

Nehemiah 1:1-11¹
Caring Heart for a Broken World

Introduction

ILLUSTRATION: A massive earthquake hit the Province of Sichuan in China on 12 May 2008. At that time, a high school teacher was teaching a literature class.

Ten days later, he wrote online what had happened when the earthquake struck. He yelled “Earthquake!” before running off, leaving his students abandoned and stunned. In fact, he confessed, “In this fleeting moment of life and death, I could only consider sacrificing myself for my daughter. I would not care about other people, even if it were my mother, under this type of circumstances.”

The education authorities were outraged by his apparent cowardice and selfishness. So they fired and stripped him of his teaching qualification even though none of his students died in the earthquake that left some 90,000 people dead or missing. A spokesman for the Education Ministry added, “We don’t have to be noble but we will not tolerate shamelessness.” The ministry is drafting a regulation that requires teachers to protect the safety of their students.

Meanwhile, the dismissed teacher has threatened to sue the authorities, arguing that chivalry was not part of his job description.

(The Straits Times, 28 June 08, p. 12)

We can debate on whether it is morally right or wrong for the teacher to abandon his students in such life-and-death circumstances. But one aspect of human nature is clearly demonstrated—between my safety and your survival, the human tendency is to choose to save myself; between my comfort and your misery, the human tendency is to choose to remain in my own comfort.

Our contemporary world has become increasingly individualistic. It is each man for himself. Individualism doesn’t help to nurture the spirit of one for all and all for one. One tries to outdo the other in order to stay in front. “I am okay, you are okay” is not quite the slogan. In fact, it is “I am okay only if you are not okay. For only then can I stay one-up on you.” And in such an environment of comparing and competing, many are living in their own broken world. Some may not have measured up. Or even if they do measure up at least on the outside, a high price has already been paid, and the cost is that of a broken world deep inside the soul.

¹ 1984 NIV

Today, we look at the first chapter of Nehemiah. We see Nehemiah as a very successful man serving in the palace of the King of Persia, the most powerful man in the then known world. We see also Nehemiah's countrymen back in Jerusalem. They were living in a broken world.

How do you carry a caring heart for people living in a broken world? I believe Nehemiah 1 offers us some precious lessons from the life of Nehemiah himself. Let's allow God to help us learn from Nehemiah today for I believe God wants to use this man's life not only to touch the people of that time, but also to teach us in our own time today.

I. Lesson #1: A caring heart begins with a true concern for others (vv. 1-4). [Read verses]

The name "Nehemiah" means "The Lord has comforted". He is introduced to us as a cupbearer to King Artaxerxes who ruled Persia from 464 to 423 B.C. A cupbearer was a position of great responsibility and privilege. He tested the king's food and wine to make sure they weren't poisoned. Because he had access to the king, the cupbearer was a man of great influence—he could talk with and advise the king. And he could actually use it for good or for evil.

You can say that Nehemiah was a foreign talent who had excelled in his adopted land. You may know that for nearly a century, the Jewish remnant had been back in Jerusalem from their exile in Babylon. But Nehemiah somehow chose to remain in the palace or he was so talented that he was not allowed to leave. It turned out that God had a work for him to do there that he could not have accomplished elsewhere. God placed Nehemiah in Susa, the capital city of the Persian Empire.

One ordinary day in the Hebrew month of Chislev (from mid-November to mid-December on our calendar) and the 20th year of Artaxerxes (444 B.C.), Nehemiah met his brother Hanani who had come from Jerusalem.

And he asked Hanani about "the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem."

And the answer was, "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."

After this morning service, you will probably be fellowshiping with one another and asking, "How are you this week?" But what do you expect to hear? Perhaps, we expect to hear nothing more than "I am fine. Thank you."

But imagine someone is asked, "How are you?" And this person replies, "I am feeling really down ..." and he goes on and on to tell you his story of woes.

How would people respond? Some may stop all things and give this person their whole-hearted attention. But I suspect many may respond something like

this (at least in their heart), “Mine! Why do you tell me all your sob stories? I am just asking to be cordial, not to listen to all your woes. Now that I know, I feel so obligated to do something. I regret asking and wish I have never asked.”

ILLUSTRATION: When my mother was still alive and living with me, I would sometimes see her sitting silently on the sofa. Obviously she was waiting for me and that means she wanted some attention. And I would ask, “How are you today?”

And that would open the flood gates for her to pour out all her woes she felt that day. I found myself stopping her many times and saying, “Ma, I already have a very heavy day and this is not what I want to hear. Can you tell me something good?”

