



Studies in Ezra & Nehemiah

Text

Nehemiah 1:1-11

Topic

Nehemiah is greatly moved upon hearing that the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and that its gates are burned with fire

Title

*"The Gate Awakening"*

Super heroes:

- Marvel calls them "enhanced."
- DC labels them "meta-humans."

They have amazing abilities and, as earth's mightiest heroes, they "fight the battles that we never could."

Christians can fall into a super hero mindset.

We assume that someone else, another believer, someone with greater spiritual abilities, will step up and serve the Lord.

Maybe you've heard the saying, "God isn't looking for our *ability*, just our *availability*."

I understand the point it's making, but I think I'd change it to this: "God doesn't require our ability, but our availability in our inability."

Bible hero after Bible hero claimed inability but God called them anyway.

Moses provides the textbook example. While he was at work one day, God tapped him to be Israel's deliverer. Moses argued that his inability to speak well should disqualify him. He ultimately impolitely asked God to find someone else.

Nehemiah was a normal guy, going about his daily life in Persia, working for the government. One day almost out of nowhere he was called upon to become both a warrior and a building contractor - things he had no ability to perform.

That kind of thing can... It should... Happen to us. As we go about our daily routine, despite our inabilities, God taps us to be used by Him.

I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 Your Eyes Can Be Suddenly Opened To See The Need, and #2 Your Heart Can Be Seriously Burdened To Meet The Need.

## #1 Your Eyes Can Be Suddenly Opened To See The Need

(v1-4)

In the church, are there “enhanced” elect? Are there “meta-human” ministers?

We're not “supers,” as Mr. Incredible calls them.

At the same time, if you are in Christ, you *are* enhanced, are you not, by the presence of God the Holy Spirit living in you?

You *are* meta-human in that you are empowered to do all things through Christ Who strengthens you.

You can't see it, but you are clothed with the robe of righteousness, and you walk in the power of the resurrection of Jesus.

You are, therefore, *always* available for any need God brings to your attention. If you are in Christ, Jesus assumes your availability, and ignores your inability.

Neh 1:1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. It came to pass in the month of Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the citadel,

We've read ahead, so we know that Nehemiah held an important position in the service of the king of Persia.

It's too bad, really, because Nehemiah went out of his way to keep his position a secret until the very last words of chapter one.

He presented himself as an average, everyday believer. He was a regular Jew who happened to be in the service of King Artaxerxes.

God has His ways of positioning you; of stationing you. In the New Testament, Philip was told to go hang-out along the side of the road. Along came an Ethiopian government official. Philip shared the Lord with him, baptized him, and the man brought the Gospel to Africa.

- The particular task God had for Nehemiah required his close contact with Artaxerxes.
- The particular task God has for you requires you to be right where **you** are.

Unless you are actively running from God, trust that He has brought you where He wants you.

You should have the anticipation that, at any moment, God can use you.

Neh 1:2 that Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.

Hanani may have been a brother, or a close relative, or (as they say in Riverdale) a brother-from-another-mother in the sense of his being Jewish.

Having just returned from a visit to Jerusalem, Nehemiah would, naturally, ask him how things were going there.

It's interesting Nehemiah referred to the Jews who had returned with Zerubbabel and, later, Ezra, as "escaped" and having "survived the captivity." It sounds romanticized - as if life in Jerusalem was all rainbows and unicorns after the captivity.

Hardly...

Neh 1:3 And they said to me, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province *are* there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem *is* also broken down, and its gates *are* burned with fire."

Some 75 years earlier Zerubbabel had taken the first group of 50,000 released captives back and amid much opposition rebuilt the temple. Some years later, just a few years before Nehemiah's time, Ezra had taken a second group of 5,000 back to restore the worship.

There was nothing to romanticize. Things were bad; terrible, even:

- Hanani and his companions refer to the returnees as "survivors," a much bleaker description than Nehemiah's.
- They were in "distress," the subjects of "reproach."

