

Nehemiah #2
Reading Psalm 15 and Nehemiah 1:3-11

January 10 2010 - Neh 1:4-11

From time to time we hear of a situation where a person has responded to an emergency and a complete stranger becomes a hero because of their action. At other times we hear of some tragedy happening where lots of people were standing around but no one seemed prepared to help. This appears to be the result of an interesting phenomena called the **Bystander Effect** that was researched and published by **Drs. John Darley and Bibb Latané**. Their research began as a result of a **1968 New York Times** newspaper article, concerning the rape and stabbing of a young woman. Early one morning, Kitty Genovese, after working all night, was just entering her apartment building when she was attacked. Her ordeal lasted over a period of half an hour. The attack was either heard or witnessed by a number of neighbors who failed to either offer help or to call for immediate help. When help was eventually summoned she died on the way to the hospital. The researchers discovered that there is a significant difference in the way people respond to the needs of others when they are alone and when there are others standing around doing nothing. That particular episode was labeled the **Genovese syndrome** until these researchers discovered that it was not an isolated occurrence. Apparently, under most circumstances, when there are a number of people around it is easy to adopt the attitude that assumes someone else will respond or someone is better qualified, or better able to help, than me; thus the term 'Bystander effect'. Significant changes however can take place when one individual moves into action or motivates others to become engaged. A man who has a prominent place in History, for both his action and his motivation, is Sir

Winston Churchill. Some say that he did more to win the last world conflict than any general on the field. However Churchill, commentating on his own life, said that he did not accept much of the applause given to him concerning those dreadful days of the last World War, and the subsequent British victory. "It was not I," says Churchill, "it was the British people who had the stamina to fight, the endurance to hang on, and the courage to face great odds. It was the people who had the Lion's heart. It was just that I was the one privileged to give the roar. ``

Although the people of God are obviously not immune, to any social trend, believers in Jesus Christ should never consider themselves just bystanders in the affairs of the Kingdom of God. A brief look at scripture will reveal that our Saviour expects every believer to be very involved with, and concerned for, other believers. I have just assembled a few of the passages where the term '**one another**' indicates our obligation to others in the family of God.

Rom 12:10-11 Be devoted to one another.
Honor one another.
Rom 12:16- Live in harmony with one another.
Rom 15:7: Accept one another,
Rom 15:14-14 instruct one another.
2 Cor 13:12 Greet one another with a holy kiss.

Gal 5:13 serve one another
Eph 4:2-3 bear with one another in love.
Eph 4:32 Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other,
Eph 5:19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs.
Eph 5:21 Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.
Col 3:16 teach and admonish one another
1 Peter 4:9 Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.

In addition to these at least 11 times in the NT we are commanded
11 times we are commanded to "love one another"

And then; there are these special verses which suggest that, whatever else we do, we ought to encourage or '**give the roar**' to those around us.

1 Thess 5:11 encourage one another and build each other up
Heb 3:13 encourage one another daily,
Heb 10:24-25 spur one another on toward love and good deeds - as we encourage one another —

None of these things will happen if people, who call themselves believers, are not prepared to step out of their comfort zone, put private comforts aside and step into those roles of helpers and encouragers.

No one in scripture exemplifies this attitude more than Nehemiah, the man whose life and story we began to look at last week. There was a lot of background information given last week so, if you missed it, or want to have another listen it can be heard or read on the Oaklands website. For those who do not have access to the web there are printed copies available in the foyer and, if they run out, there are more available from Secretary Sally.

We begin today's message where **Nehemiah- this man who has the enviable position of being cupbearer, confidant and right hand man to King Artaxerxes, the most powerful man in the ancient world**, receives the news that his fellow Jewish believers are suffering and are in tragic conditions. We read last week that when Nehemiah asked how things were going, for the returned exiles, the reply he received was;

"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."

