

The Start to Something Great

Nehemiah 1

SERIES “Next”

Jarrett Stephens

I was asked this week by someone what my favorite book of the Bible was to study and preach from, and I replied that typically it's the one that I am studying and preaching through at the time. I feel like this is the case as we come to the book of Nehemiah.

It is so rich...and it has been incredibly rewarding to read and to study in depth. I've never preached this book before and it's just been a treasure chest of insight. I have absolutely loved reading about this man, Nehemiah and the mission God assigned to him to fulfill.

Now, one of the reasons I wanted to preach this book during this season of our church is because it dovetails perfectly with our NEXT campaign.

- Nehemiah sensed a calling to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem that had been broken down and needed restoration.
- We are sensing a calling to build at North Klien more Life Group space and to bring restoration to our Worship Center here at Champions.

Certainly, in a spiritual sense we are called to rebuild and restore lives that are broken through the preaching of the gospel and by loving and serving people in Christ's name.

- Nehemiah had to pull people together and inspire, encourage, and challenge them that the task at hand could be accomplished with God's help and with person each playing their part.
- This is where we are at! In order to accomplish what God is calling us to we are ALL going to have to play OUR part and with God's supernatural help we can do what we have set out to do.

Throughout the process, Nehemiah had to overcome obstacles. We'll study some of those obstacles in this series and I assure you as we move forward in this generosity initiative, we'll face some of the same obstacles that we'll have to overcome as well.

This is a really exciting book...and it's an exciting time to be engaged and involved at Champion Forest. And so, with this introduction, let's read our passage of scripture.

The title of the message today is: **The Start to Something Great**

Nehemiah 1:1-11- “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,² 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.³ 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.”⁴ As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.⁵ And I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.⁷ We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant, Moses.⁸ Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” Now I was cupbearer to the king.”

Now, as we outline this passage of scripture, I want to organize it in two big “chunks” if you will.

First, I want us to note what I'm calling: **God's Providence**

We're going to see as we make our way through this study that while the one everything revolves around in this book is named, Nehemiah, the MAIN character and the one that is behind all the action is one named, Providence.

If you have been around Champion Forest for any length of time, you know that I speak often of the sovereignty of God.

Theologically, we believe that God has supreme authority and operates absolute control over the affairs and events of the world. You might have heard me say it like this before: Man plays checkers, while God plays chess. Or maybe you have heard me say that NOTHING touches the child of God without first filtering through God's holy hands – this is sovereignty...this is the providence.

Jonathan Edwards the great theologian and preacher that helped spark the First Great Awakening was known in his writings for capitalizing “Providence” and using it as a name for God...many Puritans did this as well.

Our Founding Fathers – this year marks the 250th Anniversary of the founding of our nation...just read the Declaration of Independence. It refers to “divine Providence” – (capital P) and when you read the personal letters of people like George Washington and John Adams and

Thomas Jefferson, they did the same...they used the terms "Providence" and God synonymously.

Providence is WHO God is! He is sovereign in all affairs...governs all events...can intervene and do WHAT he pleases WHEN he pleases and NO ONE and NOTHING can thwart his purposes and plans.

When you study the book of Nehemiah...you can't help but see the unseen – take note of Providence.

Illus. Champion Forest - Think about how you got to Champion Forest. Some of you planned it. You researched churches, visited multiple times, made a decision. But if I asked you to tell the story, you'd probably say things like, "We just happened to drive by," or "A coworker mentioned it.". We think of the human decisions, but behind those decisions? Providence. God was moving you here for a purpose...it's providence playing out in your life!

Let's talk about "Providence" as it relates to context of this book. This event in (Ch. 1) of Nehemiah is taking place around 445 BC. A man (and I stress man – you'll see why toward the end of our time together – Dan. 2 removes and raises up kings - Providence is the one in really in charge!) by the name of Artaxerxes is in power over the Persian Empire.

Now, to understand what's taking place in detail, let's just give a little history here and I'll put it on the screen where we can visually see the movement of what has taken place up to this point

In 931 BC – after the death of King Solomon (David's son) the Kingdom splits. You have Israel to the North and Judah to the South. Now, during this time there are various kings in charge (most them evil) and you have various prophets that God raises up to speak to the kings and people and calls on them to repent or the judgment is just going to get worse.

This goes on for 200 years and in 722 BC, the Assyrians sweep in and conquer the Northern Kingdom.

Now, the Southern Kingdom thinks they are all good – they're NOT!

Just read Isaiah and Jeremiah and some of the minor prophets – these prophets keep warning the Southern Kingdom that because of their rebellion, they will be judged and taken into exile!

And ultimately that is exactly what happens. Babylon moves in around 605 BC...they are the new world power!

