

# Building God's City within Our City

By Matthew Black, Pastor

**Text:** Nehemiah 1:1-11

**Date:** Sunday, May 24, 2009

## Tabernacle Baptist Church

7020 Barrington Road

Hanover Park, Illinois 60133

**Website:** [www.GodCentered.info](http://www.GodCentered.info)

**Introduction:** Open your Bible to the book of **Nehemiah 1**. We begin a new study in the Scriptures through the book of Nehemiah. The title of the message this morning is "Building God's City within Our City".

[Prayer for Guidance]

- A. The **message** of Nehemiah. Nehemiah tells us how God can gather people together scattered every where to bring a people together for Himself. That is what He is still doing today. And more specifically, Nehemiah is all about bring people together to love and worship and live for Jesus Christ. Every page of the Bible reveals Jesus Christ to us, and the book of Nehemiah is no different. Jesus Christ is the God of the Bible. He is the Almighty God who created heaven and earth, and every knee will bow to Him and every tongue confess that He is Lord. Jesus said in **John 5:39**, "Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me." The book of Nehemiah is about Jesus. Every page of the Bible is about Jesus!

After Jesus was raised from the dead, when he was on the road to Emmaus, He spoke to his followers and opened up the three sections of the Old Testament, the Law, the Prophets, and the Psalms—and He preached Himself to his followers! The Old Testament is about Jesus. The book of Nehemiah is about Jesus.

- B. The book of Nehemiah helps us understand the **mission** of our church. The mission of Tabernacle Baptist Church is to raise up a city within our city of Hanover Park. Our hope and goal is to raise up a city within our city. We want to raise up a group of people that loves and walks with Christ, that believes the Scriptures, and lives for the glory of God. God is bringing together a city within our city for the glory of His Son.

As we come to this new study in the book of Nehemiah, we have to ask ourselves, how does this book relate to us? We are roughly 2500 years removed from the time the events in Nehemiah took place. How does the book of Nehemiah relate to us today?

**Nehemiah's mission is our mission.** We must understand that Nehemiah is not just about building a wall, but about *spiritual advancement*. Nehemiah was to build the broken down walls of Jerusalem, but this was just a prelude to the revival that would turn the people back to God. As the Lord's church, we form a city within our city. We are demonstrating who to live a transformed life. Everything changes when you come to know God. We approach money, family, our word choices, our thought life, our love life, our friendships—we approach everything differently because we know God. That's

called holiness. We are showing what it is like to be united to God through Christ.

- C. The **vision** of Nehemiah. The people of Israel were scattered among the nations. Yet we are called to reach the nations! We live in the suburbs where there is great density and diversity. We live in a strategic place for the Kingdom of God. There are more people per square mile, and there are more kinds of people. There is every ethnic group in the world among us. The mayor told me there were over 38 languages spoken in our Hanover Park alone. Our call is to reach "every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation" (**Revelation 5:9**).

Christ says "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid" (**Matthew 5:14**). There is a city within our city. It is the church. When you have great darkness, you need a city of light that can permeate the darkness. We are that city on a hill—Christ's church, His people.

As we come to the book of Nehemiah, we must see that this book is not just about a building project. Yes, they are repairing and building up the broken down walls of Jerusalem. This book is more about God gathering His people together to live out life in Him—to love and worship Him—to read the Scriptures and apply them to their lives. This is what we want to do. We want to build a city within the city—to show the lost all around us what life is like when you live for and are united to Jesus.

We want to build a city within our city, and we need to listen to what God's has recorded for us today in the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah tells us how to build a city within our city.

- I. God uses common **people** to build His city within our city. We come to **verse 1**, "The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah". Nehemiah is the main person in the book.

A. GOD USES COMMON PEOPLE TO DO EXTRAORDINARY THINGS.

Now, Nehemiah is not a prophet.

