

## **Holy Ambition--Holy Burden**

**Nehemiah 1**

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Begin with Freedom reminder...and commitment card.

We are starting a brand-new series today on the book of Nehemiah called **Holy Ambition**. This is a sermon series I've been looking forward to for a long time. Nehemiah is one of the most intriguing and inspiring books of the entire Old Testament. And I believe God has a lot that he wants to teach us through it. I think God has something special in store for us through this book. If you are interested in history, you are going to love this book. If you are interested in politics, you are going to love this book. If you are interested in leadership, there are countless principles you are going to learn as we study together. And if you are here today and are in a place where you are trying to figure out what God wants to do with your life, how he wants to use you, and what you need to do to be prepared for the work, you are going to love this book. It's inspiring, challenging, and it's unbelievably practical. We are going to learn a lot, both as individuals, and as a church family.

If you have your bibles, will you turn to Nehemiah 1. It's about  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the way through the Bible. As you are turning there, let me set the historical context.

For **hundreds of years** the people of Israel were living in the promised land. When God brought them into this land, he made a covenant with them. You can read about this in Deuteronomy. He said, "If you keep my laws and commands, I will protect you and provide for you. If you reject me, I will reject. And I will rise up empires from the East to come and destroy you." After years and years of rejecting God and his laws, in 722 God prompts the **Assyrians** to come and pillage northern Israel. And then in 586, God prompts the **Babylonians** to come and pillage southern Israel. The city of Jerusalem was obliterated and the temple was torn down. Most of the people were deported to Babylon. This begins a several decades long period known as Exile, where God's people were living as captives in a land not their own. And they understood this to be the fitting consequence to several centuries of disregarding and disobeying God, as well as worshipping pagan idols. After an extended time, when the Persians defeated the Babylonians in **539**, they allowed the Israelites to return home and re-establish their homeland. Many, but not all, went. And they did their best to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. But they had so few resources and faced so much opposition. In fact, when the few people who were alive to see the original city and the temple looked at the rebuilt city and temple, what did they do? They sat down and wept because it was barely a shadow of what once was. The **events of Nehemiah** take place nearly 100 years after that--445. Nehemiah did not return home to Jerusalem. He and his family were still living in Persia, and our story begins as he hears word about what's taken place back home:

**1250 Israel in the promised land**

**722 Assyrian invasion**

**586 Babylonian invasion**

**586 - 539 Exile**

**539 Rebuilding begins  
445 Nehemiah**

**Nehemiah 1:1-11**

**The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:**

**In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.**

**They said to me, “Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”**

**When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. Then I said:**

**“Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.**

**“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’**

**“They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”**

**I was cupbearer to the king.**

There are four words I want to use to engage the movement of this text, and here’s the first one.

**Curiosity.** Everything for Nehemiah begins after his brother and a group of friends return home from a trip to Jerusalem and we read this: **“I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.”** Nehemiah was curious! He wanted to know about what was going on. He cared enough not only to ask the question; he cared enough to listen to the response. And the answer wasn’t pretty: **“Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.”** What happens to a city when its walls are broken? They have no protection and no safety. In fact, in ancient society, it was the presence of

a boundary wall that transitioned a community from a village to a city. Without walls, enemies can march right in, steal possessions, claim lives. His people were in **great trouble and disgrace**. Nehemiah cared enough to ask a question, and the answer to his question dramatically altered the course of Nehemiah's life. Your future may very well be shaped by the questions you care enough about to ask.

This is **Scott Harrison**. In his 20's he was being paid hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to throw parties for elites in NYC. Living the dream. Then he discovered how many people in the world were dying every day because they didn't have access to clean drinking water. In 2006 he left his dream job to **found charity water**. Since that time he has helped 8.1 million people get access to safe drinking water. He asked a simple question. The answer changed his life.

**Your future may very well be shaped by the questions you care enough about to ask!**

- How many people in that country will go their entire lives without hearing the name of Jesus?
- How many kids are in Indiana's foster care system waiting for a family to love them?
- How many students at Thomas Gregg Elementary school are waiting for a mentor but don't have one?
- How many people attend this church nearly every single week without getting connected and growing as a disciple?

When we are curious enough to ask questions, what we oftentimes discover is that **new information**, accompanied by **divine revelation** often leads to **personal obligation**. Because once you know, and the Spirit moves in your heart, you can't just sit back and do nothing. At the core of your being you know something has to be done!