They had conquered the Assyrians about (5-7) years earlier and so they have control over the Northern Kingdom of Israel, and they set their sights on Jerusalem and the Southern Kingdom of Judah...they want total domination and power over the entire region.

Well, it doesn't take long to get it. Jerusalem falls pretty quickly. You can read about it from a historical perspective in (2 Kings 24, 2 Chron. 36) as well as read the eye-witness accounts in (Jeremiah 39, 52).

Under King Nebo (remember him from the book of Daniel) – there is a first deportation of Jews – this is when Daniel and his friends are exiled to Babylon.

- Eight years later there is a second deportation (this is when Ezekial is taken to Babylon).
- Eleven years later (586 BC), Nebuchadnezzar puts the nail in the coffin, so to speak, and burns Jerusalem to the ground and leads another deportation.

It's a sad time in Israel's history as the city is sacked, burned and the Temple totally destroyed.

Jeremiah, the prophet, who lived to see it all...his journal over the destruction of Jerusalem is the book of Lamentations, where he weeps over what he is seeing occur.

Now, important to note: We're talking about the providence of God...NONE of what is happening is taking him by surprise. It's why he sent the prophets. And he warned them that when they got deported, they better get comfortable in Babylon because they were going to be there for a long time.

In fact, he tells them EXACTLY how long they would be there – 70 years!

Jer. 25:8-12 – “Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, ⁹behold, I will send for all the tribes of the north, declares the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants, and against all these surrounding nations. I will devote them to destruction, and make them a horror, a hissing, and an everlasting desolation. ¹⁰Moreover, I will banish from them the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the grinding of the millstones and the light of the lamp. ¹¹This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. ¹²Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity, declares the Lord, making the land an everlasting waste.”

Providence...this is EXACTLY what happens. For 70 years Babylon has their day.

Now, you can trace it one of two ways...I just want you to see the specificity of God! He's doing his thing. From the time Babylon captured Judah (605 BC) to when Persia captured Babylon in (539) – that's 67 years...or you can look at it from the Temple being destroyed (586 BC) to the Temple being rebuilt (516) – that's exactly 70 years.

Either way, God is working behind the scenes and what I want you to see is that he raises up Nehemiah at the exact time of his choosing.

When we get to Nehemiah (chapter one) the Persian Empire has been going for nearly 100 years.

VERY IMPORTANT: in that time frame of 100 years, there had been four previous kings. The first king comes on the scene (King Cyrus – 538 BC), and he issues a decree allowing the Jewish refugees to return to Jerusalem.

This is amazing...this is a miracle. The Jews can go back to their homeland, and they go back led by a man named, Zerubbabel – you can read about this first deportation in the book of Ezra.

Zerubbabel gets there and starts rebuilding the Temple that the Babylonians had destroyed. Ezra, the scribe goes back to Jerusalem 80 years after Zerubbabel (this is part of a second wave of Jews going back to the homeland in this time) and Ezra led primarily in religious reform.

While the Temple had been rebuilt physically, the people were not worshipping the Lord as they should – spiritually, they were still in ruins and so God sends Ezra, the scribe and teacher of the Law.

Fast forward over a decade later. And we get to this man we're introduced to in the text as Nehemiah. Now, (v. 11) tells us that Nehemiah had a very powerful and prominent position within the Persian Empire.

Nehemiah 1:11b – “...I was cupbearer to the king.”

A “cupbearer” was a big deal. He was a trusted advisor to the king. He would actually be the one that would taste the wine to make sure it wasn’t poisoned...make sure it was exactly what was needed for the moment. Think of this person like a valet if you will.

He overheard important conversations...often times it was him determining who could see the king. He guarded the King’s sleeping quarters. Bottom line: He was THE most trusted individual in the king’s court.

Nehemiah, held a VERY prominent position – and here’s the deal...he was a Jew. How do you think he got this position? Who do you think made this happen?

It was Providence ALL the way! (BTW – Esther – Artaxerxes’ father- saved the Jewish population from genocide in Persia just a generation earlier!) God/Providence was getting ready to do something special in Jerusalem (part of his grand plan) – that’s what this book bearing the name Nehemiah is all about!

And ALL along the way God has been:

- moving in the background preparing...
- getting people and situations ready...
- ensuring that what he desires...
- what he longs for...
- what he wants gets carried out...

It's the providence of God! Listen to me. We have a free will. We can make choices and decisions that have tremendous consequences and can affect both positively and negatively the course of our entire life – this is our story AND the story of Israel!

But hear this: God's sovereignty and providence isn't threatened not one second by man's free will.

