

# All About God

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As Israel readies itself to enter the Promised Land, the Lord makes covenant with his people. And, in the covenant ceremony he warns them as follows:

*After you have had children and grandchildren and have lived in the land a long time—if you then become corrupt and make any kind of idol, doing evil in the eyes of the Lord your God and arousing his anger, I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you this day that you will quickly perish from the land that you are crossing the Jordan to possess. You will not live there long.... The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations to which the Lord will drive you.... But if from there you seek the Lord your God, you will find him if you seek him with all your heart and with all your soul (Deuteronomy 4:25-27, 29).*

This is an essential background to the book of Nehemiah for, in Nehemiah, we encounter a man who remembers the warnings as well as the promises from God and trusts in them—trusts in the Lord’s unchanging faithfulness in all he’s promised. Friends, we have a lot to learn from this ancient book.

Israel had abandoned God. And, they were scattered first by the Assyrians then by the Babylonians, and now we find Nehemiah serving in the Persian Empire. Let’s read the first chapter and a half of this book together.

Listen to the word of God.

### **Nehemiah 1-2:10**

**1** The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, <sup>2</sup>Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup>They said to me, “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.”

<sup>4</sup> When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup> Then I said:

“Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, <sup>6</sup> 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 the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed against you. <sup>7</sup> We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

<sup>8</sup> “Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, <sup>9</sup> 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.’

<sup>10</sup> “They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. <sup>11</sup> 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. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

I was cupbearer to the king.

**2** In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, <sup>2</sup> so the king asked me, “Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart.”

I was very much afraid, <sup>3</sup> but I said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”

<sup>4</sup> The king said to me, “What is it you want?”

Then I prayed to the God of heaven, <sup>5</sup> and I answered the king, “If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it.”

<sup>6</sup> Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, “How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?” It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time.

<sup>7</sup> I also said to him, “If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? <sup>8</sup> And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?” And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests. <sup>9</sup> So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king’s letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me.

<sup>10</sup> When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.

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There’s so much we could dig into here. In the short time we have, however, we’re going to focus on three brief themes. Each of them drive and guide Nehemiah as he steps out in faith. (1<sup>st</sup>) We want to consider the Lord’s character. (2<sup>nd</sup>) We want to look at the Lord’s timing. (3<sup>rd</sup>) We want to reflect upon the Lord’s grace.

Let’s begin with the first theme.

### **1. God’s character (1:4-11).**

In the middle of this pandemic, it’s easy for me to feel like God is far away. In the midst of all of the political divisiveness in this country, it’s easy for me to feel as if God is far away. When racial tensions boil over and people are bruised, battered, and killed, it’s easy to feel like God is far away.

Friends, we all have to admit that it’s often easy to doubt that the Lord is there or, if he is there, that he hears us or that he cares for us. Whenever we’re confronted by these kinds of sinful realities, it’s easy to doubt; isn’t it?

I’m certain that Nehemiah would have had these kinds of feelings. Here he is in a foreign empire. He’s far away from his home. Jerusalem is some 850 miles away from Susa—the city where he serves as the king’s cupbearer. More than that even,

Jerusalem is in ruins. It has no defense against its enemies. As envoys tell Nehemiah, The people “are in great trouble and disgrace” (1:3).

Nehemiah must have had doubts, *What are you doing Lord?! Where are you?!*

Yet, it’s in the midst of this bad news that Nehemiah remembers who God is. He goes back to God’s word. He goes back to God’s promises. Nehemiah takes God at his word. This is how he approaches him. He confesses his own sins and the sins of his people. He confesses that they have been wicked and sinned against the Lord. That’s why they’re in this situation. But in faith, he reminds God of his promise—to show Israel mercy if it repents.

Look at how Nehemiah recalls, in conversation with God, his divine covenant with Israel. He prays this.

*“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 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...’”* (1:8-9).

I promise things and then forget them. I promise things and then I’m unable to deliver on those promises. I even promise things at times that I don’t really intend to make good on. This is because I’m not omniscient or omnipotent or trustworthy, not completely. News flash—I’m a finite sinner. That’s my character. And it’s yours. We’ve all sin and fall short of God’s glory (Romans 3:23).

Nehemiah, however, remembers that God is not like us. And, so he goes back to his promises. He trusts in God’s character. And, so should we! In these dark day, we should not be surprised. The Lord has clearly warned us that trouble will come because we live in a sinful, fallen world.

- Death will be an ever present reality (Genesis 2:17).
- Sin will divide and destroy relationships (Genesis 3:15).
- Life will entail painful, hard work (Genesis 3:17-18).

Yet, God also promises that with him there’s redemption and salvation for us. This is what Nehemiah trusted in during his dark situation. And, so should we!