1. **Nehemiah is *not* a paid religious professional.** He is a man with a secular job, the king's cupbearer. He is in a strategic position to be used for the Lord.
2. **Nehemiah has no formal religious training.** He's not a pastor, he's not a priest in Israel. He's a man working a job in Persia. Nehemiah was a layman, a cupbearer to the great Artaxerxes who ruled Persia from 464 to 423 BC.<sup>1</sup>
3. **Nehemiah is writing from his own experience.** The first 7 chapters of Nehemiah and the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter are written in the first person by Nehemiah. Basically these chapters reveal the HEART of Nehemiah.
4. Nehemiah's name means "*the Lord has comforted*", and he truly lives out his name.

---

<sup>1</sup>Warren W. Wiersbe. *Be Determined*. (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1992), introduction.

**Application:** What does this tell us? God can use common people to do uncommon and amazing things! Some of the greatest movers and shakers in the Lord's church have had no formal theological education, but they have been taught of the Lord by reading their Bible and spending hours in the prayer closet. Men like AW Tozer, Charles Spurgeon, DL Moody, and John Bunyan. John Bunyan one day was praised by the most educated man in all of England, the Puritan doctor of theology named John Owen.

B. God works on common **days** to transform this world. Every extraordinary day, begins as an ordinary day. One ordinary day, Nehemiah's world turned upside down. Revival came to him. A renewed spirit of prayer and burden for his people dropped down on him from heaven. Nehemiah's world changed on one ordinary day that turned into an extraordinary day. Today could be that day for you. The day when everything in your life changes. You begin to see with a new perspective. God loves to take an ordinary day and radically change your life!

- **Think about Moses:** It was just another day when Moses went out to care for his sheep, but on that day he saw a **burning bush** and heard the Lord's call and became a prophet (Exodus 3).
- **Think about David:** It was an ordinary day when David was called home from shepherding his flock; but on that day, he was anointed king (1 Samuel 16).
- **Think about the Disciples:** It was an ordinary day when Peter, Andrew, James, and John were mending their nets after a night of failure; but that was the day Jesus called them to become fishers of men (Luke 5:1-11).

You never know what God has in store for you on any given day. Keep your heart open to God's presence and plan. Yet to Nehemiah, this day looked no different than any other day.

1. It wasn't a significant **time**.

We read on in **verse 1**, "And it came to pass in the month Chisleu [pronounced KISS-lev]". This is in the winter, around November and December. Nehemiah tells us that these events happened in "in the twentieth year". This is the twentieth year of the Persian king Artaxerxes. Artaxerxes began to reign in 464, so this account occurred in 444 B.C.

2. It wasn't a significant **place** to Nehemiah.

Nehemiah is in Shushan (or Susa) when some terrible news come to him. Shushan (or Susa) was the capital city of the Persian Empire and the site of the king's winter palace. This is where Nehemiah was when his brother Hanani bursts into the room to give him some news.

3. It wasn't even a significant **message**. It was one he had heard before.

We find it in **verses 2-3**, "[It came to pass...] That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. 3 And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire."

So Hanani tells Nehemiah—“ the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.” The town has been attacked by the Babylonians.

**Explanation:** Why is the wall of Jerusalem so important? In the ancient world, a city would be built inside of walls. The walls were to fortify and protect the city from war, from terrorist attacks, from enemies. Enemies could come in and kill innocent civilians. Today is Memorial Day. We are amazed at the sacrifice of common people who have shown bravery and given their lives for our protection and our freedom.

Protection is important. The walls of Jerusalem had been torn down by the Babylonians, and the gates had been “burned with fire”. You see within these great walls, there were gates. When danger would arise, the gates would be shut, and the soldiers would defend the gates and the wall. In order to survive you had to have the wall and an army, but without the wall, there was no point of having an army. Without the walls, the city would be easily ransacked.

So the Babylonians had come and broken through the gates, terrorized the city, and burned out the gates and torn down the walls. The city of Jerusalem was now completely vulnerable and uninhabitable. Most of the people in Jerusalem were taken by the Babylonians into exile as slaves. The few people who are left are there in shame and disgrace and deep poverty.

