

**A New Enterprise: God's Enterprise**  
**Nehemiah 1:1-4**  
**October 13, 2013**

**Introduction – New Beginnings**

Life is full of new beginnings. It would be awfully dull without them. You know, when you were a kid, September always came around with a new teacher and a new classroom. Junior High and High School on the first day was both intimidating and exciting. It got your blood pumping, didn't it? You know you're alive! And for those who are married, what about the honeymoon and those first days of wedded bliss. New beginnings are exciting.

I remember the first home we bought. That was a new beginning. We were in California and for nearly ten years I had watched home prices sky-rocket to the point that I believed I would never own my own home. (Truth is, I probably never will. The bank owns the lion's-share of my house right now.) But in 1985, we moved to the high desert of California where housing was relatively cheap. And interest rates were at bargain levels of 13 7/8%! There was a building boom going on and we thought we would get in the fun and buy a new tract home. They were cookie-cutter style, with three floor plans available. You knew that every third house on your block was going to be just like yours. Very special! Still, we were excited. The lot was about 37 feet wide by 75 feet long. Our neighbor's wall was on our property line. It was called "zero-lot-line" planning. Our mansion was 1100 square feet and we were happy to squeeze into it. I planted and harvested grapes. We put in a patio and I built the awning. I put in a sprinkler system and laid sod. Looking back, we smile and see a bit of humor in our circumstances. But for us, it was a new beginning. Our memories aren't inspired so much by the sticks and bricks, but rather by the life experiences that we had together in that place.

Surely, you've felt the excitement of new beginnings. Perhaps it was a new house or maybe it was a new job. Maybe you moved. What does U-Haul call it? "Adventures in Moving!" New beginnings are a sign of life and one of its special joys.

**The Word**

The Jewish people needed a new beginning. Starting with King Solomon, the people of God continued to break their Covenant with him until they reaped the consequences that Moses had foretold back in Deuteronomy (4:25-31). The northern tribes were defeated and carried away from their homeland by Assyria in 733 B.C. Nearly a hundred and fifty years later, the Babylonians laid siege to Jerusalem and carried most of the nation away, leaving only a small and poor remnant of people to care for the land. The Jews would remain in exile for seventy years and more. During this time, God did not desert his people. He commissioned godly prophets and leaders, including Daniel, Ezekiel and Esther. In God's good plan, the Persians conquered the Babylonians in 539 B.C. A year later, the Persian King issued the following amazing decree:

“Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel—he is the God who is in Jerusalem. And let each survivor, in whatever place he sojourns, be assisted by the men of his place with silver and gold, with goods and with beasts, besides freewill offerings for the house of God that is in Jerusalem.”

God never deserts his people. Though they may be faithless, he remains faithful. After 70 years of exile, God brought his people back to rebuild the Temple and reestablish worship in Jerusalem. God was with them, but the work was not easy. They faced many adversaries and overcame numerous obstacles. The Temple was completed twenty years after the work had begun. But God’s rebuilding program involved much more than just bricks and mortar. Ezra, an expert in the Jewish Scriptures arrived nearly sixty years later to lead a spiritual revival of the people. Thirteen years later, back in the Persian Empire, our narrative begins:

The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”

Nehemiah 1:1-3

## **Prayer**

### **God is the Main Character**

The book opens with what seems to be a journal or diary entry by Nehemiah, whose name means “Yahweh has comforted.” We’ll learn more about Nehemiah as we go through the book. There are many entries in the book that seem to come directly from his hand. Nevertheless, most biblical scholars believe the book was not written by Nehemiah, but rather by the same author who wrote the book of Ezra. Indeed, in ancient times, the two books were considered as one. It is very possible that Ezra wrote both books, since he appears in both and his vocation was that of a scribe and a scholar.

But neither Ezra nor Nehemiah is the main character of the book. God is. It is always true of every Old Testament narrative. God is the primary actor; the people are the supporting cast. I cannot overemphasize this point too much. Because God’s action is often behind the scenes and implied, we are often led to believe that the story revolves around a particular individual. Like a

good drama, the real story, however, is found between the lines. Keep in mind, as we work our way through the book of Nehemiah that it is, first, about God and his purposes. If we hold on to that understanding, we will grasp why the record has been kept for us and what is God's word for us through the book today. Secondly, Nehemiah is about people whom God used to accomplish his purposes. We will be inspired and instructed by their courageous and faith-empowered actions.

