

The Real McCoy

Nehemiah . . . Memoirs of an Ordinary Man – Part V

Nehemiah 2:1-10

Introduction

Late one night, around 1840, two slaves from Kentucky slipped out of their shack and into the darkness. This husband and wife left their plantation and were soon on their way to freedom as the newest passengers on the Underground Railroad. Moving from safe house to safe house, they made their journey to the promised land of freedom. They did not stop until they reached Canada, and there they lived out the rest of their years.

They had a son, in 1843, and named him Elijah. He was able to attend school near his home, while his father prospered in business ventures. His father prospered so much so that he was able to send Elijah to Edinburg, Scotland, where he studied mechanical engineering.

After he graduated, Elijah moved to Detroit to find work. He was not able to find work in his field and instead, landed a job as a fireman on the Michigan Central Railroad. In those days, trains and other machinery were stopped every day to be oiled. Recognizing the need for a better system, Elijah designed a steam engine lubricator that could lubricate the engine during its operation. There was no need to stop the train, which saved the Michigan Central Railroad time and money. He secured a United States government patent for his lubricator cup.

Elijah did not stop with that, though. He kept improving his device and developed variations of it. He adapted it to other machinery and, in time, received forty two patents for inventions in

lubrication systems. These were eventually put to use all around the world.

There were, of course, others who tried to copy his work, but Elijah's inventions were so superior that people would settle for nothing less than the original. You see, Elijah's last name was McCoy. And a phrase was coined in honor of this man's work, spoken by people who would settle for nothing less than, "The Real McCoy."

That expression has become part of America's vocabulary. It is uttered by people who will not be satisfied with a substitute, "a knockoff," an imitation. They want, "The Real McCoy".

Having studied the life of Nehemiah, I have come to the conclusion that Nehemiah was a "real McCoy". He was a genuine, authentic follower of God. Like a man, or woman, that you have watched and then, remarked, to someone else, "That person is real."

That is Nehemiah.

The biblical book that bears his name is as real as he is. It does not spin the story to make him look good. In fact, it does not even show his best side at times. You are allowed to see, not only the strengths of Nehemiah, but also his weaknesses. You are able to watch him when he is fearless and courageous, and you are allowed to watch him when he is weak and afraid. In fact, we will discover both sides of him in our study today.

When we finish our study, today, of this particular chapter in his life, I believe we will be led to the same conclusion. Nehemiah was the genuine article of godly faith. There was no facade, no pseudo

spiritual language, no false piety. He was nothing less than, “The Real McCoy”.

Turn, in your Bible, to Nehemiah’s personal diary. We will study chapter 2 today.

While you are turning, you may remember that, for four months, Nehemiah has been praying, fasting, mourning, and weeping over the broken condition of Jerusalem. And, he has been praying for four months that God would use *him* to lead the way and rebuild the city. But, for four months, God had not answered him.

Suddenly . . . Opportunity!

Chapter 2 will suddenly change everything.

A sudden crises

The chapter opens with a sudden crisis, in verses 1 and 2.

And it came about in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, that wine was before him, and I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence. So the king said to me, “Why is your face sad though you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of heart.” Then I was very much afraid.

For four months Nehemiah has been keeping it all in. No one, including the king, has been able to observe the agony Nehemiah has been feeling. But, on this day, Nehemiah cannot keep it in any longer and he inadvertently lets it show.

The king asks him, “Why this sadness of heart?”

You would think that this would be an invitation from Artaxerxes for Nehemiah to sit down on the couch and say, “Well, Art, “ole” buddy, nice of you to ask.”

Why would Nehemiah say, “I was very much afraid”?

Well, remember, Nehemiah’s job was to protect the king from any assassination attempts through poisoning the king’s goblet of wine or his casserole. Any change in Nehemiah’s behavior or countenance would arouse suspicion from an already paranoid king whose own father had been assassinated.

Furthermore, you can actually translate the word, “sadness,” entirely differently. You could render the king’s words, in verse 2, this way, “Why is your face troubled with evil . . .”.

In other words, the king says, “Nehemiah, something’s wrong. What’s going on here?!”

. . . *Then I was very much afraid.*

Continue to verse 3,

I said to the king, “Let the king live forever.”

That is another way of saying, “There’s nothing in your drink, I promise!”

“Why should my face not be sad when the city, the place of my fathers’ tombs, lies desolate and its gates have been consumed by fire?”

For four months Nehemiah has been asking God to grant him favor in the eyes of the king so that he might return to Jerusalem. This is the same king who, in Ezra, chapter 4, ordered the work stopped. God would have to do something really unusual to change his heart. So Nehemiah has been fasting and praying, “Oh, God, do something to grant me an audience with the king.”

Then suddenly, out of nowhere, unexpectedly, Nehemiah shows his feelings for a moment. The king picks up on it and demands an explanation. So, Nehemiah says, “Well, I’m, I’m, I’m sad because my father’s city lies desolate and its gates are burned with fire.”

