

## **THEOLOGY IS AN ANCHOR IN THE STORM** **A Sermon on Nehemiah 1**

**by Ra McLaughlin**

I run a theological question and answer forum on the internet. It's sort of like a cyberspace version of the *Bible Answer Man* radio program, but not nearly as popular. Recently in that forum, I've had some lengthy email discussions with a Christian who believes that he's lost his salvation.

I really feel badly for him. Although he believes that all his sins were forgiven when he came to Christ, he also believes that maintaining his salvation depends – or perhaps I should say “depended” since he thinks he is now unsaved – on his human ability to remain loyal to Christ. After his conversion he lived like a hellion for a while, so he's now convinced that he has irrevocably forfeited his salvation.

In my correspondence with him, I've told him that his problem is not his *sin* but his *theology*. He has a very serious misunderstanding of the biblical picture of salvation. The fact of the matter is that a Christian cannot fall away from the faith. And a Christian cannot sin so badly that God revokes his or her salvation. When you become a believer, Christ not only takes the blame for every sin you have ever committed, but he continues to take the blame for all the sins you continue to commit – all of them.

My internet friend is suffering terribly because of two things: 1) there is horrible crisis in his life; and 2) his poor theology has not offered him hope, but only despair. Rather than his theology providing him an anchor in the storm, it has become the storm itself.

Today's text is Nehemiah chapter 1. It's here that Nehemiah begins to tell us his story. And believe it or not, it's a lot like the story of my internet friend – but with one significant difference: Nehemiah has good theology.

In Nehemiah's day, the people of Israel were in a serious crisis. They had already been in a special covenant relationship with God for 1,500 years, and they had blown it at nearly every step of the way. Israel had lived in the Promised Land for hundreds of years. But for most of those years they had sinned grossly against God. They had routinely rejected his law, killed his prophets, worshiped other gods, fornicating with every willing partner, and murdered their own children in sacrifice to idols like Molech.

As a result, God had finally cursed them with the ultimate covenant judgment: exile from the Promised Land. But God still loved them (just like he still loves you). And so, in his great love and mercy, he eventually began to let his people return to the Land.

Friends, this was the gospel in action! God had forgiven their trespasses, and he had begun to restore his kingdom. When the Old Testament prophets spoke of the restoration of the kingdom of God, and when they foresaw the new covenant and perfect holy life, and when they spoke of the kingdom that the Messiah would bring, *this was supposed to be it*.

This is where Nehemiah's story picks up. Nehemiah is a trusted servant in the court of the Persian king Artaxerxes, and Persia is the kingdom that rules the world. Persia has allowed, and indeed assisted, the rebuilding and restoration of Jerusalem, its city walls, and most importantly the temple of Yahweh.

Nehemiah himself is a faithful Jew, one of the exiles who is ecstatic over the coming of the kingdom of God. He's biding his time in Persia humming *This World is not my Home* and dreaming of the mansion he's going to have in the new Jerusalem. But then he gets the news that something has gone terribly wrong.

The year is 445 B.C. The place is a palace in Persia. And as we read in Nehemiah 1:1, these are the memoirs of Nehemiah:

"In late autumn of the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was at the fortress of Susa. Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had survived the captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem. They said to me, 'Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been burned.' When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven" (Neh. 1:1-4).

Can you imagine how you would feel if Jesus came back but things didn't get any better? What would you do? What would you think? Do you remember what the disciples did when Jesus was arrested? They ran away. Do you remember what they did when he was buried? They gave up, and they stopped believing.

Nehemiah found himself in a very similar situation. The promised restoration of God's kingdom had arrived – but it had been cut short, and Nehemiah was distraught. He wept for days. He couldn't eat. He cried out to God, "Why?"

If you haven't been in Nehemiah's shoes, you will be. And if you have been there, you'll be there again. There will be crises in your life that challenge everything you believe: Just a couple years ago, my friend at seminary lost his very young daughter. She was alive, and then she was dead. I think she was about four years old. Not long after that, the precious infant treasure of another young couple here drowned in the babysitter's swimming pool. I have another friend who was put through the ringer recently when his child was born with an indistinct gender. I'm not a prophet, but the statistics say that one day our spouses will leave some of us – some already have. You

will probably be fired at least once, and you may be plunged into financial ruin then or at another time. You will be sick, perhaps unto death, or perhaps just so badly that you'll wish you were dead.

There will be crises that render you helpless and bewildered, that challenge not only your sanity and desire to live, but your very faith in God. This fallen world ensures that. The question is, What will you do when they come?