This should give us a confidence, and it should encourage us that God's purposes will stand and what he wants will get done. As the great **C.H. Spurgeon** said: "**The sovereignty of God is the pillow upon which the Christian rests his head.**"

So, let's note God's Providence. But secondly, let's look for a moment at this man God chooses to use and I want to highlight in this: **Nehemiah's Posture**

Nehemiah is in this position of influence, but from all that we can gather, he is a humble man that loves the Lord. Evidently, he is VERY committed to God and to the holy city of Jerusalem.

You've got to remember, even while in exile, the Jewish people longed get back to the holy city of God. Jerusalem was the place, the glory of God dwelled. Remember from Daniel's account, three times a day he would get on his knees at a window facing Jerusalem and pray.

Recall the words of **Psalm 137:1-6** – (this would have been the cry of the Israelites while in exile under the Babylonian regime. Nehemiah would have known these words!): "**By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.** ² **On the willows there we hung up our lyres.** ³ **For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors, mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"** ⁴ **How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?** ⁵ **If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill!** ⁶ **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!"**

Here Nehemiah is, a Jewish man...and we KNOW he loved his God, his people, and the city of Jerusalem because when his brother, returns to Persia after being in Jerusalem, the first thing Nehemiah wants to know is...look at this:

Neh. 1:1b-2 – "...Now it happened in the month of Chislev (November/December time frame), in the twentieth year (Artaxerxes reign), as I was in Susa the citadel (he's in the fortified palace of the capital city of Persia), ² **that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them** (this was the FIRST thing in Nehemiah's heart) **concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem.**"

Look at their response and then look at Nehemiah's response...we're highlighting the posture he takes here.

Neh. 1:3-4 – "And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. (The word "trouble" here denotes danger...misery...it's one of the strongest words in the Hebrew language to describe disaster and

calamity. These Jewish exiles that have returned home and those that were left behind in the original deportations are in a massive amount of trouble and shame (embarrassment, reproach) – why? BECAUSE) **The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.**” (For a city to be without walls was unimaginable at the time. You would be extremely vulnerable to an attack by a foreign army...there would be very little safety and security...this is NOT good! And this report breaks Nehemiah. Look at his response...it tells us a lot about this man) **“As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”**

This news that the wall is broken down, and the gates of Jerusalem are destroyed...it buckles Nehemiah...he has to sit down!

- Have you ever heard news that buckled you?
- Made you sit down?
- Takes your breath away?

Nehemiah is flabbergasted...he is in complete shock...and here is what I want to highlight in this and make sure we get!

It wasn't the physical walls being destroyed that got Nehemiah's attention...that's NOT what made him sit, weep, mourn, fast and pray - it's what the physical walls represented!

Again, this had to do with safety and security of the PEOPLE living in the city. He was broken hearted that the destroyed walls and burned gates is what others saw when they saw the city of God!

What once was the esteem of the Jewish people, the favored city of God, it was now an embarrassment...and Nehemiah...he's broken by it.

It so burdens him that that he weeps...he mourns...he fasts...and he prays.

I've got a couple of questions for us to consider this morning:

1. Are you broken for people whose lives are in ruin?

It's something to consider. Does it move you when you hear about people who are being destroyed by the enemy? Marriage's crumbling...friends caught in sin?

Does it break us to hear of need that is all around us? Children being aborted, abused or neglected...people not being able put food on the table for their family (CMC)...when people created in the image of God are made to feel less than...

2. Are you burdened enough that it leads to action?

And mainly by “action” I mean, PRAY. This was Nehemiah's first step! BEFORE he acted, he prayed. That was his ACTION!

In fact, chapter 2 picks up – look at: Neh. 2:1-3 – “**In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of the King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid. I said to the king, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”**

We'll work this out more next week, but what I want you to notice is that this exchange happens in the month of Nisan (that's March/April timeframe) – that's four months AFTER he has heard this news.

Before he ever brings it up to the king, our guy Nehemiah is praying...FOUR months...that's 120 days minimum!

Nehemiah isn't just praying once and moving on - he's DWELLING in prayer. He's letting God shape his heart, clarify his vision. His prayer is preparation, and he's covering this entire situation in prayer – this is his FIRST action!

(v. 4-11) is the first of nine prayers we have recorded in the book of Nehemiah and it is also the longest prayer we have recorded in this book.

Nehemiah was a man of prayer. I wish I had time to unpack this prayer...we could teach an entire series on how to pray from this prayer. A couple of insights I will highlight. If you want a map to follow when praying, use Nehemiah's prayer here as an example.

1. He acknowledges the greatness of God

Neh. 1:5-6a – “And I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants...”

This is what we call adoration...praise! He is acknowledging Providence – God, you are the God of heaven...you are in control.