**New Information**  
+ **Divine Revelation**  

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**Personal Obligation**

This is my story. When I was younger, I came to church with my family every single week. Sunday after Sunday. And I saw all these people come to church, so many of them looking for a connection with God, so many of them having sincere faith...and yet so many of them experiencing a type of life drastically different from the life in Christ described in the Bible. Instead of enjoying rich community with other believers, they were in isolation. Instead of experiencing freedom and victory over strongholds, they felt enslaved to destructive behavior patterns. Instead of walking in joy and confidence, they were weighed down with anxiety and discouragement. I remember as clear as day being in my teenage years and my early twenties and seeing this, and it was startling. Person after person, family after family I met at the churches I attended, that was their story. And for me this wasn't just information and data I saw; it was accompanied by a deep moving in my heart from the Holy Spirit. And I knew, this is what my life is supposed to be about! To serve the church by teaching the Word and making disciples in such a way where people's lives are actually changed. I didn't just want to hear people say, "I believe in Jesus." I wanted to see them actually follow Jesus. In the grand scheme of things, church attendance is insignificant. What matters is changed lives! New information,

accompanied by divine revelation led to a personal obligation. I knew I was being called to be a pastor, to give my life to that.

Have you come to the place where God has revealed to you what he would like to accomplish through your life? I know for some the answer is yes. For others the answer is not yet. It starts with curiosity. Ask questions about things that matter and see how God moves.

The second word is: **brokenness**. Brokenness happens not simply when we become aware of a need, but when we become aware of a need and our heart is sensitive enough to become distraught over it. Look at what Nehemiah does when he learned about the desolation of his people: He says **“When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.”** His heart wasn’t calloused. He didn’t try to project a culturally corrupted view of rugged masculinity. He heard devastating news about the plight of his people and it hit him deeply.

God wants to move us all to a place where we are sensitive enough and responsive enough that when we become aware of the dire needs in the world and the dire needs in the lives of people we know and love, that we wouldn’t be calloused, that we wouldn’t be emotionally unaffected, but that that we would respond like Nehemiah--with brokenness, with tears, mourning, and fasting. That we would respond that way not just when things in *our* world aren’t going the way *we* want, but that we would respond that way when we see that things in *God’s* world aren’t going the way *he* wants. I believe that is one of the hallmark signs that a person has truly matured in Christ. They are stirred in their heart as much (if not more so) by the needs of others than they are by the needs they see when they look at themselves.

Plutarch, writing in the 1st century, describes an event in the life of **Julius Caesar (photo of statue on one side)**: **“In Spain, when Caesar was at leisure and was reading from the history of Alexander, he was lost in thought for a long time, and then burst into tears. His friends were astonished, and asked the reason for his tears. “Do you not think it is matter for sorrow that while Alexander, at my age, was already king of so many peoples, I have as yet achieved no brilliant success?”** Caesar had no problem weeping, but he wept for himself. For his own vainglory. What if we got to that place where we were moved to tears...not for our own ambitions, our own dreams, our own successes and accomplishments, but we were moved to tears for the needs of others.

I remember a young lady asking if she and her friend could meet with me. I said, “of course.” One was a believer; one was not. They asked questions about Christianity, the Bible, faith, salvation. Clearly the Christian was hoping that her unbelieving friend would make a decision to trust Jesus. As we were nearing the end of our conversation - it’s been a great discussion - I looked at this young Christian girl, and I see that tears are making their way down her cheeks, she looked at her friend and said, “Jesus loves you so much. He loves you so much.” Her tears spoke volumes to her friend. But they may have spoken even louder to me. I have never forgotten how much she cared for her friend’s salvation. And that is what God wants my heart to be like and your heart to be like for everyone who does not yet know him.

What happens in your heart when you can see clearly what God wants to accomplish in a person's life, in a marriage, in a family, in a community, in a church...you see it clearly and it's beautiful and exciting, but when you compare that vision with reality, there is an enormous gap. What happens in your heart when you see that? From what I've seen again and again in my life and in the lives of many others: until we share in the brokenheartedness of God we will not share in the breakthrough of God.

