THE MAN WHO CRIED ABOUT A WALL

Nehemiah 1:1-11

By

Steven J. Cole

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People cry about a lot of things. They cry at weddings. Parents cry when their children leave home. Sometimes they cry at the birth of their children and grandchildren. They cry at sad movies. Today we’re going to look at a man who cried about a broken wall.

I’m going to begin by making an assumption that I hope is true of everyone here—that you want to be used by God. Included in that assumption is that you have come to know Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord by trusting in His shed blood to cover your sins. You cannot serve the Lord until you have done that. But if you have done that, the Bible is clear that you have been given a spiritual gift to use in service for the Lord (1 Pet. 4:10-11). It is a great blessing when you see the Almighty God, creator of heaven and earth, use you in some capacity to serve the Lord Jesus!

But there’s much more to serving God than just talking about it. God wants to use each one of us, but He also wants to develop us into people who are more usable to Him. As we look at the life of Nehemiah, we will learn many qualities of service and leadership. The book falls into two broad sections: Rebuilding the Wall (chapters 1-7); and, Rebuilding the People (chapters 8-13).

Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 444 B.C., about 13 years after Ezra had returned there. He was a great leader whom God used to pull off a phenomenal feat: he instilled a vision in God’s remnant in Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city. In spite of much opposition and numerous hurdles, they accomplished the task in just 52 days. The temple had been rebuilt for about 70 years, but the walls that Nebuchadnezzar had destroyed in 586 B.C. were still in ruins, leaving the city defenseless against enemy attacks. As we saw in Ezra 4:11-23, an attempt at rebuilding the walls had been made a few years before. But when some Samaritans and other pagan residents of the land had complained, Artaxerxes issued a decree to stop the project, which these enemies had done with force of arms.
In November/December, 444 B.C., Nehemiah was serving as cupbearer to this same Artaxerxes at his winter capital in Susa when he had a life-changing conversation with his brother, Hanani, and some other men who had just come from Jerusalem. Nehemiah inquired about the condition of the city and the people. They responded, “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” (1:3).

Nehemiah knew most of these facts before this. The wall and gates had been destroyed over 140 years before. But this graphic firsthand description of the scene by Nehemiah’s brother, including the news of things after the ban by Artaxerxes, devastated Nehemiah. He wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed for days, entreating God to do something about these deplorable conditions. God responded by doing something—through Nehemiah! We learn that …

The person God uses has a burden for His people, a vision for His purpose, and a commitment to His purpose.

First, Nehemiah saw the great need, which burdened his heart. He also saw what God wanted to accomplish. And, he committed himself to see it through in spite of the many difficulties.

1. The person God uses has a burden for His people.

When God wants to use you in some capacity, the first thing He does is to burden your heart with the situation. Perhaps, like Nehemiah, you will have known in general about the need for a long time. But then you hear about the specifics of it or you see it firsthand and you can’t put it out of your mind. When you compare the date of 1:1 with the date of 2:1, you discover that Nehemiah did not hear about this need and immediately rush in before the king with his request to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the wall. Rather, he waited on God in prayer for four months before the opportunity arose to talk with the king. Note three things about Nehemiah’s burden:

A. Nehemiah’s burden stemmed from feeling the people’s great need.

Other Jews in Babylon had probably heard about the conditions in Jerusalem, shaken their heads and said, “My, my! That’s too bad!” They went back to their work in Babylon thinking,
“What a tragedy!” But they were not burdened by the need of God’s people in the land.

But the man that God used to do something about it not only heard about the need. He felt their need. He wept, mourned, fasted and prayed for days about what he had heard. He just couldn’t put it out of his mind. God used that burden as the basis for action.

Maybe you’re wondering, “The needs are so many and so great! I can’t possibly respond to them all. How do I discern which particular need God wants me to get involved with?”

Two thoughts: First, don’t let the immensity of the needs paralyze you so that you don’t do anything. Sometimes you hear about the overwhelming needs around the world and run for cover because there is no way to respond to them all. Out of emotional survival, we throw up a barricade around our hearts that blocks all of the needs from moving us. We end up engrossed in our own pursuit of pleasure and ignore the needs of others.

Matthew 9:36-38 says, “Seeing the people, He felt compassion for them, because they were distressed and dispirited like sheep without a shepherd. Then He said to His disciples, ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. Therefore beseech the Lord of the harvest to send out workers into His harvest.’” So we need to pray, “Lord, give me the eyes of Jesus to see the needs of people. Give me the heart of Jesus to feel compassion for them. And raise up workers for the harvest to meet these overwhelming needs!”

Second, don’t commit yourself impetuously to something just because the need is there. The needs are simply endless. You don’t have to respond to all of the world’s needs. Nobody could do that. Rather, wait on God in prayer until He burdens your heart with a particular need that you can do something about. Alan Redpath wrote, “Recognition of need must be followed by earnest, persistent waiting upon God until the overwhelming sense of world need becomes a specific burden in my soul for one particular piece of work which God would have me do” (Victorious Christian Service [Revell], p. 31). So we need to pray continually that God would give us a heart to feel the burden of hurting people’s needs and the willingness to get involved where we can offer some help.
B. Nehemiah’s burden was focused by seeing the people’s great sin.

