

## Series: Transforming the World in which God Has Placed Us

VBC

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October 8-9, 2005

Nehemiah 1:1-4

### “Finding Your ‘I Can’t Stand It Any Longer’ Point”

The opening words tell us that this is a letter, a memoir written from Nehemiah

- It is his account of one of the great renewal projects in the OT
- But it is more, IT IS HIS JOURNAL
- Written to God
  - Hear us O God (Nehemiah 4:4)
  - Remember me O God (Nehemiah 5:19)
  - Don't forget what I have done O God (Nehemiah 13:14)
- But even more, it is ultimately a letter written to us from God
  - Written to every person serious about changing his/her world

First, a little background

- A) 1:1 son of Hacaliah - which does not tell us much except this:
  - Nehemiah was a Jew
  - Writing from Persia, for Israel was in captivity
- B) Who nonetheless rose in ranks to a position of influence
  - Verse 11 tell us he was a trusted cup bearer
  - Who became more than trusted wine tasters, but tactful companions
- C) Nehemiah was not a king, nor a priest, nor a sage, nor a prophet
  - He never made it to the biblical hall of faith in Hebrews 11
  - But nonetheless Nehemiah made a significant mark in history
  - A nation in captivity would owe its re-emergence largely to him
- D) He was a strategist (the classic leadership manual)
  - He was bold, not at all intimidated by evil
  - Fearless when it came to carrying out the will of God
  - Once he started building, he was tenacious
  - At times remarkably humble
  - At times extreme and harsh
    - He had absolutely no patience with ungodliness
    - Willing to pray down judgment, call down curses, even pull the hair out of some
  - A person like all of us in our passions, with both strengths and short comings
  - Nehemiah knew who God is, and God's greatness to accomplish whatever He wills to do

Verse 1 tells us the story begins in Susa, the winter resort of Persian kings (the Naples, Florida of Persia)

- In the month Chislev, the twentieth year
- The twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, making it around Nov/Dec 446 BC
- 140 years after Israel was force marched into captivity
  - Pressed into servitude

Israel had been cut down, almost to its roots

- And for good reason, the people had stiff armed God
- And went whoring after other gods
- Ignoring, rejecting the warnings of prophets like Jeremiah

In this story, a team had just arrived from Jerusalem (verse 2)

- And for those who remained in exile, any shred of news from their previous home was devoured and dissected
- Were things finally turning around?
- Were the reforms under Zerubbabel and Ezra taking hold?

*Illustration* - Me in Europe, news from home: Regarding the Padres and Chargers

- The news was generally bad

It was the same here

- This long dark night in Israel's history only seemed to get darker
- Nehemiah hoped for good news, but the reports were upsetting
- Things were worse, what urban renewal underway with Ezra was negligible (read verse 3)
- Jerusalem remained a place of decay and corruption
- And all of this leveled him (read verse 4)
- Nehemiah was plunged downwards into deep affliction; he sat down and mourned, wept

But out of all of this, God was about to do something great

- Amidst a sense of despair, Nehemiah would transform a ghetto into a secure city

How did he do this?

- What's behind world changers like Nehemiah?
- I believe you want to know, because I believe most of you are not content in merely sliding through life

Here what the initial verses tell us

1) FACE UP TO THE REALITIES OF OUR WORLD (Nehemiah 1:3)

- People who change the world are not afraid to see the world as God sees the world
- Nehemiah could have isolated himself
- Settled into a life of relative ease
  - Enjoying the luxuries, the perks that came with being part of the king's entourage
  - Medicating himself with the wine he tested for the king
    - I mean, how tough was it?
      - A wine taster, checking each night for after taste, balance, body, breed
      - Whether the wine was dry, noble, round, sharp, watery, tired

*Illustration* – There are a lot worse jobs

- Pop Science: mouthwash companies who have halitosis testers, checking for product efficiency
  
- But something of God was obviously working in him
  - His interest was with the things of God, the people of God
  - And out of this began a vision

Leonard Sweet - Vision is first of all ears

- That hear, listen, to the sounds of the world as it is
- What Nehemiah heard were the sounds of despair and distress
- The remnant were in great trouble, literally great evil
- They faced graceless spirits intent upon dispensing disgrace, reproach, scorn, contempt
- The city remained a city reduced to smolder and ruin
- Broken walls, piled rocks, charred posts, gaping portals
  - (Everyone was waiting on FEMA)

*APPLICATION* - What are the realities we must see, the things we must hear, if we are to make any difference?