I am moved by; Nehemiah's response. He says;

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

I am moved because I know how I receive news of brothers and sisters in Christ who are suffering. Whether its news about those here at home, or about those in far off places around the world, sometimes it hardly touches my soul. It is so easy to become immune to the pictures that we see, in magazines or on TV, of bloated bellies, squalid living

conditions and people in distress from war or natural disasters. Even when those stories are about believers they often fail to impact us. We live in comfortable surroundings, supplied with everything we physically need, and very often we feel we can do nothing or we just have no incentive to do anything. I am moved also because whereas I have the freedom to make decisions about my life, in other words, you and I free to make our own decisions, Nehemiah, although in an elevated role was still a slave in a court ruled by a despotic King. Every aspect of this man's life was under the control and the whim of the king. He couldn't just ask for a raise, or for three months off. His life was not his own. It would have been easy for him to respond to the news by saying, "Well that's tough, but there's nothing I can do."

Jill Briscoe in a very challenging book titled 'Fight for the Family' uses the story of Nehemiah to show how broken Christian Families and Churches can often, with help, be restored. She also points out why, when a helping hand may have changed things, so many are left in ruins. She says:

"Many of us have acclimatized too quickly to the chill wind of changing values and have simply buttoned up our top coats of indifference in order to prevent the icy blasts from touching our hearts."

Nehemiah's response tells me that here was a man whose heart was tuned to the heartbeat of God. What concerned the heart of God concerned Nehemiah. These were God's people, it was God's kingdom that was in ruins, and it was the name of God that was being put to shame. Look again at his response:

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

Nehemiah allowed the full impact of what he heard to penetrate his being. He took the time to think through what he heard and he allowed his emotions to have full rein. His

official duties never slackened and one of the demands of his job was that he should always be cheerful; the law in Babylon was that anyone appearing before the king with a sad complex could be executed. However, in the privacy of his own chamber he spent his days contemplating what he'd heard and he spent time in prayer. Now, when was the last time that you sat down and really spent time with God going over in your mind what you know, or have heard about, concerning the affairs in His kingdom? The issues may be large or small, they may concern the local church or, like Nehemiah's concerns, they may be on the other side of the world, but nothing changes until God's people are, or God's person is, moved to prayer.

Lets look at Nehemiah's prayer together. I want us to notice particularly where Nehemiah starts with his prayer.

Then I said:

5 "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands,

He does not start with the problem or with his feelings about the problem. He begins his prayer by reminding himself about the greatness and the character of God.

A.W.Tozer in his wonderful book The Knowledge of the Holy says

I believe that what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us. The most important thing about any human being is not what he may say or do at a given time, but what deep in his heart he thinks about God.

Without a great and awesome God so many things are impossible. Without a God who loves and keeps His promises; prayer would be useless.

Throughout the years of my ministry the one question that I was asked over and over again was, How do you manage to keep a positive spirit when you spend so much of your time dealing with the sorrows and struggles of the people around you? My answer has consistently been that I need to constantly remind myself of my Theology. When my mind thinks clearly about who God is, what He has done and the future that He has guaranteed, it changes how I think about the present. In the mid 1800's as a young man

of twenty, the great C.H. Spurgeon, was just beginning a ministry that was to last over fifty years. His 3,600 sermons, forty-nine volumes of commentaries, sayings, anecdotes, illustrations, devotions and other books are still being published and read by people all over the world today. What sort of man was he? **J.I.Packer at the beginning of his book, “Knowing God,”** quotes Spurgeon, who made this comment;

“Would you lose sorrow? Would you drown your cares? Then go and plunge yourself in the Godhead’s deepest sea; be lost in His immensity; and you shall come forth as from a couch of rest, refreshed and invigorated. I know nothing which can so comfort the soul; so calm the swelling billows of sorrow and grief; so speak peace to the winds of trial, as a devout musing upon the subject of the Godhead.”

