**“Holy Discontent” (Nehemiah 1:1-11)**

1. **INTRO**
   1. Think with me for a moment…What if you lived in your house (or apartment) with your family and it had no front door. And to make matters worse, there was no law enforcement to speak of – and bands of marauders would regularly descend upon your neighborhood.
      1. How would that change the way you live? How would it change the way you slept? How would it change the way you work – or planned you day?
      2. That’s a bit of what it was like for the people who lived in the city of Jerusalem for decades before Nehemiah came on the scene.
   2. We are starting a new series today. For the next three months or so we will be making our way through Nehemiah.
   3. This won’t be an expository study where we will work through it verse by verse. Nehemiah is a narrative so we will take it section by section and extrapolate the principles that the author intended and then we will contextualize those principles to our contemporary culture – and more specifically to KHC.
   4. I have a new favorite saying related to preaching: We want to be, “Faithful to the text and prophetic to the context.” What is the author seeking to communicate? and What is God wanting to say to KHC through the life and ministry of Nehemiah?
   5. I’m not sure how long this will take (but I hope to have some clarity in the next couple of weeks). I do think we rushed a bit through Ephesians and I don’t want to do that again.
   6. Today I would like to do today is three things:
      1. Read chapter 1:1-4 by way of introduction to the book.
      2. Set the historical context for the book.
      3. Take a close look at v. 3.
2. **BODY**
   1. *“The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, 2 that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. 3 And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire. 4 As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”* --Nehemiah 1:1-4
   2. Historical Context[[1]](#footnote-1) – Actual History
      1. God anointed another king named David, a man after His own heart. David was a great shepherd leader in Israel.
      2. God made some amazing promises to David, one of which was that from David’s lineage would come the Messiah who would sit on the throne forever.
      3. David’s son Solomon who inherited the throne after David was the wisest man who ever lived but he was not such a great king (he didn’t finish well).
      4. When Solomon died the kingdom was turned over to one of his sons and then the nation ended up being divided. Ten tribes went with one of Solomon’s sons and became the Northern tribes of Israel and two tribes went south and they became the southern tribes of Judah.
      5. About 714 BC Assyria came in and wiped out the northern tribes of Israel – and scattered them bringing some of their own people into Israel and exiled many of the people out of Israel into various parts of the Assyrian empire.
      6. At this time most of the OT writings begin to focus on God’s relationship with the two southern tribes of Judah.
      7. Judah should have learned a lesson from Israel but Judah began this up and down relationship with God. They would have an evil king who would lead the people astray or the people themselves would give into idolatry and rebellion and then God would raise up a great king like Josiah (who lead a reformation and a renewal of the Covenant in 2 Kings 23) and the next king would not stoke the fires of renewal (remember Acts 3:19 – *“Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord...”*)
      8. God kept warning Judah, if you don’t engage a lifestyle of repentance and renewal, if you continue to be unfaithful to Me, if you don’t put away your false Gods – if you don’t seek to be a faithful covenant community then I will bring My judgment upon you. Your fate will be similar to your sister Israel’s.
      9. Jeremiah addressed this issue with the people by continuing to warn Judah. A chastening is coming… And they just wouldn’t listen to God.
      10. In 586 BC God sends the Babylonian Empire into Judah and they conquer Judah and destroy Jerusalem – both the walls and the temple that Solomon built.
      11. The Babylonian king gouged out the eyes of the king of Judah and led him in chains into Babylon.
      12. Most of the educated or highly skilled people were exiled out of Judah and into Babylon. And only the poorest of the poor were left behind – and a governor was appointed over the people.
      13. When this happens Jeremiah gives a prophetic promise that this exile will last 70 years – and then God will restore you (Jeremiah 29:10).
      14. Then in 539 BC God humbles the Babylonian Empire and raises up the Persian Empire led by Cyrus to overthrow the Babylonians – including all the land of Israel and Judah.
      15. During this time King Cyrus issues an edict (538 BC) allowing Jewish exiles to return to their homeland – and they can even rebuild their temple.
      16. The book of Ezra (right before the book of Nehemiah) tells about this wave of exiles who begin to return to Jerusalem and begin to rebuild the temple. They come back to complete rubble.
      17. The returning exiles begin to rebuild their city and the temple. But because of some opposition and threats they stopped working on the Temple and instead they focused on rebuilding their our homes.
      18. This is when two prophets are raised up to address the people: Haggai and Zechariah. Their message was, *“Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house lies desolate?”* --Haggai 1:4 (NASB)
      19. Are you going to invest your time, energy, and resources in your own comfort, or will you build My house?
      20. Through the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah the people respond with humility and work to complete the rebuilding of God’s House.
      21. \*\*In 516 BC the temple is completed and rededicated. From 586 when the temple was destroyed and the people were exiled till 516 when the Temple was rebuilt and dedicated was 70 years – exactly what Jeremiah had prophesied.
      22. But the city – and particularly the walls were still broken down.
      23. In 458 BC a little over 50 years after the Temple was rebuilt and dedicated Ezra shows up and he initiates a spiritual reform and renewal. He begins to gather the people together and teach them the Torah. He calls the people to realign themselves with God. They had returned to the land but they had not fully returned to the heart of God.
      24. Ezra calls them to repentance. It’s not so much about the people getting their real estate back, as it is about God getting His people back.
      25. It is about the people wholeheartedly returning to the Lord. Recapturing the qualitative distinctiveness of the called out people of God. Set apart from the rest of the nations for the work of God in the world. And walking in the humble fear and reverence of God.
      26. Ezra initiated this great renewal/reformation and the people responded.
      27. It is during Ezra’s ministry that Nehemiah becomes stirred up about the people of Jerusalem and the walls of the city.
      28. So, this brings us to 445 BC and the book of Nehemiah. So, 13-years after Ezra shows up in Jerusalem Nehemiah is still living in Susa. It is the month of Kislev (Nov-Dec).
      29. Susa, the Winter capital – and Nehemiah lives in the palace of the king of Persia is Artaxerxes and he is the cupbearer to the king.
      30. The cupbearer would taste the king’s wine before the king had his meal. The cupbearer was a thoroughly trustworthy individual and his confidential relations with the king often gave him a position of great influence and often times that influence led to input or oversight of responsibilities at the palace or in the kingdom. A sort of Executive Assistant to the King kind of position.
      31. Every meal the cupbearer’s life was on the line. It was a high-risk high-reward job. Nehemiah lived in the opulence, comfort, and convenience of the palace.
      32. Nehemiah had grown up in Persia (as far as we know) as part of the exiled community of Jews -- and he could not have become the cupbearer without demonstrating considerable integrity worthy of the king’s trust.
      33. Now some relatives have come back from Judah with the bad news.