So the people of Jerusalem had either been taken, or had died, or in fear they ran for their lives. It was a hopeless time. They could not get together for worship. They did not have the money to rebuild. They did not have the protection to rebuild. It was a hopeless time.

***The goal was within these walls, to have a people that loved God, that worshipped and obeyed God—living in the power of God’s presence.*** But that all seemed impossible now. This is all destroyed.

**Application:** Our city too is destroyed by the enemy. The strong man has bound the people of the towns we live in. They are enslaved to the lusts and cares of this world. What shall we do? God works on common days to transform the world. Today could be that day!

What should we do to be ready for God to work?

- II. God works on **contrite** people to transform this world. Look at Nehemiah’s sorrow for those around him. He has tears and a heart of brokenness. That is exactly the kind of person God will use.
  - A. We **need** to be awakened by the devastation sin has brought on our city. Nehemiah’s response to the news of the walls is *devastation*. He is heartbroken to hear that Jerusalem is destroyed. **Verse 4**, “And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven”. Nehemiah goes to God and he weeps and fasts and mourns over his city and he takes this massive burden to God. He is heartbroken for his people. If you connect

this with Nehemiah 2:1, you will find that he fasted, prayed, and wept for three or four months. We see the king asking him why his face was sunken with hunger. Nehemiah is broken to his very core.

B. God **brings** this awakening as He gives us His heart for the lost. This is what happened in the life of Nehemiah. Let me give you one bit of history to clarify how shocking this is. The report of the Babylonian attack was a piece of information seemed new, but of course, the Babylonians had done this 141 years prior to this. So why is Nehemiah weeping, fasting, and praying for three or four months?

I believe the Holy Spirit opened Nehemiah's heart to have the heart of Jesus for that city. As Jesus would later weep for Jerusalem, so here Nehemiah is weeping for his city of Jerusalem. So God opens up Nehemiah's heart to feel the pain and to know the heartache of these people. He has known that Jerusalem was in ruins—it had been in ruins for 141 years. But now the reality hits him and his heart breaks for them.

Jerusalem's destruction was common place to Nehemiah, but one day, the fact of Jerusalem's destruction just tore Nehemiah apart. Do you get angry at the irresponsibility of this generation? Do you see the culture sliding away and get angry, or does your heart break? They need Jesus! I'm asking you to ask God the Holy Spirit to break open your heart for your family anew. Do you want to see them saved. Oh, you did years ago, but now their lostness is common place. It's old hat. You've given up. Ask God to break your heart and give you the heart of Jesus for those without Christ.

**Application:** We are in a city that is no less spiritually bankrupt, destroyed, and confused than the city of Jerusalem was in the time of Nehemiah. But, like Nehemiah before that day in Shushan, we have the tendency to not be troubled by it because it's all we've ever known. The spiritual bankruptcy in the families and homes of our friends and even family seems normal. It's the world. But our hearts ought to break!

We can become so accustomed to the our city being broken by sin and all the spiritual bankruptcy around us, that our hearts do not break like Jesus' heart. God the Holy Spirit wants us to have the heart of Jesus for our city.

**Illustration:** [SOX PARK] Last year I was at a White Sox game at US Cellular field. Seating capacity is 45,000 people. I saw that crowd, and I wanted to weep. You can put the entire population of Hanover Park in US Cellular Field. If you took out all the Christians from our town—perhaps there are 2000, you would still have 38,000 people who are on their way to hell. Does your heart break for those around you? All these people do not know Jesus. They are living a life separated from Him. Consider that almost all the marriages in our town do NOT have Christ in the center. Many are near divorce, over half are already divorced. Many are simply living in fornication and numbing themselves with alcohol and even drugs to numb the pain. Does your heart break? The children of our town do not know Jesus Christ. The parents are not raising them to be prepared for Judgment Day. What is the future for all these children? What will they become without Christ in their lives? Where would you be without Christ in your life?

Nehemiah has the heart of Jesus for his city. Christ wants us to have His heart for our city. Do you have the heart of Christ for your friends and neighbors?