We've already seen the first thing Nehemiah did: he wept and fasted and prayed – and Nehemiah was a godly man. Let me tell you, men: godly men weep. Don't buy the lie that being a man means keeping a stiff upper lip. Even Jesus cried when Lazarus died. If our hearts are in tune with God's, we will be torn apart and distraught by the horrors of this world.

But Nehemiah also did something else: he thought. He thought about God's character. He thought about God's covenant. And he thought about his own sin. Do you know what word summarizes all of that thinking? Theology. When Nehemiah had no other resources at his disposal, he could still rest on the Word of God.

Now, I don't at all want to suggest that the proper response to crises in your life is to intellectualize yourself to a stable state of mind. That certainly is not what Nehemiah did. But the focus of this chapter is a legitimate one: When we encounter crises in our lives, God's Word helps us figure out how to think and feel about those crises, and what to do about them.

Based on what Nehemiah knew about God, he thought of a plan. As we learn at the end of Nehemiah 1:11, Nehemiah was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia, the ruler of the world. And as he tells us in chapter 2, Nehemiah planned to use his influence with the king to rescue the restoration effort. So, Nehemiah prayed that God would grant him success when he petitioned the king. And in his prayer, he taught us that the Bible's theology can strengthen us when we are at our lowest.

What is the first thing Nehemiah mentioned? God's character: "Then I said, "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unending love with those who love him and obey his commands" (Neh. 1:5).

Nehemiah recognized that God is both frightening and trustworthy. Nehemiah's word for "awesome" does not mean that God is a "totally righteous dude." He's not a skateboarder with incredible moves. Or, for those of us who are a little older, he's not the Fonz. By "awesome," Nehemiah meant that God is terrifying. He strikes fear in your heart. He's the Terminator.

Remember, this is the same God who a few generations earlier had destroyed his own people by exiling them from the Promised Land. As we will find out, he is also the one that frustrated the restoration of the kingdom. God had abundantly

demonstrated his willingness to discipline his people with a heavy hand, and he was rightly to be feared.

But remember how the Terminator was the bad guy in the first movie, and the good guy in the second movie? Well, God is also the good guy. He is faithful to his covenant and to his covenant people.

When I was young, like many kids I read C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia. In that series, two young girls, Susan and Lucy, have an audience with Aslan the king, and Mr. And Mrs. Beaver are preparing them for their encounter by explaining that Aslan is actually a lion:

"Ooh," says Susan, "I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion."

"That you will, dearie," replies Mrs. Beaver. "And make no mistake, if there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or else just silly."

"Then he isn't safe?" asks Lucy.

"Safe?" says Mr. Beaver. "Don't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the king, I tell you!"

As silly as it may sound, that's not a bad picture of God as Nehemiah knew him – and it was this knowledge of God as sovereign, dangerous ruler that began Nehemiah's prayer. And just as Aslan gave an audience to Susan and Lucy, Nehemiah trusted that he could gain an audience with the Lord. So, he prayed confidently, "Listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel" (Neh. 1:6). Our God is not safe; he is terrifying. But he is also good, and he is willing to listen to us. I know this is not a new idea for you, but just stop and think about it for a minute.

Would you feel honored if you called the White House and, upon hearing that you were on the phone, the president wanted to take the call personally? Or who is your favorite celebrity? A sports figure? An actor or actress? A musician? A minister? A radio host? Whoever it is, how would feel if you called up your favorite celebrity and that person took such a liking to you that the next time he or she called you? That would be pretty cool, wouldn't it?

When I was in high school, I was selected by my law teacher to participate in a special lunch with United States Supreme Court Justice William Brennan. From the entire Los Angeles Unified School District, there were about 50 kids at that lunch. Everyone but me was either so awestruck or so happy with Brennan's politics that they just smiled and agreed with everything he had ever done or said. But I was fairly

opinionated, and I didn't like Justice Brennan's politics. So, I sat right across the table from him and argued with him the whole time.

At the end of the lunch, most of the students pressed around Justice Brennan while a publicist snapped photos of the judge rubbing elbows with America's youth. I, on the other hand, was slipping out the back door to find my car.

Do you know what happened? Brennan called after me. He brought me right to the center of the mob, smiled at me warmly, and put his arm around me. He told me that even though we didn't agree, he respected my tenacity and directness, and he kept me standing there next to him while everyone else passed by to shake his hand. Let me tell you – I was honored by that, and I still remember it with incredible fondness.

