

IV. Crisis and the Christian in Biblical Perspective
“Nehemiah and the Foundational Action Step for Every Crisis”

Nehemiah 1

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This is our fourth study in this series of how the believer is to live in this present world by the grace of God, a broken world with crisis after crisis of all kinds. Nehemiah 1:1–3 says *[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.”*

The grass withers, the flower fade, the Word of God abides forever and by His grace and mercy may it be preached for you.

I want to give some context to this chapter in Nehemiah before we go further Nehemiah 1 but I want to come back to why we are doing this series. In this series I am putting together how a believer with a Christian world and life view, framed by the Word of God, enabled by the Spirit of God looks at a crisis in a broken world, whether it's the COVID-19 crisis or famine or any other crisis.

We have already laid down three framing statements. The first one was that crises are providential from Titus 2:11–14. It speaks of past grace which was the Incarnation of God that has appeared as Immanuel—God with us, full of glory who came to die for our sins. We learned that the grace of God is instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and Godly in this present age. We are now in this present age and Jesus tells us that until He comes again there will be what He calls birth pangs. The Gospel is to be preached to all the nations and all the elect of God is brought to Christ and then comes the end. The birth pangs that show us that delivering moment is coming are crises such as famines, earthquakes, false teachers, economic crisis and all kinds of crises.

So in these crises how shall we then live? God's grace teaches us to live sensibly, righteously and Godly. To live sensibly, faith does not lead to an irrational lifestyle. Faith is not leaping in the dark but walking in the light. When you live sensibly that means your way of life is being illuminated by the Word of God so that means you're living righteously, attempting to be obedient to God's Word, not to be saved, but because Jesus has saved us we want to obey Him as our Lord and Savior. This is a God-centered life and not a self-centered life or world-centered life. So in crisis we are prudent without panic. We are trusting God without tempting God. We are living faithfully and therefore fearlessly. Our fears do not control us for it is the fear of the Lord that liberates us in the trusting of the Lord our majestic Savior.

Then we went to a case study of the life of Joseph. He is his father's favorite son, with a favorite coat, put into a pit, taken out of pit, gets sold into slavery by his brothers, went into Potiphar's house who was the captain of the guard for Pharaoh as a slave, there with stood the seduction of Potiphar's wife but that ended with Joseph being thrown into prison, in jail he ministered to two prison mates, at just the right time one of the prison mates remembers Joseph and now he becomes the prime minister of Egypt under Pharaoh with the only one greater than Joseph is Pharaoh. Joseph rules faithfully especially as they face seven years of famine and

seven years of plenty and not only is Egypt saved but also the surrounding nations, including this burgeoning tribal family from Abraham, Isaac and now Jacob, Joseph's father.

Joseph's brothers come to him, are received and cared for but when Jacob dies they are afraid they will receive the retribution due them when they mistreated Joseph who now has all this power. So they now come with repentance and forgiveness and Joseph says to them 'What you meant for evil God meant for good to bring this about.' So the second principle we learned about the Christian in crises is that crises are multi-faceted. It is that element of God's providence from a sovereign God where He is accomplishing many things during these crises and it's not just all about you. No matter where Joseph was he responded sensibly, righteously and Godly and now he was able to see what God was doing, at least to some degree.

I like to try and explain God's providence in various word pictures with one of them being like a jigsaw puzzle. You know there is something there but you don't have the picture on the box. God has the picture, but you do have the pieces. You know they are in the hand of a sovereign God. When I do a jigsaw puzzle I first look for the four corner pieces and that's what I'm trying to give you in this series on how the Christian handles crisis. So I've just given you a review of the first two pieces.

The third lesson/piece was straight from the mouth of Jesus when He was asked about two crises in Luke 13. Jesus' response to both was the same for He said that every time you look at a crisis it's a reminder that we've all sinned, come short of the glory of God and the great catastrophe that looms in the futures is the Judgment Seat and we need to be ready. Praise God that the One who said 'repent or perish' is the One under Pilate whose blood would be mingled as our sacrifice at Calvary – Jesus. That's why we can repent and not perish, for God so loved the world He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). Every crisis is a measured reminder that sin costs and the wages is death so flee to Christ.

There is not only a foundational and urgent message but there are actions steps for every crisis. When a crisis comes the initial, reflexive response of people tells you their world and life view. Historically in the US we have had presidents like Washington, Lincoln and others as well as governors and mayors that when these problems/crises come they would almost always call for a day of prayer, humiliation and fasting. I am grateful that President Trump did the same thing recently on Good Friday. Yet overall that is not what we're doing. We're gathering and analyzing data. We're creating models which most have not been accurate. We're now regulating our behavior first by our analysis of the data and the models. I am not anti-science. I enjoy looking at data to solve problem but while that is a right move that ought not to be our first move.

