

# Nehemiah 1:1-4

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Date: 20 September 2020

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[ 0 : 00 ] Turn if you will to Nehemiah chapter one. Nehemiah chapter one. If you didn't pick up Smarties tube this morning for the gift day, there's still a load there. Somebody asked me could you put notes in them. And you're more than welcome to put a selection of notes in them. But children, if you didn't get one, take a Smarties tube and ask your mum and dad if you can eat them and then fill them with 20 peas or if you're an adult pound.

And we're going to begin a series tonight on the book of Nehemiah. And there's a couple of reasons why I wanted to preach on Nehemiah.

And one, Nehemiah is really about a kind of rebuilding of God's church. And in July, we said goodbye to Paul and Liz. And today, we say goodbye to Chuck and Waima.

And we announced this morning that we'll say goodbye to Chris and Emma in December. And so I do think, particularly in my mind, there's a feeling of kind of rebuilding and rethinking things. And Nehemiah will help us in that.

The other reason is Nehemiah stands up to the state. And Nehemiah's... ..posed. And I think it's probably likely that over the next couple of months, maybe in the next couple of weeks, maybe even this week, we're going to need to stand up to the state as Christ's church.

[ 1 : 24 ] We want to obey wherever we can. And yet, when it comes to a conflict between what God commands and what man commands, well, God always wins.

And I think Nehemiah will help us to do that and to do it well. Nehemiah is one of the last books in the New Testament. And yet, as you read Nehemiah, there's a sense of exciting things about to happen.

Here is a man's life that is about to be changed forever. And perhaps God will use this study of Nehemiah to change your life, to change the life of our church, or bigger changes than that.

I want us just to look at the first four verses tonight. I promise we're not going to go that slowly. I hope we'll get it done in 11 or 12 sermons. But I just want us to focus in particularly on verse 4.

So that's our text. Can you look there with me? Nehemiah 1, verse 4. Nehemiah says, As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept. And so you have a grown man who is sitting, crying.

[ 2 : 34 ] And we tonight want to look at this weeping man. He's not a wimp. He's not a weakling. He's not a very emotional, sensitive type.

He's a top police officer. He is hard and shrewd. He's clever. He's tough. He's determined. All of that comes through in the book. He's been promoted to be a cupbearer to Artaxerxes, the leader of one of the mightiest empires in all of the world.

That the world has ever seen. He was Artaxerxes' chief security officer. He was his personal bodyguard. He's not a lightweight. The head of his civil service.

He is responsible in seeing that Artaxerxes is not killed. He's not assassinated. He's not poisoned. They don't appoint softies to jobs like that. Nehemiah was a man of tremendous force of characters. We're going to see a formidable individual. He was very, very gifted. He's very determined. He was a natural leader. He wasn't a man that bore fools gladly.

[ 3 : 43 ] And yet we see this man, don't we, in verse 4, sitting, weeping. And that is remarkable. I doubt if Nehemiah often wept. Doesn't seem to be that sort of man.

And yet he is here. And we want to ask ourselves, why is he weeping? And more than that, I think we want to be brought by God's Spirit to imitate him.

Some of us probably should be weeping. Some of us should be weeping instead of smiling. We should all be showing the deepest concern. Nehemiah wept over Jerusalem, the city of God.

And we should weep for ourselves, for our church. And you may think, well, what a morbid subject. But actually, it's not morbid. It's the most encouraging thing that has happened in the history of the

people of God in a very, very long time.

And very often, the most encouraging thing that can happen in our lives is that we become deeply concerned. That's a good sign. And if many of us were more concerned than we are about our relationship with God, it would be the best thing that's ever happened to us.

[ 5 : 00 ] If some of us woke up from our indifference and carelessness, that would be a wonderful blessing. If some of us had sleepless nights and shared some tears about our relationship with God, that would be a great blessing.

If the church in this country was a little bit less complacent and stopped rolling over, and a little bit less pleased with itself, and a little bit less satisfied than we are, it would be for all the church a great blessing.

And so I want to say to you tonight, weeping can be very, very positive, and it was here. So let's think of the news that Nehemiah hears. The news that Nehemiah hears.

That's my first point. We're trying out a new children's sheet. So there's my first point tonight. The news that Nehemiah hears. The book is dated about December 446 BC.

