse of chapter 2, "I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before."

My friends, one did not mourn and fast in the presence of an ancient king unless the king himself was mourning and fasting.

- In fact, it was considered a personal affront to the king for anyone to appear in his presence looking sad or unhappy.
- You could actually be beheaded for such an affront.
  - Because in the presence of the King, your only thought was to serve for the pleasure of the King.
  - And to bring your own troubles into his presence was to say that something other than the king was foremost on your mind.

So you see, Nehemiah may have been mourning and fasting for 3 months, but not in the presence of the King.  
-For those 3 months, he had not given the king any evidence on the job that anything was bothering him at all.  
-But now, after 3 months of praying, Nehemiah has decided that God has called him to take a major step of living faith.

So on this particular day in March, he goes into the king's presence revealing in his face the sadness that is in his heart for his people.

-And does the king notice? You bet he does.  
-In v. 2 the king asks immediately, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart!"

And look at the next line! Nehemiah writes, "I was very much afraid!"

-You see?

-He knows that he has just committed himself to a very risky business, and could possibly lose his life, his job, everything.

The king isn't just asking, "Aw, Nehemiah, what's the matter?"

-He is asking, "What is the meaning of this?!"

-And if he doesn't like Nehemiah's response, Nehemiah could be done for.

So what does Nehemiah say?

"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 destroyed by fire?"

It's gutsy, but Nehemiah tells the king straight out what is on his heart: it's his homeland, which lies in ruins.

-That's what grieves him in the presence of the king.

And then Nehemiah holds his breath as he awaits the king's response to him.

-You see, he has prayed about this for 3 months.

-He has felt called by God to take this risky step of faith.

-He has committed himself to this course of action, and now he is looking for signs of God's presence with him.

-He is looking for confirmation, and for rescue!

And in v. 4, the King says, "What is it you want?"

-And we should all join Nehemiah in a collective sigh of relief!

-He didn't say, "Off with his head!"

-Instead, he said, "What is it you want?"

And then Nehemiah writes, "I prayed to the God of heaven, and I answered the king."

And there's two things I love about this!

1. First is that Nehemiah shoots up this quick little arrow prayer to heaven before he says a word.
2. And secondly, that Nehemiah has a plan to actually present to the king.

Those two things tell us a lot about Nehemiah, and what "living faith" meant for him.

-He exhibits this great combination of faith and practicality.

Even after praying about this matter for 3 months, he still shoots up another quick prayer before he says another word to the king.

- It was probably just a quick little, "O God, help me now!"
- but it's a sign that he was depending on God for every step he was taking.

Yet, Nehemiah was also a man with a plan.

-He didn't go into the king without having thought through what it was specifically that he wanted to ask of the King.

So when the King asks, "What is it you want?"

- He doesn't say, "Well, gee, I don't know. I just think something ought to be done for my homeland."
- No, what he says is, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in your sight, let him send me to the City in Judah where my father's are buried so that I can rebuild it."

He is asking for time off from his job as cupbearer to the king, -and time away from Susa, in order to go back to Judah for a building project.

-And the king understands the request, and asks, "How long will you need?"

- And Nehemiah sets out a time frame, as well as a specific list of items he will need to complete the task.

He tells the king he will need travel permits, and authorization to get the supplies and materials needed,

-and some funding.

You see, he's got it all ready to lay out before the king.

-And the king, amazingly enough, nods his head and grants his request!

And it is all confirmation to Nehemiah that God is with Him.

-That this sense of calling that God has placed within him really has been from God.

-And he writes in v. 8, "It was because the gracious hand of God was upon me that the king granted my requests."

And can you imagine the relief, and the joy, with which he left the king's presence that day?

It might not have turned out that way at all, but because the gracious hand of God was with him, it did.

And do you see how that all unfolded?

-It began by hearing this news from Israel through his brother that caused him grief.

-But that grief was actually a part of feeling the heart of God for God's people.

-And it was what caused Nehemiah to pray, and fast, and pray some more, crying out to God for help and guidance.

-And then the guidance began to unfold for him,

-and God began to place a sense of calling on his heart and mind.

-It wasn't someone else God wanted to use to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, it was him! Nehemiah.

-But that would turn his whole life upside down!

-That would involve risk, and change, and sacrifice, and difficulty.

-He would have to die to whatever plan he had had for his own life, in order to follow God's new plan for his life.

It's a Christ-like calling for Nehemiah to say, "Ok, God, not my will but thy will be done."

And then, contrary to what his human logic might call him to do, (that is, avoid all risks, keep your day job, don't rock the boat)

- Nehemiah makes a decision to go to the King and reveal his heart for his people, Israel.
- And human logic says that was a dumb thing to do, and would probably turn out badly.

But his living faith calls him to trust in God's leading, and entrust himself to God's care.

- So he goes to the King, and lo and behold, God goes before him, and is with him, and it doesn't go badly at all.

My friends, this is the same pattern and the same elements of faith that we have seen in all the people we have studied these past months.

What I hope you can also see, is that this is a pattern that is not foreign to your life and mine either.

- These same elements of faith are present in you and me.
- And we are no more perfect at this thing called faith than they were.
- But it is present in us, and we are trying to nurture it, and lean on it, and experience it more and more.
- Just like they did.

By praying. By listening. By paying attention to God's word, -and the nudges of His Spirit.

By learning to say more and more, "Not my will, but your will be done, Lord."

By learning not to rely completely on our own logic and understanding, but learning to trust in His ways, and His will.

By making decisions that are more in line with God's priorities, And God's values, and God's understanding.

All of this is what living by faith looks like.

- You can see it in Nehemiah, as he's just trying to be a faithful cupbearer to the King.
- Can you see it in your own life, as you are just trying to be a faithful in your life all these hundreds of years later?

Let's pray.