### **The Setting**

Nehemiah says that it was in the month of Chislev – a timeframe within November and December in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of the Persian King, Artaxerxes, (445 B.C.) when the story begins. He was in Susa, one of the Persian capitals and the same city in which the story of Esther played out thirty years before. The city was not too far from present-day Basrah in Southern Iraq.

### **The Inciting Event**

Every good story has an “inciting event.” The action in Nehemiah begins simply enough. He encounters his brother Hanani and certain men who came with him from Judah. The Scriptures don't tell us much about Hannani or his mission with the men from Judah. We don't know if they are residents of the Persian Empire who had visited Judah or if they were part of the small band of Jews then living in Judah. Perhaps they came to see Nehemiah because they believed he might help them since, as we will learn, he had access to the king.

Nehemiah's probably didn't consider his encounter with his brother as having high importance. He held high public office and he might have just assumed that Hannani was coming to pay his respects and to catch him up on family news. But, as we'll see, this seemingly common event would dramatically change Nehemiah's life and impact the history of the Jews forever.

We never know when God will break into our mundane lives with a word or with an event that will dramatically change the course of our lives. It was a harmless double-date arranged so that Diane could approve her roommate's boyfriend that led to our meeting for the first time. My job as ministry professor was launched by an off-the-cuff statement I made to a friend of mine. Moses was tending sheep when he noticed a bush in the desert that kept burning. Peter and John had just finished a bad day fishing when they encountered Jesus. God works in mundane ways to accomplish extraordinary things in the lives of his people. Do not despise the routine events of your life. God may indeed be working behind the scenes to accomplish great things in and through your life.

### **He Asked Because He Cared**

Nehemiah inquired about Jerusalem and the small remnant of people living there. His line of questioning is not surprising. Jerusalem was where the Temple was. It was where God's people

went to worship. Jerusalem was where heaven met earth and every devout Jew shared the same passion as King David who wrote:

I was glad when they said to me,  
 “Let us go into the house of the Lord.”  
 Our feet have been standing  
 Within your gates, O Jerusalem!

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:  
 “May they prosper who love you.  
 Peace be within your walls,  
 Prosperity within your palaces.”  
 For the sake of my brethren and companions,  
 I will now say, “Peace be within you.”  
 Because of the house of the Lord our God  
 I will seek your good.

Psalm 122:1-2; 6-9

Even while in exile, the Jews longed to be back in Jerusalem:

By the waters of Babylon,  
 there we sat down and wept,  
 when we remembered Zion.  
 On the willows there  
 we hung up our lyres.  
 For there our captors  
 required of us songs,  
 and our tormentors, mirth, saying,  
 “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”  
 How shall we sing the Lord's song  
 in a foreign land?  
 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
 let my right hand forget its skill!  
 Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth,  
 if I do not remember you,  
 if I do not set Jerusalem  
 above my highest joy!

Psalm 137:1-6

### **Devastating News**

The report that Nehemiah received was devastating. The people who lived there were in great trouble and shame. We learn later in the book that they had experienced a great famine and many of them had forfeited their property and sold themselves into slavery. Moreover, the

walls of the city were broken and the gates burned so that marauders and wild animals could torment the residents. The city of God had become a junk heap!

We can hardly imagine what this would be like. Perhaps the current sad state of Detroit gives us some idea of what Nehemiah was hearing. But unless you experienced the glory days of the Motor City in the 50's and 60's you probably can't fully understand the heartbreak the current residents have over their city. Most of us worry about the future of our nation. The report that Nehemiah heard about Jerusalem would be similar to hearing sometime in the future that Washington DC was in ruins and that all our national parks had been trashed with litter and graffiti. The thought horrifies us, but it is perhaps within the grasp of our imagination. That was the kind of report that Nehemiah received.

It would be hard to overstate the devastation that he felt, knowing that the city of Jerusalem was shamed. Nothing could be worse in the ancient world. It was the place where God met his people. Jerusalem was the pride of all Jews. Their worship of God, which set them apart from all the other nations, happened at the Temple in the city. The psalms that we read magnify its greatness and honor. But now, it lay in ruins – a laughing stock among the nations. Indefensible. Such a report would cut right to the heart of a God-honoring Jew like Nehemiah. It would make his blood boil and incite his passions to rebel against the status-quo. And that's exactly what happened.