And she would answer back, “But you ask me how I feel and this is exactly how I feel today. Are you serious about wanting to know or not?”

Today, when we ask, “How are you?” or “How are things?” do we really want to hear the truth as it is? Some ask because they just want to be cordial; some ask because they are curious and want some interesting news for social conversations; some ask because they want to hear something nice and good so that it can be some kind of stress relief for them; some ask and want to hear only positive things because they believe negative words are not faith building and belittle our God.

When Nehemiah asked about the Jewish remnant and the city of Jerusalem, what was the truth he heard? Just words of bad news—“trouble, disgrace, broken down, burned with fire.” The people and Jerusalem were in shambles. You may know that the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem’s walls, gates, and temple in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:1–21). Fifty years later, a group of 50,000 Jews had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city. But the Gentiles there had hindered their work. Hence, the temple was not completed for twenty years (Ezra 1–6), and the gates and walls were never repaired.

Perhaps Nehemiah had hoped that the work on the walls had begun again and that the city was now restored. But it was not to be. Without walls and gates, the people were open to ridicule and the city was open to attack. Imagine people walking in and out of your house because there is no barrier to say that they are trespassing into private premises. How would you feel? Obviously you feel not only vulnerable, but also a loss of respect and dignity. Indeed, without walls and gates, the people in Jerusalem were living in a broken world.

Nehemiah asked because he had a caring heart and was truly concerned about the people and Jerusalem. He didn’t ask because he just wanted to know some facts or hear some good news. He asked and heard the truth that

all was not well back in Jerusalem—they were living in a broken world. And his caring heart shared their pain.

How do I know? In verse 4, we read that Nehemiah “sat down and wept. For some days he mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.”

It takes a lot to cry for something or some people so far away from you, especially when you are enjoying comfort in where you are. But Nehemiah wept. Why would a highly successful court official with all the comfort, status and influence in the world cry for some people suffering in their broken world so far away?

But Nehemiah carried a caring heart for the broken world of the Jews in Jerusalem—he cared enough to cry for them. In fact, he even mourned and fasted for some days. Fasting was required of the Jews only once a year on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29). But Nehemiah spent some days fasting—such was his caring concern for the people and situation in Jerusalem. His heart was broken for the broken world of the Jews in Jerusalem.

We hear news all the time about people and from people about their broken world:

- Victims who suffer from sickness, earthquake or cyclone
- Missionaries who face persecution, loneliness or discouragement
- Christians losing out in the world because they try to live God-pleasing lives

What is our response to what we have heard? Do we treat it as something just for information, or something for social conversation? The Lord wants us to respond like what Nehemiah did—i.e. to care enough to be truly concerned with people in their broken world. That’s the beginning point.

A caring heart begins with true concern for people in their broken world. Humanly speaking, what follows immediately if you are truly concerned is to act in some concrete ways; to prove that your concern is not just feelings without actions. But God’s Word shows us something significantly different in Nehemiah’s response.

II. Lesson #2: A true concern for people’s broken world will first lead us to seek God’s perspective (vv. 5-9). [Read verses]

The prayer in Nehemiah 1 is the first of twelve instances of prayer recorded in this book (see 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 9:5ff; 13:14, 22, 29, 31.) The Book of Nehemiah opens and closes with prayer. This seems to tell us that Nehemiah was a man of faith who depended wholly on the Lord. He always sought to find God’s perspective to handle the challenges he faced.

I want to just focus on the greater part of Nehemiah’s prayer here—i.e. from vv. 6-9. This section is devoted to his confession of sin. The God who

promised blessing and chastening also promised forgiveness if His people would repent and turn back to Him. It is this promise that Nehemiah was claiming as he prayed for himself and the Jews.

But notice how closely Nehemiah identified himself with the Jewish people in his confession of sin in vv. 6-7:

“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 house, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.”

Nehemiah identified himself with the sins of a generation he didn't even know. It would have been easy to look back and blame his ancestors for the reproach of Jerusalem, but he didn't.

Notice the absence of self-righteousness. He did not say, “Lord, be gracious to those sinners in Jerusalem.” No, he put himself in the picture, saying, “I am also a part of the whole problem. There are things that I have done that have made this ruin possible. I confess before you the sins of myself and my father's house.” There is no attempt to excuse or to blame others for this.