But brothers and sisters, you and I speak with someone far more important than a United States Supreme Court justice every time we pray. God himself actually listens to us! And so, like Nehemiah we can confidently approach his throne, knowing that our covenant Lord cares.

When Nehemiah's crisis hit, one of the first places he sought for comfort and stability was the character of God, and I think this is also a good place for us to start when we are in a crisis.

The second thing Nehemiah did was to realize his own part in the crisis. He didn't blame God even though he knew that God had brought the crisis. Rather, he realized that God had created the crisis in keeping with the terms of his covenant with Israel:

"I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, laws, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses" (Neh. 1:6-7).

Certainly, there are many crises that are not sent by God as temporal punishment for our sins. But we need to recognize that because God loves us, because we are his children, God does discipline us.

Moreover, some of the discipline we endure really is the result of our sin. As Hebrews 12 makes clear, one big reason that Christians suffer is that God is disciplining us. He doesn't do it in wrath – all his wrath toward us fell on Jesus at the Cross. God will never be angry with us again.

Still, we have a part to play in our relationship with God, even as it relates to our continuing forgiveness. As 1 John 1:9 teaches, "if we confess our sins to him, he is faithful and just to forgive us and to cleanse us from every wrong." It's not that we are

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only forgiven for the sins we confess, but rather that a life of forgiveness on God's part must be accompanied by a life characterized by confession and repentance on our part.

Finally, Nehemiah based his prayer on his understanding of God's covenant:

"Please remember what you told your servant Moses: 'If you sin, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands, even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.' We are your servants, the people you rescued by your great power and might" (Neh. 1:8-10).

Nehemiah knew why the restoration efforts had faltered. Even in the midst of God's incredible mercy and blessing, in the midst of his supernatural work to restore the kingdom, the people had rebelled. They had rejected his law – the terms of the covenant. In the midst of their salvation from exile, they had returned to the very things that had gotten them exiled in the first place. Have you been there? Have you done that? Have you thanked God for his blessing by sinning against him?

The kingdom of God in which we now live is part of the restoration that God had offered to bring about in Nehemiah's days. When Jesus came as the Son of David, heir to David's throne, he began to restore the kingdom of God. We don't see the kingdom in its fullness yet – that won't happen until Jesus returns. But we *are* in the kingdom, so how do we know it won't fail now just like it failed then?

We need to look at three parts of this question. First of all, Nehemiah knew that God had promised to return the exiles to the Promised Land and to bless them incredibly. These covenant blessings were just as much a part of the covenant as the curses they had already been experiencing.

We should also be confident that God will ultimately fulfill his promised covenant blessings to us. If we trust Christ as our Lord and Savior, then we have received Christ's status and God looks at us as if we were Christ himself. Because of this, God considers us to be perfect covenant keepers, and we can expect nothing but blessings as our inheritance. This theology should give us hope. Whether our crisis be as small as losing a job or as big as losing a child, knowing God's intentions toward us and our security in Christ ought to keep us sane.

Second, God's people today, namely the church, are a mixture of believers and unbelievers. Believers are counted in Christ, but unbelievers are not. As a result, unbelievers in the church can expect only the covenant curses as their inheritance – the ultimate manifestation of this being eternal punishment in hell. If you are unsaved, you should realize that the crises you experience now are nothing compared to the curses that await you. Remember, God is scary, he's not safe. If you are in that boat,

follow Nehemiah's example: confess and repent of your sin, and then cling to God in Christ as your Savior.

Third, the church as the visible community of God participates in the world in ways similar to the ways Israel did. God is going to save all who are in Christ – but that doesn't mean that he won't delay the full completion of the kingdom of God if the church is disobedient. In our day, I think we already see this happening. Just as God delayed the full restoration in Nehemiah's day because of Israel's sin, he seems to be delaying Christ's return in our own day, perhaps because the church at large is in rebellion against him.

How should we respond to this crisis? Well, like Nehemiah, we ought to begin with theology, and let that drive us to intercessory prayer. After all, Nehemiah's entire prayer led up to the last verse. It stated the thoughts and motivations behind the one petition Nehemiah actually brought before God in this prayer:

“O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. Please grant me success now as I go to ask the king for a great favor. Put it into his heart to be kind to me” (Neh. 1:11).

Nehemiah prayed that God would do something very practical that would put the restoration of the kingdom back on track. This was the same motivation behind Paul's prayer in 1 Corinthians 16:22: “Our Lord, come!” And it should be our prayer too.