- That God will never abandon or forsake us in Christ (Deuteronomy 31:6).
- That sin is forever removed from us when we trust Jesus (Psalm 103:12).
- That God will ultimately bring perfect justice in Christ (Revelation 21:4).

Friends, how often do you meditate on the promises of God and his character? For Nehemiah, this was obviously a regular practice. And, God used it to lead him and strengthen his faith—as well as the faith of many others. Take God at his word. Pray that our church might experience his promises. And, I believe, God will deliver. He will transform and use this community in redemptive ways.

Let's move to our second theme.

## **2. God's timing (1:1; 2:1).**

I'm going to keep this one short (which is ironic, as you'll see in a moment).

When we read this opening account, we can quickly skip over its timeframe without much thought about it. We don't know what month the month of Kislev is, and (if we're being honest) we probably don't care. Moreover, we hear of the month of Nisan and since we're not talking about an automobile sale, we likely shrug it off. Who cares? What does it matter?

Well, it matters because it teaches us something very practical about seeking after the things of God. It teaches us that his timing isn't always our timing.

When Nehemiah hears about the dismal state of Jerusalem and of its people, it's the month of Kislev—roughly late November-early December. When he hears, he begins to pray for God to give him favor with the king so that he might journey to Jerusalem and help. At the point that he gets his shot, it's the month of Nisan—roughly our March-April. So, let's put this together. Nehemiah prayed and watched and waited for around four months just to have an opportunity to make this request to the king. He's not traveling. He's not building walls. He's not organizing people. He's simply praying and waiting for the Lord to provide a chance to ask.

Friends, we often want results yesterday. We often demand change right now. And, if we're being honest, we aren't good at waiting. Yet, here's the truth about it. God doesn't care; he works as fast or as slow as he pleases. *And, his timing is perfect.*

- Do you want to see change in your spouse? Then dig-in for the long run.

- Do you want to see change in this church? Then roll-up your sleeves.
- Do you want to see change in our community? Then begin to patiently pray and wait and then work wherever you see God at work.

Waiting on the Lord is rarely easy. However, it is often for our sanctification. Moreover, when we wait faithfully on God to move—on God to direct our steps—we’re identifying and uniting with all who have followed the Lord God before us. Charles Spurgeon says it this way.

*If the Lord...makes us wait, let us do so with our whole hearts; for blessed are all that wait for Him. He is worth waiting for. The waiting itself is beneficial: it tries faith, exercises patience, trains submission, and endears the blessing when it comes. The Lord’s people have always been a waiting people.<sup>1</sup>*

Well, let’s move now briefly to our last theme.

### **3. God’s grace (1:9-10; 2:8).**

We’re not studying the book of Esther, but this passage in Nehemiah has much in common with it. As many scholars have noted, the Lord isn’t mentioned one time in Esther’s narrative. Yet, any sensitive reader will recognize that he’s ever present. God’s silent sovereignty guides the whole story.<sup>2</sup> The Lord is protecting his people from destruction through Esther’s work. And, in a similar way, the Lord is working in this passage of Nehemiah. He’s always in control.

- We read that King Artaxerxes notices Nehemiah’s sad demeanor (2:2).
- We read that he’s sensitive enough to ask Nehemiah what’s wrong (2:2) and wise enough to ask him what he wants from him (2:4).
- We read that the King is favorable about sending Nehemiah to Jerusalem and even gives him a guard and letters to ensure safe conduct (2:6-9).

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Treasury of David*, Psalm 130:5.

<sup>2</sup> F. B. Huey Jr., *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job*, 784-785.

As you read all of these things, you might be tempted to dwell on the character of this king. You might be tempted (like I am) to think—*Well, that King Artaxerxes isn't such a bad guy.* And, perhaps, he was. Maybe he was a rather awesome dude. But, that's not the point of Nehemiah's interaction with him. The point is about God. The point is about his sovereign and gracious work on behalf of his hurting people. And, Nehemiah makes this truth explicit. Listen to what he says.

*And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests (2:8).*

Friends, the Lord is in control, and he is always working graciously on behalf of his beloved people. This is a great and important truth to remember.

This November, some of you will not get the president for whom you voted. You may feel disappointed and disillusioned. If you do, take heart because the Lord is in control and is always working graciously on behalf of his people. No president, no king stands over God. The Lord is always on the throne.

We're all in the middle of a pandemic for which this world wasn't prepared. But, God wasn't the least bit surprised by these events. He stands above this disease. And, believe this, the Lord is in absolute control and is working graciously on behalf of his people. God is always on the throne, even when you don't see it.

Friends, whenever you feel the grind of this fallen world in which we all live, remember that behind the scenes God is working his gracious, redemptive purposes into creation for the benefit of his people. This is a great truth most profoundly seen at Calvary—where, through the evil of the crucifixion, our Lord won our salvation. Praise God for his sovereign grace. Amen.