It has always been true that any degree of self-justification will cancel out restoration. In fact, if you try to excuse yourself for what is wrong in your life, you block your own restoration and recovery. The spirit of this age teaches us never to admit liability; that only the weak admit their mistakes, but the strong don't because they make no mistakes. But God's first step for us in the process of restoration and recovery is to check our self-justification.

ILLUSTRATION: One time, some leaders of a church asked me to speak a word for them to their pastor. Apparently, they tried but found that he simply refused to listen. The relationship between him and the leaders was turning from bad to worse. Since I knew him quite well, the leaders asked me to help.

I visited that church one Sunday. As I was sitting in the pews hearing the pastor preach, I felt more and more uneasy as he went on. Why? He was using the pronoun “you” so frequently and strongly whenever he was addressing something lacking in the congregation.

After the service, I went to him. We exchanged some pleasantries and I ventured to point out to him that I was uneasy with him using the word “you” so often in his sermon. I said, “Perhaps, using ‘we’ from time to time may help them better consider the hard truths you were saying to them. It may make them feel that you do identify with their struggles with imperfection. And you are not trying to draw a dividing line between the people and you.”

His reply was, “I cannot use ‘we’ because it will be dishonest for me to do that. I do much evangelism but they don’t. I do this and that but they don’t.” He had chosen to stand as the lone righteous hero for the Lord.

Some time later, he left the church, but with much unhappiness.

Today, he has changed his ministry from pastoring to counselling. Why? He went through a period of emotional and spiritual brokenness. By God’s grace, he recovered from the setback with the help of godly care and counselling. This impacted him with one lesson—if you truly care for the broken world of people, you need to identify with their brokenness. He now deals with people in their broken world not as one with a condemning heart, but as one with a caring heart. And the Lord is using him to bless many lives.

When we learn to humbly care for others not as their spiritual superiors, but as those equally in need of God’s grace, we help them and ourselves to press on the upward way.

ILLUSTRATION: The two giants of the Early Reformation, Ulrich Zwingli and Martin Luther were once at odds with each other. Zwingli did not know how to resolve the situation. One morning, he went up the Swiss mountain and there he found his answer.

He saw two goats going up a narrow path from opposite directions, one ascending and the other descending. At one point the narrow trail prevented them from passing each other. When they saw each other, they backed up and lowered their heads, as though ready to lunge. But then a wonderful thing happened. The ascending goat lay down on the path. The other stepped over his back and continued his descent. The ascending one then arose and continued his climb to the top. Zwingli observed that the ascending goat could make it higher because he was willing to bend lower.

(Max Lucado, *Cure for the Common Life*, pp. 133-34)

And caring for people in a broken world often calls us to lower our posture of superiority if we are to come across as real and sincere. We empty our pride and admit we are sinners like them in our need for God’s grace and forgiveness. We are as imperfect in our own ways as they are. That’s seeing our true self from God’s perspective.

Another consequence of seeking and finding God’s perspective in a broken world is that it anchors our hope in God (the first is that we identify with the brokenness of others without self-justification). For the Jews in Jerusalem, they had perhaps lost much faith and hope in the Lord in the face of the ruins.

If we look at Nehemiah’s prayer in vv 8-9, he prayed the very words of God’s promise to His people who would turn back to Him:

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“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 and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’”

Had Nehemiah lost faith in God? Well, according to this prayer Nehemiah believed God is still God.

- Have you lost faith because of the negative things that surround your life?
- Have you lost faith because it appears you are not winning at the present?
- Have you lost faith because God seems distant at this time?

Nehemiah's example says to us today—“God is still God. Seek Him and find His perspective. Don't lose faith.”

God doesn't break His promise to those who obey Him. He is the God who keeps His covenant of love with those who obey His commands.

Why are our lives in chaos? Perhaps we are not obeying God's Word, God's way and God's will for our lives. But remember, our obedience will find God to be the same yesterday, today, and forever. To find God's perspective is often a call to turn back to God in obedience.

A true concern for people's broken world will first move us to seek God's perspective. Once we find it, we see ourselves not as spiritually superior to others, but as those who need the grace of God as well. A truly caring heart can never be a condemning heart. Also, God's perspective anchors our hope and faith in Him in spite of our negative circumstances because we see Him as ever true to those who remain faithful to Him. How does seeing people and ourselves from God's perspective further impact us?

III. Lesson #3: God's perspective changes our caring heart into caring hands (vv. 10-11). [Read verses]

Nehemiah prayed in v. 11, “Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man (i.e. King Artaxerxes).”

This is not a hopeful prayer. It is a prayer of confidence that God would work in the heart of Artaxerxes.

