

Introducing an Ordinary Man

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

Nehemiah 1:1

Introduction

I thought you would be interested in a story that I received recently. Let me tell it to you.

One Sunday morning, the pastor noticed little Johnny was staring up at the large plaque that hung in the foyer of the church. The seven-year-old had been staring at the plaque for some time, so the pastor walked up, stood beside the boy, and said quietly, “Good morning, son.”

“Good morning, Pastor” replied the young boy, still focused on the plaque. “Sir, what is this?” Johnny asked.

“Well, son, this plaque is to honor all the people from our community who died in the service,” replied the pastor.

Soberly, they stood together, staring at the large plaque, lost in their own thoughts. Then, little Johnny’s voice barely broke the silence when he asked, “Which one was it, the 9:30 or the 11:00 o’clock service?”

I am not quite sure why that was sent to me!

Then, in a more serious vein, the following letter came to me from our missionary friends in Hungary. I want to use it as an introduction to our study today. The letter reads:

Greetings from Budapest. This fall the newspapers and magazines of Central and Eastern Europe were filled with the 10th Anniversary flashback stories of the fall of communism in 1989. Recently an unusually powerful article emerged.

In 1943 a young Jewish mother, trapped in the ghettos of Poland, placed her infant son in the arms of a childless Catholic neighbor lady and begged her to save her tiny son’s life. When the neighbor hesitated, the desperate mother persisted, “You believe in Jesus, who was a Jew. So try to save this Jewish baby for the Jew in whom you believe. And one day maybe he will grow up to be a priest.” Shocked at the thought of a Jew becoming a Catholic priest, the Polish neighbor nevertheless took the baby into her home. The Jewish mother and the rest of her family perished in the Nazi death camps. Thirty five years later Father Weksler stood by the side of his dying Polish mother, only to hear her death-bed confession of his true Jewish heritage. While his mother and his adopted parents had acted out of love, Father Weksler was nonetheless stunned and confused. His entire occupation was now based on a completely false understanding of his true identity.

Imagine the trauma in this man’s heart and mind. He no longer knows which version of God he must relate to. Is He the God of the Jew or is He the God of the Roman Church? And he no longer knows who he should be for God; how he should serve God.

This letter went on to tell how this young man has appealed to the pope for help to resolve his personal, moral dilemma and identity crisis.

The letter ends,

Pray for us as we lead many of the hopeless people here to discover their true identity in Jesus Christ. Their only hope is to appeal to their true great High Priest, Jesus Christ.

Imagine this man no longer having any bearings about him. He does not know where he fits into the drama of life. Everything he thought he was, he was not – and everything he knew about God was different in light of his true genealogy.

I would imagine that if you asked a thousand people who have walk through these church doors, on any given Sunday, “Just who are you in the sight of God? What kind of person does God want you to be?” you would get a thousand different answers.

Today, I want to introduce a man to you who had the answer to those questions. His name was Nehemiah. He knew who he was, and he seemed to know the kind of person God was looking for.

But, I want to say something about him that may surprise you – Nehemiah was an ordinary man. He was run of the mill, common stock.

He had a good job, steady income, and respect. But something happened, one day, that jarred his world. It seemed to remind him of who he truly was, and the rest of the book, that bears his name, reveals who an ordinary person can become when fully surrendered to a supernatural God.

A Biblical Setting

Let us back up, for a moment, and take a look at the historical background and setting. When I say that, I can see the eyes glazing over, “Oh no, a history lesson.”

This past Christmas I gave my wife a beautiful bracelet. It came complete with an exquisite looking black velvet box. When you opened the box, you saw that the inside was lined in something that looked like satin. The box, alone, was exciting. Now, why didn't I just wrap that bracelet in newspaper, then twist the ends of the newspaper and use a lot of scotch tape? Why not? Because I wanted to stay indoors for Christmas! No, because I know what you know, the setting of an object enhances the beauty of the object. It brings out the luster and brilliance of the gift. When my wife opened the box, her heart was already prepared for something special. Now, my wife never thanked me for the box, and she did not try to strap the box onto her wrist. If she had, I would have called for help. No, she threw the box away. That box had value in the way it introduced the object.

The brilliance of Nehemiah's testimony and the luster of his integrity is all the more beautiful and remarkable because of his setting.

“It cannot be done.” – Zerubbabel and Ezra

It is a dark setting. He lived in a generation of Jews who said, “It cannot be done.”

They had been captives for generations. When Cyrus said they could go back to Jerusalem, Zerubbabel tried to lead the restoration, but gave up without finishing the task. Ezra tried, as well, but was left short of the finished task of restoring the Jews in a restored city.

Frankly, the setting that introduces us to Nehemiah is a mixture of grief and complacency. That makes Nehemiah's accomplishments even more incredible.

Listen as Psalm, chapter 137, verses 1 through 6, reveal how the children of Israel felt during their days of captivity.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. Upon the willows in the midst of it we hung our harps. For there our captors demanded of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion.” How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.

In Babylon, we did not sing, we sobbed with grief. We had disobeyed our Lord and we had ignored His word. So, we hung up our harps on the willow trees. There was no singing, no music, no joy. How can we sing in a foreign land? How can we sing when the walls of Jerusalem are fallen?

Even now that we are allowed to return and rebuild, our enemies are numerous, the task is impossible. Who will be our champion?

“It can be done.” - Nehemiah

Nehemiah! The common response, however, would have been, “Nehemiah who?”

If you look at the first verse of the first chapter of Nehemiah, you have all that can be said about his potential in the eyes of man.

The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hachaliah. . .

Ha! So what! Who is he? Who cares!