I wonder if Nehemiah thought to himself, “That’s not the way I wanted to say it. That didn’t come out right.”

Do you find that, no matter how long you plan, you can never plan enough for the unexpected? I doubt Nehemiah would have picked this day or this way to bring up the subject. He is on the defensive and the king is suspicious. This is not the way he planned it to happen. Now, he is afraid.

The real McCoy of authentic Christianity is not the person who is self-assured, always together, never afraid. It may be the person who is caught off guard, filled with fear and trembling, unsure of himself and, as we will see in a moment, totally dependent upon the strength of God.

A surprising request

What follows from the king, in the first part of verse 4, is, what I believe to be, a surprising request.

Then the king said to me, “What would you request?”

Or, “What do you want?”

Nehemiah’s head has to be spinning. Notice he has not asked the king for anything, he has simply

told the king why he is troubled. But something is moving the heart of the king to discern what he has not heard . . . that Nehemiah wants to ask him for a favor.

Whom do you think was moving the heart of the king? Proverbs, chapter 21, verse 1, tells us,

The king's heart is like channels of water in the hand of the Lord; He turns it wherever He wishes.

“What do you want Nehemiah? Speak!”

A short prayer

I love the next phrase in verse 4,

So I prayed to the God of heaven.

I love this short prayer. It is a silent, quick, SOS prayer.

“Well, Nehemiah, what do you want?”

So I prayed to the God of heaven.

We are not told what he said to God, but I am convinced it was an ancient Hebrew word, pronounced, “Heeelp!”

Some time ago, when I was in India, I was picked up from the airport and taken by taxi to my hotel. It was dark and the streets were filled with racing cars, horns blowing. Very few driving rules are kept. People just let you know where they are by blowing their horns. We were zipping along a road, when we pulled up behind a slower moving car. The taxi driver just laid on his horn, but to no avail. He decided to pass that car, and, just as he pulled out, we saw a truck coming toward us. I thought to myself, “My driver will slow down and pull back in behind the car.” But, instead, he floored it. We shot forward and, at just the last moment, before impact – because the truck wasn’t moving over either – we zipped in front of the other car and literally, it seemed, brushed past the oncoming truck.

That is the closest I have ever come to being a Pentecostal – for I was speaking to God in a language that no one could understand.

I was on the phone recently to a friend who is a police officer. He was in his police car on the third level of the parking deck at a nearby mall when the dispatcher said there was larceny taking place in a store at that mall. Suddenly, a man came running out from that store, who matched the description, carrying several items. My friend, Billy, jumped out and shouted, “Halt!”

The man changed directions and ran even faster. Billy began pursuit and was inches behind him when they reached the edge of the third level parking deck. The man jumped. Billy knew that there was a ledge of grass five feet below the deck, so he jumped too. He missed that ledge and fell all the way to the ground – twenty two feet below. He broke one leg, but told me that, as he was falling, he thought his life could very well be over. There was a short prayer meeting. He was praising God for only a broken leg.

You may have been in a situation where the phone has rung, or the boss has summoned, or the teacher has called, or the doctor’s office has reported – and you are filled with fear. What you observe, in the life of Nehemiah, is that sort of panic. He is not in control. He does not seem to have it all together. We are allowed to see him as the genuine, real person that he was – and he is terrified, gasping a quick prayer to the God of heaven.

By the way, a short prayer is best preceded by long obedience. The key to effective praying before God is not length, but loyalty. When you walk with God, you do not have to say very much in those emergency moments of life. He already knows it all, and He is ready to respond on your behalf.

A submissive appeal

Now, I want you to notice Nehemiah’s submissive appeal. Look at verse 5.

And I said to the king, “If it please the king, and if your servant has found favor before you, send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers’ tombs, that I may rebuild it.”

This is gracious tact on Nehemiah’s part. He did not say, “I’m glad you asked, oh King. God has a job for me, so I want a leave of absence. I’ll be back when God’s finished with me in Jerusalem. Have you got a problem with that?”

No. Nehemiah is willing to allow God to move through the heart of the king to willingly grant him permission to go.

A subtle influence

It would be easy to miss, what I believe to be, a subtle influence by a woman whose presence is mentioned. Continue to verse 6.

Then the king said to me, the queen sitting beside him, “How long will your journey be, and when will you return?” So it pleased the

king to send me, and I gave him a definite time.

Why the rather awkward, obvious insertion of the fact that the queen was sitting by the king? Because the queen did not sit beside the king during his business day. Do you remember how Queen Esther dared to even come into his presence without an invitation? The implication is that the queen had an influence over the king while Nehemiah presented his request.

There are some who have pointed out that, if this is the Artaxerxes we think it is chronologically, then this was not Artaxerxes' wife. The phrase queen was also used for the queen mother. The queen mother, or step mother in this case, was none other than Esther herself.

A solid plan

Now notice that Nehemiah has been doing more than praying, he has been planning as well.

Having gathered his wits about him, he now launches into a presentation of a very solid plan of action. Look at verses 7 and 8.