- III. God uses **consecrated** people to build His city within our city. Nehemiah has the right response. He goes to the only One that can change the situation. He consecrates Himself completely to be an instrument of God. Isaiah said "I set my face like a flint, and I know that I shall not be disappointed" (**Isaiah 50:7**).

He goes to God in deep and profound brokenness with fasting and weeping. That is exact thing that will change not only a city, but a nation and a world. He prayed for three to four months. He begins this time of prayer and fasting with the prayer we have recorded in the rest of this chapter. Nehemiah prays a total of nine times in the book, but this is his most lengthy prayer.

- A. God hears **God-focused** prayer.

Nehemiah begins with a prayer of adoration. He says in **verse 5**, "I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments". As he considers the broken down city of Jerusalem, there is not a lot of reason for hope. But here he looks up to God, and Nehemiah has all the hope in the world. He sees His power as "the great and terrible God". So he's talking to a God that can do anything, and Nehemiah says he keeps covenant and has mercy toward His people—those who love Him and live a transformed life. If you want people to get inside the walls of God's city, you've got to be changed and transformed. If you are not transformed, then what are you inviting people to?

- You may ask: how can I begin to pray for our city? Start by reading the Bible. Get to know who God is. Only then can you adore Him in prayer. He's not the god of your imagination. You didn't invent him. He is revealed only in the pages of the Bible. If you want to learn how to pray, read the Bible. God speaks to us in the Bible. Prayer is us responding to God. God moves us with His Word, and we respond back.
- Nehemiah knows God and thanks God for Who He is. He says He's "great and terrible". He says He's "merciful". When you get to know God you are getting to know Jesus. Never forget that Jesus is the God of the Bible. He is Jehovah. When you are looking into the face of Jesus in prayer, you are looking into the face of God!
- It's ok to make requests of God, but remember the reason God answers prayer is not simply to give us what we want, but to help us to get to know Him. Prayer, though primarily is us getting know Him and praising Him for who He is. The reason the walls were torn down in the first place was that people stopped getting to know God.
- It may take weeks to get an appointment with a doctor, a lawyer, a government official, but God is willing to hear our prayers at any time!!

- You will see throughout the book of Nehemiah, Nehemiah is constantly praying. When he needs wisdom, or encouragement, or direction, he prays.

Nehemiah begins with praising God for who He is, and then holds himself, and his family, and his nation to the God of the Bible.

- B. God hears **Broken** prayer. Nehemiah leans full force into the grace of God and He brings His people and his nation with him. The grace of God is great, so our confession of sin should be complete. We should hold nothing back!

**Look how Nehemiah moves to this PRAYER OF CONFESSION.** He says in verse 6, "Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. 7 We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses."

You know God is going to build a city within our city when God's people start confessing their sins! God the Holy Spirit is just as present when the sewers open up and people are painfully confessing sin as when people are singing His name. In fact, we need a whole lot more of services where we leave in silence in deep conviction. That is just as much the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is confession. Nehemiah confesses his own sin, the sin of his family, the sin of fellow believers, and the sins of the whole city. He goes to God and bears his heart not only for his own sin, but the sins of those he loves. He is deeply burdened that things are not right in his life. Things are not right in his own family.

**Application:** It's easy to look at other people's sins isn't it? We can become expert criticizers of the other person's sins. We have twenty-twenty vision when we see the sins of our neighbor. Nehemiah gets honest with God! He says in verses 6-7, "both I and my father's house have sinned. 7 We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses." Nehemiah looks at himself and his own family. He loves his countrymen and confesses their sins.