Nehemiah was realistic in assessing the problem. He quickly realized that at the heart of things was not a lack of organization, although they desperately needed someone to organize things, which Nehemiah subsequently did. The root problem was not a lack of resources, although the project required resources. The root problem was sin. So he prayed, “confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father’s house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses” (1:6b-7).

The Bible is clear that at the root of all our global and personal problems is sin. Why are there wars and terrorist attacks? Sin. Why are there famine and disease? Sin. Why are governments and businesses riddled with greed and corruption? Sin. Why is the mission task of the church not fulfilled? Sin. On the personal level, why do couples argue and have problems communicating? Sin. Why do kids from Christian homes rebel against God and their parents? Sin. Whatever the problem, you can trace its roots back to sin, either to the original sin of Adam and Eve, or directly to the sins of the people with the problems. If God is going to use us to help alleviate any great need, we need to keep clear in our focus, that at the root of the problem is human sin.

But it’s not just the sins of others that we need to be aware of. We also need to be aware of and confess our own sins. Nehemiah included himself with the sins of the people. Staying aware of our own sins keeps us humbled before God and others so that we don’t sit in judgment on them. We are sinners who have been shown mercy. We go to other sinners and offer God’s mercy.

But we dare not get distracted from the root problem. If we start thinking that the real need is better organization or more funds or better methods, we’ll start at the wrong place. The root need is for repentance on the part of God’s people, who have forgotten His purpose and are living for their own purpose. And lost people need repentance so that they can be reconciled to God. Nehemiah’s burden stemmed from feeling the people’s great need. It was focused by seeing the people’s and his own great sin.
C. Nehemiah’s burden was lightened by seeing the people’s great God.

He begins his prayer addressing God: “I beseech You, O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments” (1:5). Toward the conclusion he reminds God (and himself) of God’s promise to gather His people from the most remote parts where He has scattered them for their disobedience. Then he prays (1:10), “They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.” Five times in that verse he repeats “you” and “your” as if to say, “These aren’t my people, God; they’re Your people.” God wants us to feel the burden for others, but then He wants us to roll that burden back on Him, remembering that it is not our power, but His power, that redeems them.

What if you honestly don’t have a burden for God’s people or for lost people? What does that mean? What should you do? It could mean that you are not born again, because you are not concerned about the things that God is concerned about. If that is your condition, you need to repent of your sins and trust in Christ to save you.

If you are born again but do not feel burdened for the lost or for God’s people, it probably means that you have become so caught up with seeking the things that the world seeks that you are not seeking first God’s kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33). You need to go before God and get your priorities in line with His priorities. He does not save us so that we can live happy lives pursuing the American dream. He saves us so that He can use us to further His purpose. That leads to the second quality of the person God uses:

2. The person God uses has a vision for His purpose.

If Nehemiah had lacked a vision of God’s purpose, when he heard about the conditions in Jerusalem he would have said, “Why be bothered about Jerusalem? We live in Babylon and have lived here for over 100 years. What’s the big deal about Jerusalem anyway? Why not just settle down and worship God here?”
But Nehemiah knew something about what God wanted to do with His people (1:9): “I ... will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.” Babylon would not do. God’s purpose involved His name or His glory being made known in Jerusalem.

God’s purpose in this age involves the church. Jesus said, “I will build My church” (Matt. 16:18). Revelation 5:9 says that Jesus purchased for God with His blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. But why does He want to save people from around the globe? Be careful how you answer! We live in such a man-centered age that we easily can fall into the error of thinking that God’s purpose is to save people because He loves them and wants them to be happy. But that is a man-centered goal. God’s purpose is not man-centered; it is God-centered. God does love people and He wants them to be happy, but not as the final end in itself. Saving people is a means toward God’s purpose, but it is not the end of God’s purpose.

As Paul makes clear in Ephesians 1-3, God’s purpose involves building His church for the sake of His name or His glory. He wants to display the riches of His glorious grace and His manifold wisdom through the church to all of the angelic hosts (Eph. 1:6, 10-12, 14; 3:8-11). God’s chief purpose is to further His own glory through the joy of salvation that His people experience in Him.

One of the most profound, life-changing books that you could ever read is John Piper’s God’s Passion for His Glory [Crossway Books], which is built around and includes the full text of Jonathan Edwards’ The End for Which God Created the World. I will warn you: it is not easy, light reading! Grappling with the truths that Edwards presents makes your brain ache! He argues that the end for which God created the world is, “first, that the glory of God might be magnified in the universe, and, second, that Christ’s ransomed people from all times and all nations would rejoice in God above all things” (Piper, p. 31).

The life-transforming truth is that God’s glory and His people’s joy in Him fit together. As Piper puts it, “The further up you go in the revealed thoughts of God, the clearer you see that God’s aim in creating the world was to display the value of His glory, and that this aim is no other than the endless, ever-increasing joy of his
people in that glory” (p. 32). He goes on to show how the Great Commission fits with God’s purpose: “If the exhibition of God’s glory and the deepest joy of human souls are one thing, then world missions is a declaration of the glories of God among all the unreached peoples, with a view to gathering worshippers who magnify God through the gladness of radically obedient lives” (p. 42, italics his). He sums up, “In other words, rejoicing in God and glorifying God are one, and that one thing is the aim of world missions” (p. 43).