And I said to the king, "If it please the king, let letters be given me for the governors of the provinces beyond the River, that they may allow me to pass through until I come to Judah, and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city and for the house to which I will go."

Two needs anticipated by Nehemiah

Nehemiah has anticipated needing two things from the king:

1. permission in writing from the king, and
2. supplies for building.

Nehemiah sounds like a girl going to her father and asking for money to buy a new skirt. When he says, "Yes," she says, "Well, if I get a new skirt, I'll need something to wear with it."

And, before you know it, it is earrings and nail polish. The wise father says, "No," to the very first thing. Amen?

If you think Nehemiah keeps going and going here, you are absolutely right. By the time he has finished laying out his request, he has (do not miss this), asked the king not only for permission and

letters demanding cooperation from local governments around Jerusalem, but also for permission to requisition all of the lumber they will need to rebuild the gates from the king's own royal forests.

I can only imagine Asaph, scratching his head in bewilderment, as he reads the letter from the king commanding him to give Nehemiah anything he needs. This would be tantamount to the mayor of our town and the Town Council not only agreeing to our new church site plans, but voting to give a blank check to finance the entire project.

When Nehemiah walked into the king's presence that day, he was a cupbearer; but when he walked out, he was the newly appointed leader of a construction project that would ultimately restore the city of Jerusalem to the people of God.

Timeless Truths – Revealing The Real McCoy

"The Real McCoy" of authentic, genuine faith are revealed by those who are willing to live by a couple of principles.

Realize that God's delays are not necessarily . . .

1. Principle number one, they are people who realize that God's delays are not necessarily God's denials.

If you go back to chapter 1, where Nehemiah is mourning and fasting and praying, you see, in verse 11, that startling little word appear.

O Lord, I beseech Thee, may Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant and the prayer of Thy servants who delight to revere Thy name, and make Thy servant successful

. . .

here it is –

. . . *today* . . .

"Lord, do something today! Today!"

And, for four months, God did not do anything on that day, or, at least, so it seemed. But, God was in the process of doing something in Nehemiah before He would ever do something through Nehemiah.

The genuine believer is struck by the fact that God is as much interested in doing something in them as He is in doing something through them.

When it seemed that nothing was happening, something was. God wasn't just preparing Jerusalem

for Nehemiah, He was preparing Nehemiah for Jerusalem.

Refuse to accept the . . .

2. Principle number two, “Real McCoy” believers refuse to accept the credit for the work of God that is accomplished.

Nehemiah leaves little room for doubt that he fully understood what happened just moments earlier. If you missed it, he records, in his diary, this telling statement, found in verse 8b.

And the king granted [my requests] . . . to me because the good hand of my God was on me.

Nehemiah recognized that what just happened was accomplished by God. It was not because Nehemiah was smart, but because God was sovereign. It was not because Nehemiah was great, but because God was gracious.

Donald K. Campbell, in his book, *Nehemiah: Man in Charge*, quoted G. Gordon Liddy, after he was released from prison for his involvement in political scandal. He declared,

I have found within myself all I need and all I ever will need. I am a man of great faith, but my faith is in George Gordon Liddy, and I have never failed me.

It is interesting that he would have this perspective, having just been released from prison.

Nehemiah has just been released from the king’s palace – with royal permission and with all the financial backing necessary to rebuild. He was humble enough to recognize that, in spite of his planning, success was granted because of God’s good hand.

Continue to verses 9 and 10.

Then I came to the governors of the provinces beyond the River and gave them the king’s letters. Now the king had sent with me officers of the army and horsemen. And

when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about it, it was very displeasing to them that . . .

notice Nehemiah’s choice of self-description in the next word,

. . . someone had come . . .

not, “The cupbearer of the king has come,” or “The leader chosen by God has come,” but simply, that, “someone had come,” which you could render that, “a man had come,”

. . . to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel.

A genuine, authentic, down to earth, real believer never gets caught up with what he or she has done or can do.

Charles Swindoll, in his book, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart*, quoted Samuel Logan Brengle, who was a great leader in the work of God several generations ago. He said it best when he wrote,

The ax cannot boast of the trees it has cut down. It could do nothing, but for the woodsman. He made it. He sharpened it. He uses it. The moment the woodsman throws the ax aside, it becomes only old iron. Oh, that I may never lose sight of this.

Do you want to be a “Real McCoy”? Do you want to avoid the popular definition of Christianity? Do you want to avoid the “knock off” imitations of spirituality that abound today in the religious world?

Allow yourself to be the instrument in the hands of God for His purposes and for His glory. Then, when He accomplishes something through you, do not ever forget that He was the one who did it.

Someone has come to seek the welfare of the sons of Israel – just a man, just someone! Yet, upon closer inspection, we have discovered that he was actually a genuine, authentic man, sometimes filled with fear and sometimes moved by faith. But, he was totally dependent upon the goodness and sovereignty of God. Nehemiah was, “The Real McCoy”.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 3/19/2000 by Stephen Davey.

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