Nehemiah was an ordinary man – chosen by GOD!

Nehemiah 2:1-8
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I. INTRODUCTION

A. “The great big helmsman”

We’re studying in this book of Nehemiah, about how God raised a great leader for His ‘faithful remnant’ in Jerusalem. There’s an interesting little story from Nancy MacDonald in MacLean’s Magazine this week. One way to become a senior military officer – credentials:

- He’s a part-time blogger and a military historian. He was also born into China’s most vaunted political bloodline: the only grandson of Mao Zedong (who was known as the Great Helmsman), the founder of the People’s Republic and enduring icon to millions in China. And now, after almost 12 months of speculation, Mao Xinyu, the Great Helmsman’s beefy, 40-year-old heir has been made the People’s Liberation Army’s youngest major general.

This is definitely not how Nehemiah was chosen to lead God’s people in Jerusalem.

B. Nehemiah 1:11b to 2:8

- READ NEHEMIAH 1:11b TO 2:8

As we study this book of Nehemiah, we’re studying the extraordinary things that God accomplished through Nehemiah. If you know the story of Nehemiah and all that God accomplished through him, the rebuilding of the walls and gates of Jerusalem, in the face of internal unrest and external opposition, in an amazing 52 days, and his contribution to covenant faithfulness in the returned exile community, if perhaps you have read the Apocrypha and have seen how Nehemiah had become a “legendary figure in later Jewish literature,”¹ you might be tempted to think of Nehemiah as an extraordinary man. You might think of him as a super-human character, as one of those amazing biblical characters through whom God did extraordinary things. You might be tempted to think that God couldn’t possibly use you, me, us to accomplish His purposes because we are not like Nehemiah.

Well, I want to show you this morning, that Nehemiah was an ordinary man. He wasn’t anything special, but God chose him and changed his heart and worked through him to accomplish His purposes.

In fact, as we consider all of salvation-history, from Genesis to Revelation, we see that God delights in using ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things.

II. NEHEMIAH WAS AN ORDINARY MAN

A. Contrast Nehemiah and Ezra (1:1)

Turn back with me for a moment to Ezra, chapter 7. Look at how Ezra is introduced to us in verses 1-6. Ezra was a priest and a scribe. We are given a genealogy of Ezra, tracing his family all the way back to Eleazar and Aaron! In verse 6, we read that Ezra, “was a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses that the LORD, the God of Israel, had given.” These are Ezra’s credentials. Ezra was well known in the exile community in Babylon. Ezra had a strong lineage – as was necessary for one occupying the office of Priest, he could trace his fathers’ line back to Aaron. (Recall in Ezra 2: 61-63, some ‘priests’ who came with Zerubbabel and Jeshua could not prove their lineage and were not permitted to function as priests.) Ezra’s lineage and his skill as a Scribe would cause him to be instantly accepted and respected by the community in Jerusalem.

Now let’s go back to Nehemiah 1:1. The only thing that is said about Nehemiah’s lineage is that he was the son of Hacaliah. This Hacaliah is unknown to us. The only place that his name appears is here in the book of Nehemiah, in 1:1 and 10:1, and only as the father or the house from which Nehemiah came. Nehemiah is not a priest, nor a scribe. He is not from a distinguished line of the Jewish community. He is not a general, not a governor, not highly placed in the court of the king as Daniel was. (Daniel 6:1-3)

There is a ‘Nehemiah’ listed in Ezra 2:2 and Nehemiah 7:7 as one of the leaders with Zerubbabel and Jeshua in the first wave of exiles returning from Babylon, but this is clearly not the same Nehemiah. There is another Nehemiah listed in 3:16 among others who worked on the wall of Jerusalem, “Nehemiah the son of Azbuk, ruler of half the district of Beth-zur,” – also not our Nehemiah.