Nehemiah knew the truth of which Spurgeon speaks. That is why he begins his prayer by reminding himself whom he is addressing. Once we understand and grasp the greatness of God, the wonder of His love and the consistency of His character, we can find solid footing when everything around us seems to be slipping away.

How well do you know your God? Today we are constantly bombarded with so called religious critics who claim that if God were loving and powerful he would intervene to prevent the death and suffering that is happening all around us. The fact that we do not see such intervention, brings many to the conclusion that it means God is either powerless or dead, or, he is without love and compassion. I am sure that there were Jews in Babylon who were angry at God for failing to protect Jerusalem, perhaps many who had given up their faith because they saw that they lived under a power that seemed greater than the God their father’s served.

What we believe about God is the most important thing about us and Nehemiah reveals that his knowledge of God is such that he lives with hope, not despair; he lives with possibilities, not impossibilities. What is facing you this year? What is facing this church? Let me invite you to trust in the all powerful God of love, who came from

Heaven to earth as Jesus Christ, the incarnate son. He came to effectively demonstrate His love and to display his power, even his power over death. He invites you to learn of Him and, when you truly know him, you will see the world through new eyes.

Having declared what he believes about the majesty of God Nehemiah immediately states that he recognizes that people's relationship to this God is not without its obligations.

When he says

who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands,

he reveals that he understands that a relationship to this God is not unconditional. He is very aware that God's actions are sometimes tied to the actions of His people. That is where He starts his prayer.

6 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 ...

After a polite request for a hearing, and an insight into the intensity and consistency of his prayer, he begins with, "I confess." This is not a prayer of false humility, but a genuine understanding that despite his high rank in Babylon, before God, he is a sinner. He does not tell God how wicked others have been but identifies himself with all those who have rejected God's commands and standards. Look at this prayer.

... I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

It would have been so easy for Nehemiah to have claimed that his rise to prominence in

Babylon was because of his obedience, his character and his faith in God but, like

everyone of us, he could look back over his life and remember the many times he had either violated, or not lived up to the standards that God demanded.

This did not result in him drowning in guilt or concluding that he was useless to God. He goes on to reveal the knowledge of God that is of supreme importance to every one of us. Yes, we can point out how we have failed God, none of us deserve His favour, but

God has made some promises to us. He had made a covenant with Israel and Nehemiah calls upon God to respond to the conditions of that covenant.

8 "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations,

That had happened and they were suffering the consequences.

9 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.'

God had promised to restore the people when the people returned in faith and obedience to him.

The rest of Nehemiah's life was based upon this understanding; **God restores those whose hearts are set on him.**

We are not under the Old Covenant but God has a New Covenant with us. No matter who we are, what we've done, or how far from God we've fallen, God forgives and restores all those who believe that Jesus died for their sins and seek to love and follow Him. That is His covenant with us. Do you live your life with confidence because you have put your trust in Him? Nehemiah's whole life is based on this belief that God honors His covenant. The last part of the prayer reveals something else. Nehemiah is not seeking glory for himself or, at this point, asking for anything to be changed for the people.

10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 O 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.

His prayer is based upon the desire to see the name of God lifted up. That is his goal.

May I strongly suggest that we must never make plans to build a great church, relieve the suffering of others, or to make a name for ourselves. Our goal should always be the desire to lift up the name of God. It is when people seek to simply glorify God that amazing

things begin to happen. Churches grow, people get relief, names become embedded in history and it all results from the Name of God being exalted.

As Nehemiah ends his prayer he reveals his realistic understanding of his circumstances.

Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king.

Nothing, from a purely human point of view, could happen in the Babylonian world unless King Artaxerxes gave the word. Nehemiah was a slave and had every reason to say, well whoever is going to help this situation, it can't be me. What he did say was

`Lord, I've heard, I've prayed and I'm ready. I'm in your hands.

God is looking for people today who will say the same. When you see what he did with and through Nehemiah my prayer is that you will make your self available so that he can have his named glorified through you.