      34. The people are in *“great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire*.” --Nehemiah 1:3 (NASB)
      35. The Temple had been rebuilt but the city itself still lies desolate.
      36. \*\*We see in the text that Nehemiah is devastated by this news. He is so overcome by this news that he spends the next four months diligently repenting, interceding, praying, and fasting over this situation.[[2]](#footnote-2)
      37. So, The whole book of Nehemiah is about Nehemiah’s response to this news of Jerusalem’s wall’s being broken down.
      38. \*\*He will prayerfully, compassionately, courageously respond to a desperate situation. He is going to take leave of this life of opulence in the palace as the cupbearer to identify and come alongside the poor exiles who inhabit the land of Judah (which means praise).
      39. Nehemiah left the palace to become a restorer, a reformer – an instrument of renewal. With God’s help he will accomplish something that would be unheard of. He will rally an entire city – people he doesn’t even know – to reconstruct the walls around Jerusalem in 52 days – and he does it with humility, genius, and godly leadership as we’ll see in the weeks ahead.
      40. That’s the historical situation – now we need to ask the question, “Why was Nehemiah so upset when he heard the news from his relatives??
   3. Let’s take a closer look at v. 3: “And they said to me, ‘The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in **great trouble and shame**. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.’” --Nehemiah 1:3 (emphasis added)
      1. Two things:
         1. Historically the manifest presence of God had dwelled with the people of God.
            1. First we have the pillar of smoke by day and fire by night (Ex 14:20)
            2. Then we find God’s presence active in the Tabernacle.
            3. Finally, a Temple for God was built in Jerusalem and God’s presence dwelt there (1 Kings 8; 2 Chron 7). The glory of God was being obstructed or hindered – God’s presence was historically known to dwell in the city of Jerusalem.
            4. Under the terms of the Old Covenant, the temple was the great meeting-place between a holy God and His sinful people. This was the place of sacrifice, the place of atonement for sin.
            5. The sacrifice of Jesus pays for our sin, Jesus Himself becomes the great meeting-place between a holy God and His sinful people; thus Jesus becomes the Temple, the meeting-place between God and His people.
            6. Jesus says, *“Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”* --John 2:19 It is in Jesus’ death, in His crucifixion, and in His resurrection three days later, that Jesus meets our needs and reconciles us to God, becoming the Temple, the supreme meeting-place between God and sinners.
            7. Then the Church becomes the Temple (see 1 Cor 3:16; Eph 2:21-22; Heb 3:6)
            8. “I will bring them to the place I have chosen” (see Neh 1:9), which is Jerusalem.
            9. The reason Nehemiah is so upset is that the name of God is being defamed.
            10. For the city where a deity dwelt to be in such sustained shambles was disgraceful and a dishonor to that deity. “Your God must be a very weak God – He can’t even defend His own city.”
         2. Nehemiah is so upset because Jerusalem is in ruins – defaming the name of God and God’s people are in danger.
            1. The people of Jerusalem have lived for decades in a broken down city without the beauty, grandeur, magnificence – and glory of God.
            2. Again, picture what it would be like to live in your house (or apartment)…without a front door, and without law enforcement to speak of. How do you think you would sleep at night? That’s what it was like to live in Jerusalem – a city with out walls
            3. The people, the tribes, the nations that lived around Jerusalem were drawing very negative conclusions about the God of Israel.
            4. Nehemiah is most concerned about the reputation, the glory, and the praise of his God.
            5. As long as the walls were down the Temple itself was vulnerable and was a very risky place to be.
            6. God is not being seen and savored among His own people – or among the nations.
            7. The glory of God and the mission of God are at stake here.
            8. God is not being worshiped here by His own people and God is not being represented well among the nations.
      2. Nehemiah is absolutely devastated over this.
         1. This is where all renewal begins: Deep personal anguish over the belittling of God – and a passion for God’s fame and renown.
         2. There are two common characteristics of anyone who has ever been greatly used by God:
            1. They loved God
            2. They loved people
         3. People who are used greatly by God LOVE God’s glory, His reputation, His praise – and are ZEALOUS for God’s honor. And they love ALL people.
         4. We see this articulated in the Great Commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. ’ 38 This is the great and foremost commandment. 39 The second is like it, ‘ You shall love your neighbor as yourself. ’ 40 On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets.” --Matthew 22:37-40 (NASB)
         5. Before we grab ahold of the Great Commission we need to be gripped, like Nehemiah was, with the Great Commandment. This is an essential lesson as we begin our study.
   4. **Why Nehemiah? Why now at KHC?** (10 Themes)
      1. Nehemiah was a man with Mary’s heart and Martha’s hands.
      2. Nehemiah was deeply concerned about the spiritual health and welfare of the people.
      3. Spiritual repair was his main focus and rebuilding the walls of the city was how he accomplished that spiritual repair.
      4. This repair, both physical and spiritual, would guarantee the security and provide a focal point for the lost and broken people scattered throughout the South Bay.
      5. Passionate and proactive prayer with repentance is major theme. Eleven different prayers are mentioned in the book of Nehemiah.
      6. A holy and passionate reverence for Scripture with careful attention to the reading of God’s Word in order to perform God’s will is an important theme.
      7. Opposition is a constant theme from beginning to end.
      8. The *“strong hand of God”* is a theme that carries through the book of Nehemiah (1:10; 2:8, 18).
      9. Spiritual renewal came in response to Ezra’s reading of “the Book of the Law of Moses” (Neh 8)
      10. Good, godly, and functional leadership is a central theme. If the most basic definition of leadership is *influence* then we all aspire to leadership because we ALL want to influence our social spheres.
3. **CONCLUSION**
   1. Nehemiah is a beautiful picture of what God has called the Church to do.
   2. Nehemiah is going to leave the comfort and the opulence of the palace to come and identify with, and serve, and lead a bunch of broken and desperate people. Nehemiah leaves the palace to step into all the brokenness.
   3. Wait a minute…isn’t that what Jesus did? Nehemiah is a preview of Jesus who left the comfort and perfection of heaven to step into all this brokenness, desperation, and shame of humanity. Why? To live the life we should have lived and to die the death we should have died.
      1. He loved us and gave Himself up for us. Nehemiah had the same priorities that brought Jesus to earth – the honor and glory of God and a great love for people.
      2. Jesus, as the better Nehemiah, came in obedience to the Father and out of love for the Father – and laid His life down as a sacrifice for sinners – to rescue us and spare us.
      3. That our lives, like the walls of Jerusalem, might be rebuilt.
      4. Nehemiah is not just a preview of Jesus but a picture of what the Church can be in a broken world. We are being renewed and restored by God AND we are being equipped (Eph 4:12) to be the words, the hands and the feet of Jesus to a lost and broken world.
      5. So, are we willing to step out of our comfort and convenience in order to make a difference in the South Bay and beyond?
      6. What does God have in store for the next season of ministry fruitfulness here at KHC? We want to get together and seek God until He shows us.
      7. Promo Summit #2…