Sin is what restricts the forward progress of the Gospel into all the nations. Nehemiah begins by looking at who God is in his prayer, and then he sees how he and his family and his nation have fallen short of the glory of God. Sin is being unlike God. We are supposed to be image bearers of God. We are supposed to be holy because God is holy, loving because God is loving. Jesus says, "Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). We are to tell the truth because God is a truth teller. We are to reflect God's glory. But we haven't. We've all crashed and burned. God gave us His Law, His Ten Commandments to be like a mirror to show us how guilty we are. "There is none good, no not one. There is not that understands or seeks after God. There is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans

**3:12, 11).** And salvation is the journey of being restored back to the image of Jesus Christ.

**Application:** As you look into your life, what sin is keeping you from being the light that God wants you to be to the darkness of our city and our nation? Are you contributing to the darkness or to the light? Probably 38000 people in our city are lost. What is keeping the light of Christ from shining to them? Jesus said, "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid" (**Matthew 5:14**). If you are a Christian here today, are you good at criticizing the problems in the church, or are you praying for your church and serving the church? It's so easy to complain and criticize. How about doing what Nehemiah did. He saw the walls broken down, and he wept and he prayed.

IT IS SO **EASY** TO STAND BACK AND CRITICIZE. IT IS SO **HARD** TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE!

As Christians, we preach repentance to the lost world around us, but the tragedy is that we fail to practice it ourselves. We are to be a broken people if God is going to use us. We are an army, but we are an army that moves together on it's knees, humbly! Jesus Christ went to the Cross to forgive any and all types of sins. That means there is nothing you've done that God cannot forgive. There is nothing you shouldn't confess!

- C. God hears **Bible-saturated** prayer. Nehemiah begins to start praying portions of the Bible in Deuteronomy. **Verse 8**, "Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress [unfaithful], I will scatter you abroad among the nations: 9 But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there".

This is all about God's name. If we call ourselves Christians, but our lives are not being transformed by the living God, then the name of God will be brought low before our friends and family and co-workers. Nehemiah looks around and he sees God's people in terrible shape spiritually. But Nehemiah clings to the promises of God. He knows the whole situation can change because He knows the God of the Bible. He's seen how he works.

God can do something great in and through our church. He has promised to reach the nations, but He will only use us if we are clean vessels. He says, "if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence". Nehemiah knew this because he was a Bible-saturated man. Nehemiah knew that God could turn their whole situation around because he read the Bible!

How about you? Do you read the Bible? Do you believe that the God who split the Red Sea can do the impossible in your life, in your family's life, among your friends and co-workers? If you lack faith that God can do anything, read the Bible. "Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the Word of God" (**Romans 10:17**).



Nehemiah remembers that though God's people are scattered across the globe because of their sins, if they turn back to God, He will gather them again and put them back in Jerusalem.

God will move us forward as we understand His power and plan through the Bible. God can do anything. I don't care if we lack money. I don't care if it all seems impossible. We've been seeing God do the impossible. But don't stop. Remember the promises of God in the Scriptures. Remember who we are dealing with. This is the God of Abraham and Moses. This is the God of Joseph. This is the God of Elijah who brought fire down from heaven. God's promises never fail.

- D. God hears **Burdened** prayer. Nehemiah claims the promises of God not simply for himself, but for his brothers and sisters in the Lord. Look at **verses 10-11**, "Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand." Nehemiah is standing in the gap for those around him. Instead of criticizing, he prays for them. Are you praying for your brothers and sisters. You can pray through the church directory. The church that prays together grows together. As a church we need to pray for churches around us that preach the Gospel—that are doing God's work. This is not a competition. If there is another Gospel preaching church, we are all on the same team. Nehemiah was burdened for his brothers and sisters in Christ wherever they were.
- E. Finally, God hears **Believing** prayer. Do you believe God can do anything? Nehemiah doesn't just pray, but he puts feet to his prayers! Look at verse 11, "O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer." Nehemiah is about to meet with a very wealthy, influential and powerful man, King Artaxerxes, and he asks for God's favor and mercy.

**Conclusion:** If you want to reach your city for Christ, you've got to pray, but you've also got to believe that God can build a city within your city. You've got get up and start building the walls. You've got to go meet with people and tell them of Christ and see God build a city not just of brick and mortar, but of men and women, boys and girls. God wants to build a city within our city, and He wants to use you to build it. Are you willing?