The only thing that we learn about Nehemiah is in 1:11: “I was cupbearer to the king.”
B. Nehemiah the ‘cupbearer’ in the court of Artaxerxes (1:11)

There is some debate in the academic community as to how important cupbearers were in the court of the king. The only other cupbearer that we read about in Scripture is in Genesis 40, where we read about Joseph interpreting the dreams of Pharaoh’s cupbearer. He doesn’t seem to have been a very important figure. Just the one who served Pharaoh is wine. It is possible that the role of ‘Cupbearer’ took on greater prestige in later centuries. F. Charles Fensham wrote in his commentary on the book of Nehemiah:

- Recent studies have shown the importance of this position. In the ancient Near Eastern court the cupbearer, with his direct access to the king, was regarded as important and influential. In Tobit it is said that Esarhaddon’s cupbearer was second only to him in his kingdom (Tobit 1:22). In the History of Herodotus (iii.34) it is stated that Cambyses did one of his friends a favor by appointing his son as cupbearer. For Nehemiah to have reached this position was an important achievement. It shows what influential positions some of the Jews of the Exile had reached.2

However, as we noted last week, J.I. Packer described Nehemiah, the ‘cupbearer’ as “no more than a high-class slave, an alien recruited for palace service.”3 Nehemiah would have had daily access to the king, testing and serving to him his wine, if not also his food. But it seems to me that it would be up to the individual king to determine just how ‘friendly’ this relationship would become.

The dialogue between Nehemiah and Artaxerxes that we read in this passage doesn’t suggest any particular closeness between the two. Nehemiah uses the ‘expected’ phrases and displays the appropriate subservience to the king when speaking to him. In verse 3, Nehemiah begins his response to the king, “Let the king live forever!” In verses 5 and 7, “If it pleases the king.” However, the king does show interest in, and perhaps concern for, his cupbearer, Nehemiah.

The point remains that Nehemiah, though he may have been cupbearer to the king, did not have a particularly important background or lineage in the Jewish community. He didn’t come from a family with an important function like priest, or scribe, or Levite, or even

2 Fensham, p. 157
'gatekeeper'. Nehemiah, unlike Ezra, was not an important, respected person. He didn’t have credentials, like Mao Xinyu. He wouldn’t immediately and automatically have the respect of the returned exiles in Jerusalem. Nehemiah was an ordinary man.

C. Nehemiah "was very much afraid" (2:1-3).

Look now at verses 1-3. READ. Nehemiah was afraid. This same Nehemiah who we will later see facing down enemies from without and dealing with dissent and injustices within, had the same fear that any of us would have had in approaching the king of Persia.

In verse 1, Nehemiah says that, “. . . I had not been sad in his presence.” This was in the month of Nisan, the first month of the year, the fourth month since word had come to Nehemiah of the state of the defences of Jerusalem (Neh 1:1 – “in the month of Chislev”), but Nehemiah, though he had been weeping, fasting, mourning and praying to the LORD God for days (1:4; 6) had not before shown his emotions before the king. He had hidden his inner turmoil over the state of Jerusalem from Artaxerxes. And in verse 2, when the king has asked him, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick?” Nehemiah says, “Then I was very much afraid.” In Hebrew and in the Septuagint, the early Greek translation of the Hebrew text, two adjectives are used. Nehemiah says that he was very much, greatly, exceeding afraid.

From what we read later of Nehemiah, this seems out of character. What was Nehemiah afraid of? Was it fear of displeasing the king? Was it fear of execution if the king suspected that he was involved in a plot to assassinate him? Was it fear because he had finally determined that this was the right moment to ask Artaxerxes for permission to rebuild Jerusalem. This is, after all, the same Artaxerxes who had stopped the reconstruction of Jerusalem. Would the king interpret the request as being motivated by a rebellious plot?

It seems to me that what we see in these verses of chapter 2 is the mid-point of God’s transformation of Nehemiah the ‘cupbearer’ into Nehemiah the Governor.

III. GOD TRANSFORMED THE CUPBEARER INTO A GOVERNOR

You see, God transformed a “cupbearer” into a strong and dynamic leader, a builder, an organizer, a motivator, a governor to lead His people. The Nehemiah that we read about in chapter one is not the same Nehemiah that we read about in the rest of the book, and this is
the point of transition. What was this new Nehemiah like, and how had this transformation taken place?