446 years before Christ. The scene is the city of Susa. And they're in the winter palace of the Persian kings. It's about 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf.

[ 6 : 05 ] 90 years earlier, our king Cyrus has allowed a group of Jews to return from exile to their own land. So they're back in the land. Not all of them, but a group of them, a remnant. And 20 years after they'd returned, they rebuilt the temple of God.

You read about that in the book of Haggai. It's a great thing. It was a mighty deliverance. It was a wonderful event in the history of God's people. God turned back their captivity.

The Bible says they were like men who dreamed. Their mouths were filled with laughter. Their hopes and their prayers were answered. They've got a new building.

It was going to be a new beginning. It was going to be a new stage. They were going to write a new book. They were going to have a wonderful new future, but it hasn't turned out that way. The people who went back, well, they turned out to be sinful and selfish and lazy.

And the people had not done what they promised to do. And their neighbors, their neighbors had been hostile and aggressive. Their neighbors had opposed them and hindered them.

[ 7 : 11 ] And their neighbors had held them back in every possible way. And there had actually been very little progress for 70 years. And now Nehemiah hears a report from one of his brothers, Hanani, who has visited Jerusalem.

And he's come back with news of how the people are getting on. And this is what he says. He says, those who survive in exile, they're back in the province. And they are in great trouble and disgrace. And the wall of Jerusalem is broken down. And its gates have been burned with fire. In other words, the city is in a ruined condition, a pathetic condition. There are no walls and there are no gates.

And the people are in great trouble and disgrace. And so for 150 years, the city has been in a ruined condition. And in those days, a city without a wall was no city at all.

We don't really have walled cities that much anymore. You go to York and there's a walled city. And here is a city with a wall around it.

[ 8 : 17 ] And that's the case in biblical times. A city without walls, well, it had no security in those days. And the people had no security. An army could come at night. They could be killed at night at any time.

An invading army could appear and wipe them out. A city without walls had no status. It wasn't a proper city. And so for 150 years, the city of God, Jerusalem, had had this disgrace.

No walls. The people had no status. They had no security. And it was meant to be the capital city of the people of God. But it was just a joke. It was just a joke.

Psalms 79, perhaps, is thinking about this. He says that we are objects of reproach to our neighbors, of scorn to those around us. The nations around, they laughed at this place where God was meant to dwell.

God had meant Jerusalem to be the most wonderful city in all of the world. It was God's city. The place of God's temple. The place where God promised to meet with men and women and boys and girls. It was meant to be the place where God was worshipped and God's presence and God's people.

[ 9 : 28 ] And Jerusalem was meant to be a light to the nations. It was meant to be an example to the whole of the world of what it meant to live with God as your God.

And people were meant to look at Jerusalem and the temple of the Lord and see it. And they were meant to say, what a wonderful God. The God of Israel is. But what they saw was a ruin and a shabby disgrace.

And that's the news that Nehemiah heard. Secondly, second point, the reaction which he displays. The reaction which he displays. Verse 4.

As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and wept. Mourned for days. And I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

I think we need to understand that it wasn't really inevitable that Nehemiah should have wept. He was living a thousand miles away.

[10:37] In a sense, it didn't make any difference to Nehemiah. He had a good job. He had a very prosperous career. He'd probably been born in exile.

He may never have even visited the country of Israel. That's quite likely. He could have continued exactly as he was. Why did he care?

He had a good income. He had a good lifestyle. And he had a good career. Why should he care that the city of Jerusalem was broken down? And again, the situation wasn't new, was it?

It had been like this for 150 years. Nobody could remember anything different. In his father's time, Jerusalem had been a ruin. In his grandfather's time, Jerusalem had been a ruin.

In his great-grandfather's time, Jerusalem had been a ruin. Why do you get so upset now? Let's imagine you're walking down the street tomorrow, and there's a guy crouched down on the pavement, and he is weeping.

[11:47] He's crying his eyes out, breaking his heart. And as you speak to him, he begins to kind of sob through the tears, and he realizes he's a Frenchman. And you say to him, why are you weeping?

What's wrong? And he says, France lost the Battle of Trafalgar. And he starts crying.

And he says, but why are you crying? He says, France lost the Battle of Trafalgar. What would you say to him? You'd say to him, calm down, Pierre. You'd say, the Battle of Trafalgar was over 200 years ago.

