

## **BUILDING 4 GENERATIONS TO COME**

### **When He Heard the News**

#### Nehemiah 1

INTRODUCTION: I remember standing in the airport at the pay phone. It had been a glorious six week journey. Karen and I were making our second flight to Tulsa, OK where we had met and married, and it looked like God was sending us back to that city we loved to pastor my first church. We had already been back to Tulsa once and spent a good bit of time with the search team. We were going back to meet with other church leaders and for me to preach on Sunday morning in view of a call. The whole experience had been such a blessing, and we could not have been more excited about what the Lord was doing.

But I had to make a phone call. My dad had gone to the doctor for a series of tests, and he was due to get the results that morning. So before we got on the plane, I wanted to call and see what he found out.

My mom answered. She said, "Mike, it's bad. Your dad has cancer of the colon, and it has already metastasized to his liver. There's nothing they can do." After we finished talking, I hung up, and remained with my face hidden in the bank of phones. The best I can remember, it's the only time I ever cried in an airport. My dad was lost. He only had a year to live.

As I read the first chapter of the Book of Nehemiah, I wonder if Nehemiah felt much the same way. Although he lived in Shushan, the winter residence of the king of Persia, Nehemiah was a Jew. His parents had lived their lives during the Babylonian captivity and were alive to hear that after Cyrus had defeated the Babylonians that he released any Jews who desired to return to Jerusalem to go back and to rebuild their precious temple which the Babylonians had pillaged and destroyed.

Like so many of their fellow Jews, Nehemiah's parents did not return with the remnant, but chose to remain with friends and other family, many of which moved to Shushan, this very lovely city which was home to one of the principle palaces of the king. Nehemiah had grown up there, and even worked his way as a servant in the palace to become the cupbearer for King Artaxerxes I, a position of great trust and responsibility.

But Nehemiah's heart and soul were still Jewish. He worshipped the God of his forefathers, and he loved the people that God had chosen to be His own people. He despaired over the sinful past of his ancestors, but during his lifetime he had witnessed God's mighty hand acting time and time again for the good of the Jews.

- First, of course, had been the miraculous release of the Jews from their captivity at exactly the time that had been prophesied by Jeremiah by Cyrus the King,

whom Isaiah had called by name more than a hundred years before he was born. Wow, who could not see God in that!

- Then came the rebuilding of the temple. Although Cyrus had given the Hebrews permission to rebuild it, when he died, opposition arose. The original temple, built in Solomon's reign had taken only seven years to construct. The new temple, finally completed under the leadership of Zerubbabel, consumed twenty years. But it had been completed now for 70 years, another of the glorious acts of God for His people.
- And then there was God's rescue of the Jews throughout the Empire. Nehemiah had been a child when a wicked man named Haman connived a plot to kill every Jew in all of the provinces of Persia, which would have included Nehemiah and the remnant who had returned to Jerusalem. But God! Only God could have done this! He caused a young Jewish maiden to be chosen as the new bride of King Ahasuerus, and working through this godly young woman who trusted the Lord with all of her heart, God foiled the plot of this worker of iniquity, and saved the lives of all of His people.
- "Even to this day," Nehemiah must have thought, "we, the people of the Living God live in peace and security, many of us in great comfort and even luxury, because of the goodness of the Lord."

Everything was going so well!

Then, he picked up the phone to call home...

No, no, no. I've got the time line wrong here.

Then a friend of his came back to Shushan after making a visit to Jerusalem. Almost casually, Nehemiah asked about the city and the people living there who had returned from the captivity. He was shocked by the answer he received.

**Nehemiah 1:3** And they said to me, "The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province *are* there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem *is* also broken down, and its gates *are burned with fire.*"

Nehemiah was devastated.

**Nehemiah 1:4** So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *for many days*; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

- He wept
- He mourned for many days
- He fasted
- He prayed
- He confessed his sin and the sin of his people
- He recited the promises of God

And then Nehemiah committed himself to act.

**Nehemiah 1:11** O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” For I was the king’s cupbearer.

**What does Nehemiah mean?**

- **Be attentive to my prayer**
- **Let your servant prosper**
- **Grant him mercy in the sight of this man**

**Then he says, “For I was the king’s cupbearer.”**

What is he talking about? I confess. I read ahead past chapter one, so I know! Let me tell you.

**Nehemiah is asking God to bless him as Nehemiah requests that the king send him to Jerusalem to rebuild the walls of the city!**

Now, my friend, you may be asking, “And what has this to do with me? And why, pastor, have you begun a new sermon series on Nehemiah and the building of the walls of Jerusalem?”

**Because my friend, we have received some news.**

It has come to us by way of the report from The Lawless Group who our church enlisted last year to study the health of our church and to help us reach more of the younger generations in our community.