A. What was the “New Nehemiah” like? (2:5; 7-8)

The LORD God had moved in Nehemiah’s heart, changing his lament over Jerusalem into a plan for its restoration. Nehemiah has gone from weeping and mourning over the state of the city of Jerusalem, to researching, planning and preparing to lead in its reconstruction. Some commentators suggest that Nehemiah waited until the first month of the year, for a feast in the first month, when the Persian rulers were often magnanimous, generous, granting requests that would ordinarily be dismissed out-of-hand. The timing of his approach to Artaxerxes may have been significant, but Nehemiah was not idle in the intervening months.

Nehemiah may have been afraid as he approached Artaxerxes with his requests, but look at his boldness, look at what Nehemiah requests from the king. He asked for “letters . . . to the governors of the province Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through,” and a “letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king’s forest, that he may give me timber” (Neh 2:7-8). Nehemiah had thought this through; he had realized that he would need letters from Artaxerxes granting him safe passage to Jerusalem. He knew that the governors of the surrounding provinces in ‘Beyond the River’ were the ones who had warned the king and had enforced his command to stop the work on the defences of Jerusalem. He would need letters from Artaxerxes to these governors to show that the king had changed his mind and that work on Jerusalem was now permitted. And Nehemiah asked for letters to Asaph so that he could secure the materials that he needed for the work.

The LORD God had transformed this ‘cupbearer,’ this one whose career consisted of selecting, pouring and tasting the king’s wine, who managed a wine-cellar, perhaps, into one who planned and would carry through the reconstruction of the defences of the city of Jerusalem, who would motivate, guide and supervise the people to construct walls and gates and fortifications for a whole city, in the face of great danger.

B. Why did God choose Nehemiah? (1:4; 6)

But then we must ask, “Why would God choose Nehemiah?” Firstly, God chose a man whose heart was set on the honour and glory of the NAME of the LORD his God. As we saw last
week, Nehemiah’s reaction to the news from Jerusalem demonstrated his devotion to the honour of God’s NAME. Nehemiah “wept and mourned for days, and . . . continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven” (Neh 1:4).

Secondly, Nehemiah had devoted considerable time to prayer. Again, the news that Nehemiah had received concerning the condition of the city of Jerusalem had arrived “in the month of Chislev” (Neh 1:1), and the exchange with Artaxerxes that we read of in chapter 2 occurred “in the month of Nisan” (Neh 2:1), the fourth month since the news had reached him. This extended time of prayer was used by God to change Nehemiah’s heart to conform with His. We noted last week that Nehemiah’s prayer was informed, shaped by his knowledge of God’s will. What God did in Nehemiah was to change him from a bystander to an actor in what He was doing in Jerusalem. Nehemiah’s extended time of prayer was and opportunity for God to transform Nehemiah’s heart to conform to His will.

C. God also transformed the heart of Artaxerxes (2:6; 8b).

The LORD God moved in Nehemiah’s heart, changing his lament over Jerusalem into a plan for its restoration. And God also moved in the heart of Artaxerxes to listen with favour to the request of his ‘cupbearer’ and to grant him more than permission, but a commission to rebuild the holy city, Jerusalem.

Look at verse 6. READ. Artaxerxes says to Nehemiah, “How long will you be gone, and when will you return?” The king had already made up his mind. Nehemiah was being permission to go. All that the king wanted to know was how long he would have to wait to see Nehemiah again and to hear the report of progress in Jerusalem. “How long do you think it is going to take for you to get to Jerusalem and to rebuild the city’s walls and gates?” We don’t see it specifically in this text, but the letters that Artaxerxes gave to Nehemiah did more than grant him safe passage, permission to rebuild, and access to timber from the king’s forest. Artaxerxes actually appointed Nehemiah to be governor in Judah.

At the end of verse 8, Nehemiah gives all the glory to God. He says, “. . . the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.” The LORD God probably surprised Nehemiah with Artaxerxes’ answer. Nehemiah feared death for bringing such
audacious requests to the king. God caused Artaxerxes to go beyond far beyond granting permission. God moved in Artaxerxes’ heart to the point that he gave Nehemiah a commission to rebuild the walls and gates of Jerusalem.

IV. THIS IS HOW THE LORD GOD WORKS!
   A. God chooses what is foolish, what is weak, what is low and despised.
      This is how the LORD God works in the world. Remember our Scripture reading from 1 Corinthians 1. He chooses “what is foolish in the world to shame the wise. . . what is weak in the world to shame the strong . . . what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are” (1 Cor 1:27-28).