It was over 200 years ago. What are you so upset for? You don't even live in France. And so here is something that happened 150 years ago, and yet Nehemiah is crying about it.

Wasn't Nehemiah just a bit extreme, needed to lighten up? He's showing such sorrow, isn't he? Of course, the answer is he wasn't. He wasn't extreme at all, because Nehemiah had a sense of God, and God's honor, and God's cause, and he knew that God was being laughed at.

[13:07] And that is a grief to any Christian. When God or God's worship is laughed at. And that is a serious thing.

And Nehemiah was struck to the heart, because God was being laughed at. And God's people were being laughed at. And God's name was being dishonored, and he couldn't bear it.

And it was painful to him. It was agony to him. That the people were despising God. It was like a dagger in his soul. And so this top security agent, he is overwhelmed emotionally, and he is plunged into the depths of sorrow.

And we may say, but didn't he know about this? This isn't new. Didn't Nehemiah know about all this? It's been like this for 150 years.

He can't have just heard about it on that morning. He can't have been so ignorant. Surely, Nehemiah wasn't kind of sitting where he was in Susa, thinking, well, all is well in Jerusalem.

[14:13] The walls are rebuilt. He knew they weren't. Surely, he didn't think that the people of God were doing really, really well and thriving. But isn't it true that there are things that we know?

We know certain things, in a sense, and yet there comes a moment when we really know them.

There are truths, aren't there, in my life and in your life, that we hold in our mind, and yet they don't influence our lives.

You know, for example, that one of our friends, or a member of our family is not a Christian. And we know that the Bible teaches very clearly that if they die without Christ, they will be condemned by God.

And at the moment, they are going to hell to everlasting punishment. Now, we know that, and yet maybe it doesn't upset us. It doesn't worry us. We meet them. We have dinner together.

We talk together. We know they're not Christian, and it doesn't affect us. And then suddenly, there comes a moment when we realize what it means. But they're not converted.

[ 15 : 21 ] And what is going to happen to them, and what will happen to them when they die, that they will be separated from me forever, and they will spend eternity in hell. And we knew it, but now we know it.

And we feel it, and we're concerned. And so we start to pray for them more deliberately, and we start to speak to them. We think about writing to them.

And we are changed. We knew it. But there came a point when we know it. James Philip, who is a magnificent Bible teacher.

If you go on to the Tron Church in Glasgow website, his daily Bible reading notes of 50 years are on there. You'll see where I basically get everything. But his commentary on Nehemiah, he says this, there are times when obvious truths claim facts which we have known for long enough, and to which we have been blind, suddenly ignite and begin to overpower us.

And that's what happens in Nehemiah 1 verse 4.

[ 16 : 35 ] He'd known all his life that the walls were ruined, but on this day when his brother told him it hit him like a sledgehammer, and it broke him and it shattered him, and his life was never the same. And isn't that a solemn possibility for you and me tonight, that there may be some truths which are very important for you, to which at the moment you are blind.

And there may be something unique to see, and to do, or what I need to do. And so as we come to Nehemiah, we pray, Lord, please would you awaken us, as you awakened Nehemiah, to look at an old familiar reality, and say this is terrible, and this is heartbreaking, and this will not do.

The news which he heard, the response which he made, and then secondly, the example which he sets. The example which he sets. And I think it's clear the example he sets, isn't it?

Here is a man weeping. And perhaps some of us need to weep about our own lives. No, perhaps all of us do, without an exception. We're not, are we the men and women that we should be?

We've not responded to God as we should have responded. And you and I are not trusting God as much as we should. And some of us might not be trusting God at all. And we do not love the Lord Jesus Christ as deeply as we should, and some of you might not love him at all.

[ 18 : 07 ] So many failures. And we should weep, and we should be concerned. It's a bad sign in medicine, isn't it?

When somebody who's sick doesn't show pain. And it's a bad sign in the soul when someone stays careless. Nahum, I wept. And we weep for ourselves and for our sin.

What about the church of Jesus Christ? We should weep for the IPC as a family of churches.

We should weep for our community. We should weep for our nation. At the moment particularly, it seems it's disintegrating before our very eyes.

There are things that happen in our land and from our government that must cause us to weep. I'm not saying that that the UK is the people of God.