We don't know what Nehemiah knew or didn't know prior to this report. He may not have known of the conditions in Judah and Jerusalem. Or he may have known, but they had not really come into spiritual focus.

One of the things we learn from Nehemiah is that there is always timing to God's plans. I mentioned Moses earlier as God's deliverer of Israel from Egypt. When God heard the cries of His people suffering, He raised-up Moses... **But that was after 400 years.**

Then there followed more waiting:

- Moses went to work in Egypt one day - just as he had each day for the previous forty-years. One day God opened his eyes to the plight of the Jews. But Moses killed an Egyptian and was forced to flee.
- He spent the next forty-years tending sheep before God revealed Himself in the burning bush.



- Moses then embarked on the exodus that would occupy the last forty years of his life.

Nehemiah met with family and friends one day; nothing out of the ordinary. Except that was the day God opened **his** eyes to the need that he was going to meet.

You've probably gone to work one day; or to meet with someone; or something else; only to find yourself being used by God. It was exciting, right?

I wonder, too, if I've missed more than one of those appointments with God. Not maliciously; just out of dullness or busyness.

No matter how many days or weeks or months might go by where things are mostly normal, be ready to be used by God.

Neh 1:4 So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *for many* days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

He “wept,” “mourned,” fasted and prayed. As we will see, it wasn’t just an emotional response that then faded away. It was a deep, spiritual response that set him on a path.

**I don’t want** to give the impression that we are to sit around waiting for some spiritual lightning bolt to strike. As disciples in Christ, we should be pursuing Him with all of our heart, mind, soul, and strength. We should be looking for things to do, and people to share with. Prayer, even fasting, should be normal for us.

But there are also going to be special moments when your eyes are opened to see a need, and when you are being called meet it as a servant.

- It may be something that lasts a short time or for a season.
- Or it may be something that puts you on a path for the rest of your life.

You should ignore your thoughts of inability; or you should rejoice in your inability; knowing that you are just the kind of regular believer God can, and does, use.

## #2 Your Heart Can Be Seriously Burdened To Meet The Need

(v5-11)

We're going to read Nehemiah's prayer. Before we do, there's something we need to know. If we compare the dates in this chapter with those in chapter two, we realize that Nehemiah prayed for about four months.

He didn't pray this same prayer over-and-over. It represents the way he prayed for over 100 days straight, while intermittently fasting.

Neh 1:5 And I said: "I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, *You* who keep *Your* covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments,

I find analyzing prayers a little like dissecting a flower. When you're done, you can see all its parts, but the continuity and the beauty is forever destroyed. I want less to dissect it and more to discover it.

Nehemiah lifted his thoughts to Heaven. Prayer must elevate our mind and affections upward, to the throne room of God. The things of earth must grow strangely dim in the light of God's glory and grace.

Nehemiah was thankful God is the promise keeper. He keeps His "covenant" at all times, encouraging "love" and obedience on our part. When we fail, we can count on His "mercy."

Neh 1:6 please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned.

There's never a time when God is deaf or blind. The words Nehemiah used are a way of expressing urgency, calling upon God to act immediately.

“Night and day” Nehemiah prayed. He had some definite, set prayer times. He probably prayed the way Daniel did - three times a day, towards Jerusalem, coinciding with the times of the scheduled daily sacrifices.

Nehemiah also fasted. That meant he spent the time he would normally be preparing food or eating praying.

But beyond this, mentioning his praying and fasting was a way of saying that his heart was burdened by the situation. He thought about it all the time. Jerusalem, its condition, became his passion.

I'm not sure what Nehemiah liked to do on his off time. We all have hobbies and pursuits. I like coffee. More specifically, I like different methods of brewing coffee.

Maybe Nehemiah was a coffee guy... He for sure knew his wine. Or maybe he raced camels... Or maybe he had a man-cave he hung out in.

Persia was big on perfume; maybe he dabbled in apothecary. Music was huge; maybe he was in a garage band, playing cymbals or tympani.