Nehemiah was not a Levite; he was not a member of Israel's priestly tribe. He did not have royal blood in his veins; he had no rich heritage, no physical strength or leadership experience. In fact you will not even find his father's name anywhere else in the Bible. ". . . Nehemiah, the son of Hachaliah. . ." is another way of saying, "He was just an ordinary, run of the mill human being; nothing special or spectacular; just common clay."

The Value of the Book of Nehemiah

Therein lies the challenge of this book. Let me give you two of them.

It leaves us with . . .

1. First, the book of Nehemiah leaves us with a timeless example. It gives us an example of how God can make a somebody out of a nobody, of what a person can do if they do not care who gets the credit, and an example of who a person can become if they belong to the living God.

It leaves us without . . .

2. Secondly, this book also leaves us without any excuses. In other words, if God could use him, He can use you.

The moment is always ripe for a new Nehemiah. There are broken things everywhere. Burned gates are commonplace. Values lie shattered, and morals are being corroded.

Every generation needs ordinary people who are willing to restore and rebuild broken things. Nehemiah was an ordinary man – the kind of man God delights to use.

We have lost sight, today, of what it takes to qualify a man or a woman for the role of restorer, re-builder. Popularity, glamour, personality, fame, money, and political office have all replaced what you will see emerge and shine in the life of this ordinary man. In a word, "character".

For decades now, the heroes of our culture have been entertainment figures, athletes, media creations, of one sort or another, and political leaders. Yet, in

my mind and in summation, most of them have this in common – they utterly lack character.

The key to being an ordinary person used in an extraordinary way by God to impact your crumbling world, is directly related to character.

Jeremiah, chapter 5, verse 1, said,

Roam to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, and look now, and take note, and seek in her open squares, if you can find a man, if there is one who does justice, who seeks the truth . . .

Ezekiel, chapter 22, verse 30, says,

And I searched for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the gap before Me . . . but I found no one.

The church today is in its most needy hour and it is trying to impact its culture with clever methods. God will impact the world with Christian character. While the church is looking for better methods, God is looking for better men.

Aristophanes was moving people with his brilliant plays; Herodotus was writing his fascinating history; Plato and Socrates were moving worlds of thought with their philosophy. Why not bring one of them into the fold of faith and have them lead the way? All of them lived during the same time that Nehemiah lived.

Why not one of them? Because God does not choose many mighty, many noble; He chooses ordinary clay of the earth who, in the hand of God, are used to move the world.

I have made a list, that is in no way comprehensive, compiled from other authors and my own overview of Nehemiah's memoirs, of twenty-six characteristics that Nehemiah had that are characteristics of ordinary people whom God can use in extraordinary ways:

1. he was compassionate,
2. he prayed (eleven prayers in this book),
3. he knew the Old Testament scriptures,
4. he had a definite goal,
5. when something had to be done, he went directly to the person who could do something about it,
6. he depended on God,
7. he knew for what to ask,
8. he sized up the job before he started the work,

9. he knew how to delegate work,
10. he knew how to delegate responsibility,
11. he did not let opposition from those on the outside stop him,
12. he knew how to settle differences among people,
13. he was an example of his own message,
14. he was a man of keen discernment,
15. he did not let personal criticism stop him,
16. he did not excuse wrong doing, regardless of who did it,
17. he had respect for authority,
18. he gave God the credit for accomplishments,
19. he put the emphasis on spiritual life,
20. he required a higher standard for those in spiritual leadership,
21. he refused to accommodate sin even when sinful behavior had become culturally acceptable,
22. he took his personal distress and hurt to God,
23. he was willing to suffer injustice for the sake of God's work,
24. he stayed focused on the goal and did not succumb to the dangers, the risks, the obstacles, and the hardships that stood in his way,
25. he had moral strength and courage when everybody around him did not,
26. he did not give up when everybody else around him had.

These lessons and characteristics throughout the memoirs of Nehemiah are easy to observe; they are easy to understand. "Yea, yea, he was compassionate . . . he knew the word . . . he did not quit . . . yea, yea, yea! I've heard it all before."

These characteristics are easy to observe and easy to understand, but they are impossible to apply, unless you have an open, honest, vital relationship with God. Perhaps that is why this book begins with Nehemiah on his knees.

Do you know who God wants you to be? He wants you to be an ordinary man or woman.

Do you find that insulting? "Well, I'm much more than any ordinary man!"

Or, does that come as a relief to you? "I could never be anything other than ordinary!"

Application

Let me close by asking two questions.

What is it in your life . . .

1. First, what is it in your life that lies in ruins today?

In our Thursday morning prayer and Bible study time, one of the elders made the comment, as we were discussing this series in Nehemiah, that he never read the book of Nehemiah without asking himself the question, "What is it in my life that lies in ruins today?"

Perhaps what you identify with, as we study through this action-packed book, is, not Nehemiah, but the broken down wall. God needs to restore and rebuild you. He will! He binds up the broken hearted and He restores the fallen one.

What is it about your life . . .

2. Secondly, what is it about your life that is worth reading about tomorrow?

Is there anything worth recording? Is there anything ordinary? But, in the ordinary things, faithfulness and submission to God is revealed. That is worth reading about.

The twenty-sixth president of our nation was a hard charging leader. Throughout his days in office, Theodore Roosevelt was either hated or admired. One admirer once said to him, "Mr. Roosevelt, you are a great man."

With characteristic honesty, he replied, "No, Teddy Roosevelt is simply a plain, ordinary man – who is highly motivated."

That is what we need today – plain, ordinary people, who are highly motivated by the Spirit of God to advance His church and honor His name.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/16/2000 by Stephen Davey.

© Copyright 2000 Stephen Davey

All rights reserved.