[ 19 : 14 ] I'm not saying that. But that our culture has been profoundly influenced and shaped by the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. and over 50 years we've walked away and the pace of that walking away is it's got even quicker, isn't it?

And that should cause us to weep. To weep over the ruins as Nehemiah did of the people of God. This book calls us to weep for ourselves and for our families and to weep for our nation.

Now I could speak to you about the government for the next 20 minutes. And I could speak to you about the woes of the national church. What I think is wrong with churches all around the country. But I want to close and focus on one particular area of a problem that should cause us sorrow. And it's a problem like the walls of Jerusalem.

It's been with us for a long time. It's like the ruined walls of Jerusalem. It detracts from our witness to the world. It's like the ruined walls of Jerusalem. And it detracts from the honour of God's name and it threatens the very existence of the church.

[ 20 : 26 ] And that problem I would argue is the lack of conversions. The lack of people coming to saving faith in Christ.

And we as a church have grown and there have been people that have come to us. And wonderfully as I look around there are people here tonight who have been brought from death to life.

And people who have been converted and we praise God for that. But we do need to face reality. We are not bearing a powerful dynamic witness to the saving power of God.

God. And so people do not look at our church or our family of churches and say what a wonderful God what a mighty saviour.

The glory of God does not shine out from us as it should. And we're really grateful for all that the Lord has done. I'm not decrying that. But we are a city with ruined walls and there's no point kidding ourselves because weeping is positive.

[ 21 : 38 ] And sometimes the best thing that you can do to be positive is by being negative. And face up to the fact that something is wrong. And seek to do something about it.

Now is that a concern for you? Have we felt the pain of this? Perhaps we're like the citizens of Jerusalem. We've got used to it.

They've never known anything have they? They've never known anything but ruined walls. Just always has been. It's like that in my father's time like that in my grandfather's time like that in my great grandfather's time. It's just the way it was they said.

Suddenly this pushy newcomer arrives in Jerusalem Nehemiah with all his new ideas and his plans and the people are pretty angry. And this guy this Johnny lately has just come and he's telling us what to do.

Who does he think he is? And we have so much don't we? We have the truth of God. We have the truth of his word but the danger for us is we're complacent.

[ 22 : 44 ] The danger for you as you listen and for me as I've prepared this is we think well when you look at other churches we're far better than them. The other churches are not prospering and we say well they're not as sound.

And I know I do know it's possible to become very morbid and very depressed and to kind of sink into self-accusation. I grew up with a bit of that in South Wales and I don't want to ignore what great things God has done for us and what great things God is doing for us.

But we do need to realise and I need to realise that we all have a self-protective instinct and so we don't want to hear bad news so preachers and people make a kind of silent contract don't they? that I will not bother you too much and you will respond by saying well thank you very much that was great. And that can go on for 20, 30 years in a church and we don't want to hear bad news. And some of you might be listening to me thinking well Paul lockdown's really got to him hasn't it? And he's a bit discouraged and I probably need to have a word with him I'll send him a text tonight. I do want to say to you I'm not actually discouraged.

[ 23 : 55 ] I'm not discouraged. I'm encouraged. Actually I'm optimistic. But we need to be aware of that self-protective instinct that doesn't want to hear bad news.

Because if we don't face the bad news we can never change it. We just go on complacently. In Naam I looked at a situation which had been for a long long time and he was upset and he was upset that he began by weeping.

And we'll see what he does next week. He began by weeping and here's where we must begin. And I'm not trying to place blame on any of you I'm really not. Not at all. I'm not asking what needs to be done.

I'm asking you as I've asked myself over the last couple of weeks to face reality simply and to weep because of the reality. Not to make excuses not to blame one another not to minimize the pain though.

Not to shortcut the process. And I think Naam I shows us how to rebuild. Matthew Henry who I don't often find very helpful but I did find him helpful today this week said this no one will do worthy work at rebuilding the walls who has not wept over the ruins.

[ 25 : 15 ] No one will do worthy work at rebuilding the walls who has not wept over the ruins. So let's think of our lives and weep. Let's think of our land and weep.

Let's think of the church of Jesus Christ and his country and weep. Let's think of our branch of the church and weep. And the most hopeful sign for us as a congregation would be tears of sorrow because we do know don't we the Bible teaches us that those who weep in tears those who sow in tears will reap in joy.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Thank you.