At this point in his life, Jerusalem occupied his heart so much that prayer and fasting took priority over everything else.

Christians describe that as being *burdened*. We do so remembering that Jesus said His “burden was light,” since He carries it with us. Being burdened isn’t a drag; it isn’t a heavy, crushing weight. It’s more like your heart being so full that it can’t fit other, less significant, pursuits.

One thing that always accompanies burdens is a new awareness of the ugliness of sin - both yours and that of others. Thus Nehemiah’s confessions.

Neh 1:7 We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

With these words Nehemiah was recalling the reason Israel had been taken captive and exiled to Babylon. God’s covenant with Israel was both unconditional and conditional:

- Things like His promise that He would make of them a great nation from whom the Savior of the world would be born, were unconditional.
- Whether or not the Jews would be physically blessed in their land was conditional on their obedience.

Neh 1:8 Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, '*If* you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations;

Neh 1:9 but *if* you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, *yet* I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.'

Nehemiah understood the times in which he was living. God was keeping His promises to regather His special people to their land. The Temple had been rebuilt, but there was still work to be done, and the remnant needed God's help.



I wonder when, in the over 100 days that he prayed, Nehemiah understood that he would be the answer to his own prayers?

Often a believer will be burdened for some mission or missionary, and will marvel that others are not so burdened. It probably means God is tapping **you** to do something.

Neh 1:10 Now these *are* Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand.

I can't help but think of modern Israel. Scattered all over the world since Jerusalem and its Temple were destroyed in the first century, God has once again by His great power and by His strong hand brought His nation back to their land.

The existence of Israel is the fulfillment of many prophecies, and it is nothing if not miraculous.

Israel and the church are two separate entities. We, too, are beloved of God; but our destiny is different:

- Jesus is coming in the clouds to resurrect the dead in Christ of the Church Age, and to rapture believers who are alive at His coming.
- At some point after the rapture, the Jews in Israel will sign a seven year peace accord with the man who will turn out to be the antichrist. In the last half of the Great Tribulation, Israel will be persecuted, but preserved. They will receive their Messiah at His return with His Church from Heaven to establish a one thousand year kingdom, to be ruled from (where else?) Jerusalem.

Neh 1:11 O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name...”

Nehemiah wanted God to burden others in the same way He had burdened him.

He left it to the Lord. He didn't embark on his own plan or path. The need was indeed great; but meeting it must wait for the Lord.

This is one reason why we don't put burdens on you; why we don't guilt you into giving, or into serving. We've never had a Sunday where we tell you we have a special message from Jesus, just for you, about... Tithing. We want God to speak to you, through His Word and by His Spirit.

Nehemiah would have a four month wait. Some Bible characters have little or no wait; others wait for decades. God knows how much preparation you need. Don McClure calls it "Wait Training."

Wait on the Lord - realizing your wait could be only minutes long, or years ahead.

Neh 1:11 ... and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." For I was the king's cupbearer.

Nehemiah realized he was in a unique position to meet the spiritual need. He was “the king’s cupbearer.”

According to one source,

Originally, the function of a cupbearer was to taste (either for quality or for poison or for both), carry, and serve wine to his master. In a case like that of Nehemiah, a cupbearer for royalty was not just a personal servant but also a trusted confidant and advisor. Thus, it was an office of great responsibility, power, and honor in the Persian Empire.

He knew that he was in the right place; he waited for the right time - trusting in God’s timing.

**If you are in Christ,** you are in the right place. In many cases, it is already the right time to serve.

We ought to see the needs, and meet the needs, in our homes and churches and communities.

In other cases, special cases, God will seriously burden you. He ignores your complaints of inability. He picks you because of it, so that in your weakness He is glorified.

Remember - if you are in Christ, Jesus assumes your availability.

The next super hero film will be in theaters soon. A young boy, Billy Batson, transforms into a full grown super hero by saying, *Shazam*.

**You are being transformed daily into the image of your Savior, Jesus.**

Be Ready to say, "Here am I, Lord; send me."