Indeed, Nehemiah need not have to quit his job and move to Jerusalem. Instead, he was officially appointed by the king and authorized to do the rebuilding of the Jerusalem walls. He was even given the king's provision and protection so he could travel to Jerusalem and complete the work of rebuilding. Humanly speaking, it doesn't make sense. Why would a conqueror allow a

conquered people to rebuild their city wall and gates? A fortified city is stronger city than those whose walls and gates are in ruins. A fortified Jerusalem would be a threat to the Persian king than a Jerusalem with fallen walls and gates. But when God is working, nothing is impossible; He even makes good sense out of what is humanly nonsensical.

With the royal backing of the Persian king, the hand and favour of God was evident. It was evident because this was in the will of God. Nehemiah prayed and knew it to be so. However, for God's will to be done on earth, He needs people to be available for Him to use. And Nehemiah became the answer to his own prayer—God called him to Jerusalem, and his prayer in v.11 tells us that he was willing and ready to go.

Nehemiah didn't pray for God to send somebody else, nor did he argue that he was ill-equipped for such a difficult task. He simply was willing and ready to go.

The king's cupbearer would have to sacrifice the comfort and security of the palace for the rigours and dangers of life in a ruined city. Luxury would turn to ruins, and prestige to ridicule and slander. His caring heart would be changed into caring hands—he would go to Jerusalem, roll up his sleeves and take up the toils of encouraging a beaten people and finishing an almost impossible task. And with the help of God, he did it! In 52 days, the walls were rebuilt, the gates were restored, and the people were rejoicing!

God is still looking for people who care like Nehemiah—care enough to ask, to weep over the needs, to pray for God's perspective and help, and then to be willing and ready to go get the job done. For Nehemiah, it all really began with himself.

God may be calling you to begin a process of restoration and recovery in someone's broken world. Pray that God will give you the grace, the strength and the determination to take the first steps. There will be a time when all listening, crying, praying must stop because God has already called you to action. Would you be a willing and ready instrument for Him today?

ILLUSTRATION: Two brothers worked together on the family farm. One was married and had a large family. The other was single. At the day's end, the brothers shared everything equally, produce and profit.

Then one day the single brother said to himself, "It's not right that we should share equally the produce and the profit. I'm alone and my needs are simple." So each night he took a sack of grain from his bin and crept across the field between their houses, dumping it into his brother's bin. Meanwhile, the married brother said to himself, "It's not right that we should share the produce and the profit equally. After all, I'm married and I have my wife and my children to look after me in years to come. My brother has no one, and no one to take care of his

future.” So each night, he took a sack of grain and dumped it into his single brother’s bin.

Both men were puzzled for years because their supply of grain never dwindled. Then one dark night the two brothers bumped into each other. Slowly, it dawned on them what was happening. They dropped their sacks and embraced one another.

(http://www.sermonillustrator.org/illustrator/sermon2d/two_brothers.htm)

Am I my brother’s carer? Caring for others is not a spontaneous lifestyle in our age today where the “Me First” attitude dominates. When I care, it may be because “there is something in it that’s to my benefit”. We need more “Others First” caring today—i.e. when people care enough to turn their caring heart into caring hands, and do something for others’ gain.

Just like Nehemiah who so emptied himself of his palatial comfort and identified with the Jews in Jerusalem so that they might have their broken world rebuilt and their broken relationship with God restored.

Conclusion

Some people you know are living in a broken world. God may be calling you to carry a caring heart toward them.

- In His love, He looked at our world in sin and showed true concern, not contempt, for us. He sent us Jesus Christ. Pray that He would also grant you a caring heart that shows true concern for those in their broken world. Charity begins at home, and so, let this begin in our own family, even our church family.
- In His self-emptying, the Lord Jesus came down from heaven to earth in the likeness of human flesh to identify with sinners like us though He is sinless. Pray that He would also grant you the humility to identify with those in their broken world so that you can bring to them the love and hope of God in Jesus Christ.
- In His death, the Lord Jesus showed Himself not just willing and ready to pray and weep for broken sinners, but also to die on the Cross for them with nail-pierced hands. Pray that He would also grant you that willingness and readiness to do some other-centred deeds for broken people with caring hands.

If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, the Lord Himself is your example. Go and do likewise for blessed are those who know all this and do it in His Name.

If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, let it be known that He loves and cares for you enough to die for you so that He might save you from the brokenness of your sin. He laid down His life to save you from divine judgement. Would you open your heart to Him today?