A crisis reveals and refines. A crisis reveals your world and life view – your strengths and weaknesses. A crisis can be an opportunity to refine your life and world and life view. One of the things that has become obvious with the onslaught of secular humanism and the various revolutions that are sweeping our culture, not only is the first thing to go to the data but if anyone moves to prayer they're ridiculed. Our Vice President Pence put together a task force of brilliant men to lead us in this and then he asked them to join him in prayer. That was ridiculed as if that was the only thing he was going to do. It wasn't the only thing he was going to do but it was the first thing he asked them to do. I would suggest that he's right, the naysayers are wrong.

When crisis comes our first move, not our only move, should be fervent intercessory prayer. God You're sovereign, why is this here? What are You doing? What are You saying? God, we need strength, peace and wisdom. But man in vanity and arrogance says 'no' to

intercessory prayer and 'yes' to vain imagination. Oh I don't need God I just need to analyze the data. I saw this so abundantly clear when the present governor of New York as he was telling everyone how they should be living and then deals with the fact that churches are gathering to pray by saying 'The curve has flattened. God didn't flatten the curve. We did.' I have been praying that God would use this current crisis to bring humility to our nation. I'm still praying for that but boy that was so discouraging to hear that from one of our elected officials. Instead of humbling ourselves and calling upon God our nation's first movement is data management and modeling.

I didn't say prayer was all we did but it is what we do first. I would like for you to see this in the life of Nehemiah. Nehemiah is facing a personal and national crisis. The context to this is that Israel has been liberated from Egypt. They have gone through the wilderness for 40 years and are led into the Promised Land by Joshua and later governed by judges. Then they were given King Saul followed by King David followed by King Solomon in what we call the united Kingdom. But after Solomon the Kingdom divided into two different nations because of sin throughout Israel.

There was the ten northern Kingdoms which were the ten tribes called Israel and the two southern Kingdoms called Judah and Benjamin. These two remained faithful and the other ten apostatized. Then came prophets like Elijah and Elisha who kept calling out to the people to repent because they were engaged in spiritual adultery in which the label I've used has been doctored up for this study. God is not only faithful to His promises but He is also faithful to His warnings and one of His warnings was if His people abandon Him then He would take nations that are not His nations (not a covenanted nation) to discipline His people, to bring His covenanted nation together that would bring forth a Redeemer.

That is exactly what happened in the 8th century as the kingdom of Assyria is brought down in judgment upon the ten northern tribes. You would think the southern tribes would learn from that but they didn't for they also continued in the way of apostasy and therefore in the 6th century God brought another nation to bring judgment on the two southern tribes. That was the Babylonian Empire with the Babylonian captivity. Through Jeremiah and Daniel God told His people this captivity would be for 70 years and then God raised up another kingdom to defeat Babylon which was the Medo-Persian Empire. They had a king name Cyrus whom God called His anointed who set His people free and sent them back to Jerusalem. They came back to the city excited about rebuilding the temple. Zerubbabel was the governor, Joshua the High Priest and Ezra a great teacher, along with prophets who came with them. They had a good beginning as they begun the second temple but then they became discouraged. In 445 BC to 450 BC everything falls apart. Israel has become a tramping ground for the nations and Jerusalem is walked over constantly.

Nehemiah is well positioned in the Medo-Persian Empire under King Artaxerxes II. Nehemiah is the cup bearer. The cup bearer for the king in those days was very powerful. He was a counselor and was always with the king. The king had to have absolute confidence in him. He was the head of the king's secret service. Artaxerxes had great trust in Nehemiah. Nehemiah is in the citadel of power, among the most powerful in the world, in Susa, the capital. Nehemiah's concern is for the people of God, the citadel of God – Jerusalem.

So Nehemiah asks two questions. How are the people who have been left in Jerusalem? How is the city of God, Jerusalem? Hanani basically responds to Nehemiah 'I've got nothing but bad news. The people are distressed, shamed and impoverished for the nations/adversaries around them mock them, ridicule them and they walk in and out Jerusalem taking things

whenever they want, like God's people aren't even there. The walls are down in the city. The gates are burned. That is their condition.' What is it that Nehemiah does in this national and personal crisis? He has two responses. He has an immediate response and then a considered response. Let's look at the rest of the chapter.

Nehemiah 1:4–11 says [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. [5] And I said, "O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, [6] let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. [7] We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. [8] Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, [9] but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.'* [10] *They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. [11] O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."*

Now I was cupbearer to the king.