When God’s people are in great distress and reproach and the wall between them and the pagan world is broken down, God is not glorified through His people because His people are not living any differently than the world lives. The wall symbolizes the distinctive difference between God’s people and worldly people in the way we think, the values we hold, and the way we relate to God and to one another (see 1 Pet. 2:9-12).

Thus God’s purpose is to magnify His name or His glory through His people. He does that when His people not only know and dutifully obey Him, but when they joyfully know and obey Him (Piper, p. 75). As John Piper often states, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.” If you want God to use you, ask Him to give you a burden for His people and a vision for His purpose. Finally,

3. The person God uses has a commitment to His purpose.

Nehemiah didn’t hear about the sad conditions in Jerusalem and say, “That’s too bad! I hope that somebody does something about it.” Rather, he was willing to commit himself to the task and to stick with it in spite of numerous difficulties. Note two things about Nehemiah’s commitment:

A. He was willing to count the world as loss for the sake of God’s purpose.

Nehemiah notes that he was cupbearer to the king (1:11). The cupbearer was a high position in the court. His responsibility was to choose and taste the wine before it was served to the king to make sure that it was not poisoned. He would have been a handsome man, well-trained in court etiquette. He would have to be a friendly companion, willing to lend an ear and even to give advice to the king. Since he enjoyed closest access to the king, he was a
highly trusted man. Early documents also reveal that the cupbearer could be the keeper of the royal signet, be in charge of administration of the accounts, and even serve as second to the king (see Edwin Yamauchi, Expositor’s Bible Commentary [Zondervan], 4:683).

Nehemiah lived in the palace at Susa with the king. Excavations have shown that it was built with cedar, gold, silver, and ivory. The walls were decorated with artistically colored glazed bricks and relief designs of winged bulls (Donald K. Campbell, Nehemiah: Man in Charge [Victor Books], pp. 7-8). Nehemiah would have eaten the best food, worn the best clothes, and lived in very comfortable quarters. It was a cushy job! We do not know why he had not returned with the remnant with Ezra 13 years before. Perhaps, like Daniel and his friends, he had been conscripted into the king’s service as a young man and was not free to leave.

But now when he hears about the distress of God’s people and the dishonor to God’s name, he cannot be happy in this great job and these luxurious surroundings. He was willing to give it all up, make the difficult journey to Jerusalem, and to set about the stressful job of mobilizing the people to rebuild the walls so that God’s name would be honored among His people.

Was it a costly sacrifice? Yes and no. Yes, he had to give up all of the comforts that he enjoyed and endure a lot of hardship. But, no, in that he could no longer be happy doing what he had been doing. He found great joy in doing what God wanted him to do. Like Paul, he counted it all rubbish so that he might gain Christ.

John Paton and his wife gave up the comforts of their Scottish homes and the relationships with their loved ones to take the gospel to the cannibals of the New Hebrides Islands in the South Seas. When she lay there dying after complications of childbirth, her last words were, “Oh that my dear mother were here! She is a good woman, my mother, a jewel of a woman.” Then she saw that another missionary was standing nearby. She exclaimed, “Oh, Mr. Copeland, I did not know that you were there! You must not think that I regret coming here, and leaving my mother. If I had the same thing to do over again, I would do it with far more pleasure, yes, with all my heart. Oh, no! I do not regret leaving home and friends, though at the time I felt it keenly” (John G. Paton Autobiography [Banner of Truth], pp. 84-85).
B. He was willing to overcome the obstacles for the sake of God’s purpose.

The rest of the book of Nehemiah is an account of how he overcame one obstacle after another. There was overt and covert opposition from enemies. There were problems within the ranks that could have stopped the work. But Nehemiah persisted and the wall was completed in 52 days!

If you try to do anything in service for the Lord, you will face obstacles and opposition. Some of it will come from the world, but the most difficult opposition often comes from within the church. You have to realize up front that you will encounter problems and commit yourself to God and His purpose to endure.

Conclusion

I want to challenge all of us, but especially those who are young: Don’t throw away your life to achieve the American dream of financial security, early retirement, and a motor home, so that you can spend your final years driving around to capture all of the National Parks on videotape. Spend your life for the only purpose that lasts: to see the nations glorify God for His great mercy in Christ (Rom. 15:9-12)! Ask God to give you a burden for His people, a vision for His purpose, and a commitment to His purpose.

Discussion Questions

1. With all of the overwhelming needs in the world, how can a person know where God wants him/her to focus?

2. How can we fight and shrug off the subtle but aggressive worldliness that keeps seeping into the church?

3. Why is it important to realize that God’s purpose is primarily His glory, not our happiness? Why are these two things not ultimately in conflict?

4. Is it really a sacrifice to lose the world in order to gain Christ? If not, why do we cling so tightly to the things of this world?

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