Nehemiah tells us something else

2) TAKE IN THE PAIN OF THESE REALITIES (Nehemiah 1:4a)

- The world that mattered most to him was in disrepair
- And so, rather than change the subject, Nehemiah entered into the need emotionally, spiritually
  - Nehemiah was troubled by broken lives, broken walls and burned down gates
  - But the cause of his weeping must have gone deeper
  - While he knew that broken walls meant frightening insecurity, economic deprivation

- While it meant great trouble and disgrace for the people
- ABOVE ALL IT MEANT DISGRACE FOR THE NAME OF GOD
  - For Israel was chosen as a dwelling for God's name
  - Jerusalem was the symbol of the place of God's glory, but there was no glory now
- If God did not intervene, it would suggest to the world that God no longer cared
  - Or worse, that pagan gods ruled the day
  - Or even worse, that the God of Israel does not forgive
- And Nehemiah wanted to change this

*APPLICATION* - What about us?

- Do we feel something of the pain of our realities?

Nehemiah's story tells us...

3) LET THIS BE THE SEED OF A HOLY VISION (Nehemiah 1:4b)

- This deep, holy discontent that set in, this tumult that raged in Nehemiah's spirit, represented God's call
  - A call that formed the basis for God's vision
- TO REBUILD THE CITY
  - A call that would give Nehemiah the boldness and conviction that against impossible odds, God would grant success

*Point* - Before there is a vision, there must be something that shakes us inside

- That fuels a passion
- That creates a firestorm
- Every great vision is birthed in such a context
  - We see this often in Scripture
    - Moses, saw an oppressed people, and it so unsettled him he struck out against oppression, setting in motion God using him
    - Daniel, seeing the anguish of his own people, prayed in light of God's promises for their release, and God used him to speak to a king
    - Mordecai could no longer stand by and watch God's people tyrannized by evil
    - Jesus, saw Israel as sheep without a shepherd, and trained under shepherds to feed His lambs
    - Martin Luther saw a corrupt church that sold indulgences, wielded power in an abusive way, and started a reformation

- Bob Pierce could not stand the poverty he saw, the condition of children orphaned
- Francis Schaeffer was troubled by students in Europe who were searching for God, pressed by a godless culture, and created a L'Abri (a word for shelter), in which he gave himself to rebuilding broken faith
- Almost every vision, every visionary, begins with a holy discontent
  - A disturbed spirit that leads to vigorous action
  - Do you know, can you answer, what it is that you can no longer stand?
  - As Hybels puts it, "Can you identify what wrecks you?"
  - For until you do, you probably will not find your vision
    - What defines the reason for which you were made
    - If you never discover this, it is a wasted life

I've been thinking a lot about this, this week

- With respect to our vision
- If our vision is to mean anything, move any of us
- If we will end up building our wall
- It will only happen if it is a response to something that wrecks us!!

Here's what wrecks me

- Churches that have become irrelevant, do not lead to changed lives
  - That have little impact on culture

There are approximately 400,000 churches in the US today

- In a recent study, the Rainer Group narrowed this to 50,000 that are doing some things
- But going deeper...
  - Looking for those that aspire to excellence
  - That have a clear and compelling vision
  - That impact culture
  - That have a ministry leading to transformed lives
  - They reach at least one person for Christ every other week
  - They maintain consistency in leadership
  - Found less than a hundred

**I CAN'T STAND THIS!!**

Barna - After all of his years as a researcher

- Has reached the disturbing conclusion that very few churches produce radical followers of Jesus with lives powerfully transformed
- Most believers will die without leading a single person to Christ
- Few have in mind a person they regularly pray will experience the grace of God

- 8 of 10 know very little of entering, experiencing the presence of God

And because this is true, he has concluded that the church has little to no discernable influence in culture

- Certainly nothing to the level of movies, TV, music, internet
- And makes this incredible prediction, that within 20 years, only about a third of Americans will find the church to be relevant to their lives

In other words, like the walls of Jerusalem, the church is broken

- But until this gets deep inside of us, and we say "let's do something about this..."
  - Let's be a church that transforms lives
  - Has a compelling witness
  - Takes the kind of risks that impact the world globally
- We won't

What is deep inside you?