In our story, Curiosity leads to brokenness, and brokenness leads to our next word: **Prayer**. What does Nehemiah do after he learns of the need and weeps, mourns and fasts? He prays! If you just add up the words, 65% of this entire chapter is a prayer. He goes to God. And that's not just something he does in chapter 1. He does it again and again and again. This book is 13 chapters long. There are 11 different prayers. And remember, Nehemiah wasn't a priest. He wasn't a pastor. He has a government job by day and moonlights as an engineer at night.

He was a normal guy. But he knew that if anything significant and permanent was going to come through his life, it wasn't going to come by first tapping his connections with those in power, it wasn't going to come by first accessing his Rolodex of contacts or by reading a cutting-edge book on leadership or by setting up a GoFundMe page. Nehemiah knew that first and foremost he needed to go to God! Look at his prayer: **“Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel.** He begins by recognizing the greatness of God but then look at what he does next...He says **“I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.”** Looking at the sad state of affairs he doesn't blame the circumstances, and he doesn't blame other people. He takes ownership and personal responsibility for where they are at.

This is something our generation needs to hear right now! If you listen to the news, or the politicians or to prominent voices on social media, do you know who is responsible for seemingly every problem in the world right now? *Someone else*. We are just the hapless victims of other people's bad decisions. Whose fault is it? It's the democrats. No, it's the republicans! It's the intellectual elites. No, it's the willfully ignorant. It's the rich and greedy. It's the poor and lazy. It's the Russians. It was my dad's fault for leaving the house. It's my parents' fault for getting a divorce. It's my spouse's fault we can't get along. It's my teacher's fault I didn't get the grade. It was my boss's fault I didn't make the deadline. What if we stopped incessantly blaming others and we got honest before God and said with humility, “Not only have we all been a part of this problem, but I've been a part of this and my family has been a part of this. And God, by your grace, I want the change to start here, with me.”

I have a very limited vantage point. But I do have a number of people share problems with me. What I have noticed is that, more often than not, those who tell me their story and blame others for the challenges almost never get anywhere in the long run. It's those who accept ownership, take responsibility, and maintain a humble posture of prayer who often see a real change.

So, we have curiosity, brokenness, prayer, and here's the last, all important word: **Willingness**. Nehemiah didn't just ask a question, didn't just feel it deeply, didn't just pray; he was willing to do something about it!

Look at the last verse of this chapter "**Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.**" **I was cupbearer to the king.** Cupbearer to the king was the ancient equivalent of the Secret Service. Nehemiah had one of the most trusted positions in the entire kingdom. Nehemiah has status, resources, position, and ear of the most powerful man in the world. He has unbelievable influence, and he is willing to leverage all that has been entrusted to him to respond to the needs he became aware of. If he plays his cards wrong and upsets the king, he will go from being one of the highest-ranking people in the kingdom to having nothing. There was a lot on the line! But he wasn't going to stay silent. He wasn't going to just get on with the rest of his work week. He had to take action, even if it cost him everything.

In the study of physics, people talk about static friction - the force that keeps an object at rest. Static friction exists in the spiritual realms, too. It's so easy just to keep things the same, to not rock the boat. But like Nehemiah, we need to summon our strength, step out in faith, and move away from our security so we can move into our destiny. Nehemiah understood that taking a step of faith could cost him a lot, but in his mind, he knew that this was one of the reasons God put him on this earth. So, he refused to pass up the opportunity.

I am convinced that, at the core of our beings, no one wants to go through life and simply not make too many disruptions, simply not cause a scene, not make too many mistakes. God placed a desire in us for more than that. He wired us with a desire to make a difference, to live lives of consequence, to be used as a tool in his hands to bless others, advance his kingdom, grow heaven, and bring glory and honor to his name. That's what we were created for. The question we have to ask is, "Am I willing?"

That's what this series is going to be about. Living the lives God created us for. Living with passion and purpose, living with character and conviction, living a life of consequence. This matters so much! Think about it this way: Nehemiah heard that the walls of Jerusalem were in disrepair and the people were in disgrace. That matters. It matters a lot. But we have something exceedingly more important before us. Jesus Christ has come into the world to bring salvation to all mankind. To save us from sin. To save us from ourselves. To invite us into his family. To give us the power and love and grace of God to live lives to the full. And that is a message we have, and the world desperately needs. Will we be people who are curious enough to ask good questions, who are brokenhearted when we see needs, who will hit our knees in prayer, and who will be willing to leverage all that we have and all that we are to be used by God to make a difference in the world for Christ?