What is Nehemiah's immediate response? It is three things. One he sat down. Notice he didn't go to an action plan. Secondly, he wept. Thirdly, he mourned/lamented. It was a soul agonizing lamentation and that went on for days. Nehemiah had a reflexive response and his first response was not to solve the problem or gather the data or create a model. Then came his considered response. He did what would be consistent with lamentation, he fasted and prayed. It is one of the least used means of grace that God has given us – fasting. Fasting is always in concert with prayer. Fasting is not a work of self-affliction. It is giving up even the most necessary things in life to cast yourself upon the Lord who is the One who is necessary for all of life. It is setting aside that which would capture our affections and attention even the necessities of life that are good for there is nothing evil about them unless you use them sinfully – like food and drink. You set that aside to have intimacy unhindered and repentance before God.

Then Nehemiah prayed. This is fervent intercessory prayer. There are three parts to his prayer. His prayer is an important prayer for what it says and for what it doesn't say. The first part of his prayer is adoration and affirmation. He adores and affirms God for who He is and what He has done – the great Redeemer, covenant keeping God. Notice that Nehemiah doesn't complain. He begins knowing why God has done this and why God is sovereignly using this. He isn't telling God to give them what they deserve because he knows they are getting what they deserve and more. He doesn't complain, he worships God.

Secondly, he confesses and repents of his sins and the sins of the people. Notice again we don't see anger toward God or complaints coming from Nehemiah. Nehemiah knows the reasons they are in this situation is because of their sins. This is part of God's covenant faithfulness. The God who took them out of Egypt with the exodus is the One who said 'if you go play the harlot with other gods then I will use a nation to discipline you.' You will experience this if you're a parent. Be faithful to your children. You don't have to be their friend, be their parent. Later on you will be their friend and they will come to you and thank you for being the

parent. Nehemiah is not rejoicing in the condition of the people but he is rejoicing that God loves His people enough to discipline them.

Anything and everything you experience in this world, even the temporal judgments of God's discipline, short of hell, has always got God's grace in it somewhere. The only unmixed judgment of God with no grace is the eternal judgment of hell. The patience of God should lead us to repentance. We see this with Nehemiah as he confesses and repents.

Thirdly, Nehemiah then calls out with requests and petitions/supplications. God, deliver us and restore Your people. This isn't the only thing Nehemiah is going to do but this is the first thing he does so He calls on God because he knows what the real problem is which is the sins of the people.

Then the chapter ends by Nehemiah telling us he is the cup bearer to the king. I think of one of the reasons is yes he wants us to know who he is but other than King Artaxerxes there is no one more positioned to solve this problem than Nehemiah. In this position he has access to all kinds of resources and so even though he is in a position to help rebuild the city he wants us to know his heart is for the people of God. He may be one of the powerful people but he has humbled himself to be with the people of God. The answer isn't the resources Nehemiah has for the answer is found in the King of glory and that's why he goes to prayer.

Our takeaway is our fourth lesson concerning crises and the Christian is while in the providence of God crises are inevitable, multi-dimensional and all contain a foundational and urgent message – repent or perish! They also contain a foundation and urgent call to fervent prayer. It's not the only thing we do but it is the most important. If you can do more than pray then do more than pray but never the least you can do and it's the best you can do. It's not the only thing you do. Nehemiah isn't just going to pray but he is also going to ask God to bless what he is now about to do.

The giveaway is simple. His concern is about the people and the city. In Nehemiah 1 through 6 he is going to revive the people by rebuilding the city. He is going to rebuild the walls. Then in Nehemiah 7 through 13 is going to be used by God to bring revival to the people which will revive the city. He has other things yet to do but they're not the first thing he does. The first thing he does is pray through fervent prayer that adores and affirms God. Then he confesses and repents sins as he petitions God for His presence and power. James 5:16 says *[16] Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. **The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much*** (NASB).

We don't have because we don't ask and when we do ask we ask wrongly. James 4:2b-3 says *[2b] You do not have because you do not ask. [3] You ask and do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, so that you may spend it on your pleasures.* Even in a crises it's more me than my knee (prayer). It's about me.

II Chronicles 7:14 says *[14] if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.* This verse is ours as Christians, God's covenant people, the royal nation of God, who is being called together by the grace of God through the Gospel of God from all the nations of the world. If God's covenant people, the church of Jesus Christ in this land leads the way, by humbling ourselves, sit down, weep, mourn, lament and calls upon God then I will hear. That's our call as believers. I don't expect mayors or governors or any of them to do it unless they know Jesus. We are the ones to do it. It begins with us to call upon the Lord in prayer.

Nehemiah is exhibit A of II Chronicles 7:14. He humbles himself and prays as a son of the living God who has been redeemed by its grace. It is so simple but it's so elusive because we don't look to God for prevailing power, we look to ourselves, our models, our data, our mechanisms which tend to be the first things we look to. We get absorbed with the information and the analysis. I love to study data and use the intelligent quotient God gives us to deal with issues but it's not because I control them, it's because God is so glorious that He has set these laws into place. So should I go to myself and the analysis first or to the God who has established all the laws that govern humanity and all His creation and ask Him for wisdom while I repent of my sin and ask Him to forgive me and my people? There is no excuse now. With everyone being told to stay at home there aren't appointments to be made so call upon the Lord right now where you are.