**P.A.S.S. Questions For Further Reflection and For KHC Life Groups**

**P** - Participation (get everyone involved in the dialog)

1. How would your life be different if you lived with no front door, an absence of law enforcement, and marauders sweeping through your neighborhood?

**A** - Application (makes it personal)

1. Place yourself in Jerusalem somewhere between 500 BC and 445 BC. What would your life be like? Would it have been difficult for you to trust God?
2. What does Nehemiah’s grief over the state of Jerusalem reveal about his character?
3. What does Nehemiah’s grief over the state of Jerusalem reveal about his affection for the Lord and his affection for his people?

**S** - Scripture (thinking biblically is a learned behavior! :-)

1. Why is it important to realize that God’s purpose is primarily His glory, not our happiness? Why are these two things not ultimately in conflict?
2. Is it really a sacrifice to lose the world in order to gain Christ (see Phil 3:8)? If not, why do we cling so tightly to the things of this world?

**S** – Sharing (aim for a time of honest reflection, authenticity, and transparency in a safe atmosphere modeled by you). [Choose one of the following as a final dialogue question.]

1. With all of the overwhelming needs in the world, how can a person know where God wants him/her to focus?
2. How can we fight and shrug off the subtle but aggressive secularism and worldliness that keeps seeping into the Church?

1. Historical overview and outline adapted from material from JR Vasser. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. James M Hamilton. *Christ Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus In Ezra and Nehemiah*, B&H Publishing 2014:99. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)