- **Much of the news in the report is good, and should prompt our praise and thanksgiving for what the Lord is doing among us.**
  - In fact, Dr. Lawless stated, and you will see his words in the report we are going to give you at the close of the service, ... Dr. Lawless stated, “St. Andrew is one of the healthier churches with whom we have worked.”
  - They noted especially the commitment of the church to the Word of God, describing the church as theologically strong.
  - They praised the Center of Hope Ministries and the church’s commitment and personal involvement in missions, locally, nationally, and internationally.
  - They noted the unity and family spirit of the church.
  - They described the people as friendly and caring.
- **But there was bad news also.**

The bad news was not wholly unanticipated. It was one of the primary reasons we sought the study. But it confirmed what we feared was true, and it explained some of the reasons it is the way it is.

- First of all, **our church is in an attendance plateau.** We have had good growth for a number of years, but we are not growing presently.
- Secondly, the ones we are reaching the least are our two youngest generations.
- **We are not reaching many Millennials, people from age 16 to 35 right now.**
- **26% of Bay County residents are Millennials.**
- **Less than 17% of our regular attendees are Millennials.**

Think with me for a moment about the **implications** of this information.

- **Most of these unchurched Millennials are lost.**
- **The likelihood of their being saved decreases with every year they age.**
- **These are eternal consequences!**
- **If this continues, as the older generations of the church die, there will be less young and median adults to lead the ministry.**
- While at the moment, we have a good, healthy number of children and young teens, called collectively Generation Z, **the likelihood is that as these children become older teens and young adults, they too will abandon the church, as many of their Millennial predecessors have done.**
- **The problem with Generation Z will probably be the same or worse than it is with Millennials.**

Our heart should be broken as was the heart of Nehemiah.

**This news should bring us to**

- **Mourning**
- **Praying**
- **Fasting**
- **Confessing our sin**
- **Remembering and reciting the promises of God**

**And it should lead us to the same place it led Nehemiah.**

**To a decision to do something about the problem, enabled by the grace and power of God.**

So some are saying,

- Well, pastor, what do you want us to do?
- What can we do?
- What does God want us to do?

I will answer those questions, but not today. **As a church we are not ready today for the answers.**

Nehemiah spent many days in mourning and prayer seeking the Lord, and when he committed himself to action, he still did not know

- What he could do
- What was possible for him to do
- What the king in whose hands was Nehemiah's very life, would permit him to do.

But **Nehemiah said,**

- **"I will do something.**
- **God give me favor.**
- **God grant mercy.**
- **Help your servant do what you want me to do!"**

And that is what I as your pastor am asking of you today.

Nehemiah did not know what the king would allow.

Nehemiah did not know what he could or would do if the king let him go.

He did know something of the cost.

- He would move from the safety and comfort of the king's palace to a city in ruins.
- He would move from the very cushy job of serving food to the king to very hot, laborious work.
- He would likely move from a place of honor and respect to a place of conflict and rejection.

Yet, counting the cost, even not knowing what all it meant, Nehemiah said, "I will do something. God helping me, I will do what He enables me to do."

**CONCLUSION:** Folks, listen, here's the deal. We are a **4 Generation Church**

- 1. Grandparents and Great-Grandparents**
- 2. Parents**
- 3. Young Adults**
- 4. Teens and Children**

**But we have at least one and probably two generations being left behind.**

Our military proudly claims the motto "**No one left behind.**"

What I am saying to you, what every staff member of this church is saying to you, is that this must become our motto and our call to action.

It is not that Millennials are more important than the generations who came before them. We want people of all races and all generations to know the Lord and to become disciples of Jesus. We want no one left behind, no generation left behind.

And as your pastor, I am telling you I am committed to this.

I am committed to leading this church to be in every way a 4 Generation Church, with no generation left behind.

I say this knowing some of what that means for me personally, but not knowing all of what that means for me personally. But I am saying, "Whatever it takes, whatever it costs, I will not spend the last years God gives me pastoring His church watching one or two generations fade away from the knowledge of the Lord and from the glorious salvation that comes through the gospel."

**I will do whatever the Lord enables me to do by His grace and power.**

And **what I am asking of you is to make the same commitment.**

Here is the way we will do this.

- At the end of the service, you will be given a ten page report written by myself and your entire Ministerial Staff summarizing what The Lawless Group reported concerning our church, with tons more detail than I could share with you this morning.
- Our entire staff stands behind this. We are of one mind and heart.
- We want you to read this carefully.
- Thursday night, in Fellowship Hall, we will have a Townhall Meeting of the church just to explain the details of the report and to try to answer any questions about it.
- Next Sunday night, we will have a Special Church Conference.
- **I and the staff are asking you to adopt this report as an accurate description of St. Andrew Baptist Church and of the church's desires and goals for the days and years to come.**

**I'm asking you to be a Nehemiah.**

**I'm asking each and every member of this church to say, "I will do whatever the Lord enables me to do by His grace and power."**

If the church does this, then the staff and I will give you another document less than half as long, that contains specific recommendations of the things that through hours of study and prayer and consideration of all The Lawless Group said to us, the things we believe that God wants St. Andrew Baptist Church to do.

But first, like Nehemiah, we must get ready. We must say, **"I will do whatever the Lord enables me to do by His grace and power."**