I'll finish with this. I've seen President Trump a lot lately in the press conferences and news conferences in all that is happening with this pandemic. It reminds me to pray for him and I do because the Bible calls for me to pray for my leaders which include governors, magistrates, policemen, senators, president and all who are in authority. I always pray at least two prayers for them – one that they know Jesus as Lord and Savior and two that they are given wisdom if not by redeeming grace then by common grace to properly lead and make decisions.

I have another reason I pray for President Trump that reminds me to pray for him and actually leads me to pray for revival. It has to do with the revivals in Scotland. I love to study the revivals in Scotland. Scottish people have had many revivals and I think it's because my ancestors of been in great need of revivals. The last one Scotland had was in the Hebrides Islands – the Isle of Lewis, the Isle of Harris. The epicenter was a little village named Barvas and another named Tong. There were two clans/family groups – one being MacLeod and the other Smith.

In the late 1940s two octogenarians, Peggy and Christine Smith, one bent over double with stenosis of the spine, would call people to their barn outside of their croft for intercessory prayer that we would be forgiven of our sins in Scotland. This was on the aftermath of the war. They had seen all the stuff that accompanies war – the licentiousness, drunkenness – and they called upon God for forgiveness. The prayer meeting grew. They asked the pastor of their church started coming and they asked him to make sure he was born again. He was so he joined in their prayer time. They had a 15 year old cousin named Donald Smith who joined in their prayer time and revival came to the Isle of Lewis. It's the last great revival in Scotland that we are aware of which you can read about.

They, Peggy and Christine, also had a niece name Mary Anne Smith MacLeod. She, a decade earlier, before the revival had migrated to America. She met a man in New York whose name was Fred Trump, a domestic worker and Mary Anne MacLeod married him. Her cousin Donald Smith was so moved by God that he became for all intents and purposes the assistant pastor of the church where the revival started and he had a Bible he wrote in constantly, journaling all the time. Peggy and Christine came into possession of Donald Smith's journal and his Bible and sent that Bible to Mary Anne.

Mary Anne and Fred Trump had five children and one of them she named for her cousin Donald – so his name was Donald Trump. She gave him one Bible when he was confirmed. She died in 2000 and he received the Bible from Donald Smith, his namesake, with all the notes of the great revivals. The Bible he received in confirmation was one of the two Bibles he placed his hand on when sworn into being President of our nation and is now in the Museum of the Bible. The Bible he received which was Donald Smith's is now in the Oval Office. I'm not

superstitious for I know vibes aren't coming out of that Bible but every time I look at President Trump I think of Peggy and Christine Smith.

I pray for God's saving grace to be at work in my President and I pray for God's reviving grace to be at work in my nation. God raise up another Peggy and Christine Smith. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, thank You for the moments we could be together in Your Word. Thank You for the great privilege to know, love and serve You. Help us O God to understand that the crisis does not define the Christian. The Word of God defines how the Christian responds to the crisis. We want to live sensibly, righteously and Godly. We want to be confident that You providentially are doing things multi-dimensional, multi-faceted. We want to hear the call to repent lest you perish from our Savior but we also want to hear the foundational and urgent call to fervent prayer, knowing the effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. O God, make us people of prayer! Let the Holy Spirit speak to your hearts in these next few moments. Perhaps you are reading this today and the Lord has drawn you to hear that a sovereign God has loved you and in the midst of crisis is calling you to faith and repentance in Christ. You can be saved from the judgment to come by being saved from your sins now and you have this first prayer – “O God great is Thy faithfulness, I turn from my sin to put my trust in You, be merciful to me a sinner and I give You praise that in Jesus there is forgiveness and everlasting life and I surrender to Christ today.” Then Father for us, Your people, in the midst of this crisis, call us to sit down, to weep over the sins prevailing throughout our nation – the killing of the unborn, the pornography – all of the sins that are washing us with darkness and despair – help us to repent, confess and cast our hearts and lives upon You and fervently ask You, O Jesus, bring revival to Your glory. I ask this in Jesus' Name, Amen.

Power Point

REVIEW

Lesson #1: Crises are Providential

Lesson #2: Crises are multi-faceted

Lesson #3: Foundational and Urgent Message—Repent or Perish!

Nehemiah and the Foundational Action Step for Every Crisis

The Context

The Text

LIFE TAKEAWAY

While in the Providence of God crises are inevitable, multi-dimensional, and all contain a Foundational and Urgent message—Repent or Perish! They also contain a Foundational and Urgent call to fervent Prayer.