      Is this not how God has worked throughout the history that is revealed in Scripture? Remember Gideon in the book of Judges? Turn with me to Judges 6:11-16, and let’s recall where God found him, and what Gideon’s reaction was to the call of God.

      What about Moses? Turn back to Exodus, chapter 3, and let’s remind ourselves of what Moses’ reaction was to the call of God from the burning bush: Exodus 3:10-12; 13-14; 4:1; 4:10; 4:13-17.

      Here is a poem found on the site of a Christian blogger, named ‘Alesia.’

B. The Great Physician

      The next time you feel like GOD can’t use you, just remember…

      Noah was a drunk
      Abraham was too old
      Isaac was a daydreamer
      Jacob was a liar
      Leah was ugly
      Joseph was abused
      Moses had a stuttering problem
      Gideon was afraid
      Samson had long hair and was a womanizer
      Rahab was a prostitute
      Jeremiah and Timothy were too young

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David had an affair and was a murderer
Elijah was suicidal
Isaiah preached naked
Jonah ran from God
Naomi was a widow
Job went bankrupt
Peter denied Christ
The Disciples fell asleep while praying
Martha worried about everything
The Samaritan woman was divorced, more than once
Zaccheus was too small
Paul was too religious
Timothy had an ulcer..AND
Lazarus was dead! 

*And don’t forget, Jesus helped them all!*

Now! No more excuses.

**God can use you to your full potential.**

**Besides you aren't the message, you are just the messenger.**

C. **And what about our Saviour, Jesus Christ?**

- Philip went to his friend Nathaniel to tell him about Jesus and Nathaniel said, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?” *(John 1:46)*

- Jesus went to his hometown to preach the Gospel and the people asked, “Where did this man get these things? What is the wisdom given to him? How are such mighty works done by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him.” *(Mark 6:2-3)*

- Jesus, the long-expected Messiah, the Saviour, rode into Jerusalem in His triumphal entry, not on a white charger, not in a coat of armour, not at the head of a powerful army, but, in perfect fulfillment of the prophecy given through Zechariah, “Behold, your king is coming to you; righteous and having salvation is he, humble and mounted on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey.” *(Zechariah 9:9)*

- In Isaiah 53, one of the great prophecies of the ‘Suffering Servant,’ we read this about Jesus: “he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not.” *(Isaiah 53:2-3)*
God chooses “what is foolish in the world to shame the wise . . . what is weak in the world to shame the strong . . . what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.”

D. God chooses us, because it is not about us, it is all about bringing honour and glory to Him.

Are you called by the LORD God to serve Him? Are we not all called by the LORD God to serve Him? He will equip you and prepare the way for all that He has called you to do!

How does that poem end? The writer said, “Now! No more excuses. God can use you to your full potential. Besides you aren’t the message, you are just the messenger”

God is the ONE who gave us and gives us all of our ‘potential.’ God chooses to use us to fulfill HIS purposes, to draw souls into HIS Kingdom, into the saving knowledge of HIS Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. And it is all for “the praise of His glory” (Eph 1:6; 12; 14).

I want to close with the concluding paragraph from David Platt’s new book, which is entitled: Radical: Taking back your faith from the American dream, a challenge to Christians to think hard on the demands of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, to reject the false “health, wealth and prosperity gospel” and to commit to radical obedience to the true Gospel of Jesus Christ. Platt writes:

- You and I have an average of about seventy or eighty years on this earth. During these years we are bombarded with the temporary. Make money. Get stuff. Be comfortable. Live well. Have fun. In the middle of it all, we get blinded to the eternal. But it’s there. You and I stand on the porch of eternity. Both of us will soon stand before God to give an account for our stewardship of the time, the resources, the gifts, and ultimately the gospel he has entrusted to us. When that day comes, I am convinced we will not wish we had given more of ourselves to living the American dream. We will not wish we had made more money, acquired more stuff, lived more comfortably, taken more vacations, watched more television, pursued greater retirement, or been more successful in the eyes of this world. Instead we will wish we had give more of ourselves to living for the day when every nation, tribe, people, and language will bow around the throne and sing the praises of the Savior who delights in radical obedience and the God who deserves eternal worship.⁵