### **Our Approach to the Book**

Nehemiah is an exciting book. This is the first time I've preached it, but it's not the first time I've heard it preached. I've been through the book many times and its power and relevance for the day has always inspired me. Because of its themes, some have approached it as a leadership manual. Others have used it as a model for strategic planning. All of those elements are present in the book, but a singular focus on them misses the point.

Nehemiah tells the story of God's enterprise in and through his people. As we observe how God works in this ancient story, we will be learning how God can work in us as well. We are not Jerusalem. Our walls are not broken and we have not been shamed. Neither am I, nor any other leader in this church, Nehemiah. Still, his and Ezra's examples will help us learn to follow God and guide us into his purposes. As we move into a new beginning here at First Baptist, this book is timely.

### **We Are a New Enterprise**

Church family, we are entering a new beginning. We are becoming a new enterprise.

I want to speak plainly and lovingly with you.

Our TV tower is gone. The big pulpit has been replaced with this smaller lectern. Our cameras and recorders of broadcast ministry are no longer running. You are not the “audience” for a program, but all of you are participants in active worship. The music has changed. In a few weeks, our hallways and rooms will be empty during the week.

For some, this change is understandably unsettling and you are mourning your losses. But friends, these developments are necessary because our culture is quickly changing. Don’t know if you’ve noticed, but America is quickly becoming a culture that is anti-Christian. Read the stories. Military chaplains are having their hands tied and are being forced to compromise their beliefs. Schools gladly embrace and celebrate any culture or religion but Christianity. Are you not fearful for your children and grandchildren?

We must look to what God is doing today. Across this land, Christian young people are passionately living out their faith in Christ through service to others. They are not pulling into their comfortable evangelical cocoons and lamenting, “O the world is falling apart; take me home, Jesus.” Theirs is not an escapist faith, but rather one that engages the culture. God is raising up young people not to hide from this world, but to meet it where it is and transform it by the Gospel.

The Gospel that will engage our young people and change our culture is the Gospel of transformation that comes through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. For over a hundred years we evangelicals have presented a reduced Gospel that has too narrow of a focus. (I’m taking the risk of being very honest with you here.) We have tended to present a gospel that focuses on receiving Christ as your personal Savior so that when you die, you’ll go to heaven. Of course, that’s true, but it’s only part of the gospel. The Gospel that Jesus preached and demonstrated was the Kingdom of God – God’s rule and reign - not sometime in the future when we die, but here and now, manifested in changing lives. Our tendency to focus on the hereafter has resulted in a partial gospel. And a partial gospel is a distorted gospel. During the last hundred years, American culture has been friendly to our evangelical faith. It was culturally acceptable to be an evangelical. Up till now, we haven’t faced a whole lot of opposition or persecution. But that is rapidly changing. We need the full gospel, not the gospel of escape from the world – but one that loves the world, as Jesus did, and engages with it. We need to preach, teach, and especially live a gospel that changes our lives in the here and now. Are you changing? Is God changing you each day to be more and more like Christ? That’s the full Gospel that we need to preach and teach. That’s the Gospel that we need to live! The stakes are high. Our children and our grandchildren are depending on us.

### **Will We Default?**

When Nehemiah heard the news about the remnant and Jerusalem, he “sat down and wept and mourned for days.” Our walls are not broken down and our gates are not burned. We don’t live

in shame, but American evangelical churches tend to be too complacent, too comfortable to notice that we not impacting our culture as we should. Could it be that until we reach that point, we may not have what it takes to radically follow God in his new enterprise?

There's a lot of talk these days about default. What would happen, friends, if we defaulted – if we failed to meet our obligations before God as a church? What will we say when we meet Christ on Judgment Day? We had nice sermons that didn't offend too many people? We had popular ministry programs? The attendance grew to over 300?

I'm afraid that won't wash in heaven.

There are broken people all around and within our congregation who need to see the transforming power of Christ lived out in my life – in your life. God is at work among us. He is leading us into a new day, a “new enterprise.” What would it be like if we, as a church together, experienced the same passion and persuasion as Nehemiah did to see the work of God raised up in honor in this place? I can tell you: it will take all of us. Just like in Nehemiah's day, it will take honesty, confession, hard work, courage, and persistence. Does your heart burn to see God's will done in First Baptist Church – in Aberdeen? Are you eager to see the day when we experience the fullness of God's glory in this place – to magnify the honor of his name?

If you want to be like Nehemiah and join God in his new enterprise, I'm asking you to stand where you are.

## **Prayer**

### **Song of Response**

*In my life, Lord, be glorified...*

*In your church, Lord, be glorified...*