2. He acknowledges the sin of people (including himself)

Neh. 1:6b-7 – “confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant, Moses.”

3. He prays Scripture

I'm not going to read this, but (v. 8-10) is all Scripture. It comes directly from the Law...he prays and reminds the Lord of what he has said and done. It's rooted in Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

If you want answered prayer, it begins by praying with an open Bible! Nehemiah simply prays God's word to him and reminds the Lord of the promises he has made to his people!

4. He makes an ask

Neh. 1:11a – “O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

He's going before the king, but before the “King of Kings”, King Artaxerxes is just a man...he makes an ask! And next week, we'll come back and see how the earthly king responds.

Note the posture of Nehemiah. He's a humble man...let me highlight here...a normal man – in a prominent position, yes. But's he's a normal man that were going to see in this series that God uses in a great way.

Now, in every message I preach in this series, I'm going to have what I am calling: **NEXT steps**. It's going to be points of application that are related to our NEXT initiative but not limited to it. I want to give you three as we close our time together.

1. Ask God for a burden

As we think about these projects we're doing:

- The worship center renovation...
- The expansion at North Klein...
- The expansion regarding our digital broadcast ministry...
- The planting of churches internationally.
- A third campus in the Magnolia region...

Ask God to give you a burden...but check this...the burden is NOT in the projects; the burden MUST be about the people.

I want us to feel what a young, unchurched couple feels when they come on the North Klein campus to drop their kids off and not be in a life group class on the physical campus but in the school down the street...I want us to feel the burden of that.

I want us to feel the burden of the thousands of people in the Magnolia region that don't know Christ...people that we may never know personally or engage with personally...they are in Northwest Houston and God has strategically put our church here. “Let me feel the burden, God!”

I want to feel the burden personally of the young man or woman that is praying for their friend or their relative watching on tv or online...and look it's happening!

Illus. CBS Testimony - Hey Pastor Jarrett! Just wanted to share some encouragement, hope it is as encouraging to you as it was to me. My parents watched the CBS showing yesterday and it is already changing our family. My parents for the past few years have been really struggling with their marriage, not prioritizing faith and have been speaking of divorce. I have been earnestly praying that they would seek the Lord. When I told them we would be having a service on CBS they were willing to watch to hear about the church that I am at. They watched it together and for the first time in probably 5 years, my parents spoke together about their faith. They both said they realized that they were not prioritizing the right things. They want to continue watching, and are both wanting to seek the Lord more other ways. We may have only had the CBS segment going for a week, but I can already see it encouraging healing in my family. Thank you for leading by obedience!

I want to FEEL the burden of that person for their parents in such a way that it leads to prayer and fasting! I want it to lead to desperate praying, just like it did for Nehemiah.

I'm asking the Lord for tears...break my heart over what breaks yours, God. It all starts with a burden!

Donald Campbell – “A burdened God is at work in the world. He searches for burdened believers through whom he may work.”

Ask God to give you a burden...a burden so deep that it leads you to fast and pray.

Illus. Jumper cables/Staff advance – fasting will jumpstart your heart. Join us on Wednesdays!

2. Believe God can do anything

Read Nehemiah's prayer! (v.5) – “O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God”. Let's magnify our view of God. He can do anything!

38 million dollars...we need 6 million on March 1 to pull the trigger on the worship center remodel and North Klein expansion. 6 million dollars! That's NOTHING to the God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills...that's NOTHING to the God who owns oil wells all over Texas! Come on!!!

Look at Nehemiah...how did he get to that position...it wasn't his expertise...his brilliance...it was God working behind the scenes. He can do anything, let's choose to believe it and walk in it!

I don't know where the land for a third campus is going to come from, but God does...and if he chooses to, he could drop it on our doorstep tomorrow. Let's choose to believe that our God can do anything! He's the great and awesome God of the universe.

And then third and finally:

3. Prepare to act on faith

Nehemiah's prayer life was getting him ready...it was preparing him to act on faith. We'll see him next week go before the king AFTER four months of prayer!

Look, if we take this seriously...and we pray and ask God for a burden...and we believe...truly believe he can do anything...you better get ready to act on faith because like we're talking about in our *Experiencing God* study on Wednesday evenings:

“God’s invitation for you to work with him always leads you to a crisis of belief that requires faith and action.”

THIS is the start to something great! Let's be ready to be the answer to our own prayers. Prepare to act on faith.

Amen?

Let's pray.

Please Note: This document is not meant to be a published, cited, annotated research paper. It is simply a transcript of a spoken message, provided as a resource. Many commentaries, articles, and other sermon helps were likely studied and contributed to the forming of this message.