

Whatever – Nehemiah 1

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Read Ch. 1

B. Recap

1. It's that last sentence I want to focus on this morning, where Nehemiah says he was the royal cupbearer.
2. But we need to do a brief recap for those who are new to the story.
3. Nearly 200 years before this the Babylonians had defeated the kingdom of Judah & destroyed the city of Jerusalem – leaving the glorious temple of Solomon in smoking ruins.
4. The people of Judah were deported, leaving the land a deserted wilderness.
5. A few decades later, the Babylonians were conquered by the Persians who allowed the Jews to return & rebuild after 70 years of exile.
6. The book of Ezra which is right before Nehemiah tells of 2 returns, 80 years apart.
7. As we come to Nehemiah, 12 years have passed since the 2nd return.
8. Nehemiah was going about his duties one day in the Persian palace, when word reached him some officials had arrived with a report about how things were going in the southern regions of the Empire.
 - a. Among them was Nehemiah's brother who brought a disturbing report about the condition of Jerusalem.
 - b. Though it had been nearly a hundred years since the 1st return, the *defenses* of the city were still in ruins.
 - c. A lack of walls & gates meant Jerusalem's enemies could oppress its inhabitants at will.
 - d. Nehemiah had assumed surely by now the city had rebuilt its walls.
 - e. When he heard the report, his reaction was much like Ezra's we saw last week when he was told the Jewish leaders' had taken idol-worshipping wives.
 - f. He sat down in utter astonishment, pouring out his distress to God with tears & fervent prayers.
 - g. When the burden didn't lighten, he added fasting to his seeking God for help for Jerusalem.
 - h. When the burden *grew* over the next days as he fasted & prayed, Nehemiah realized God wanted him to do *more* than pray & fast.
 - i. God wanted him to *go* & lead the rebuilding effort.
9. So his prayers shifted from praying for *Jerusalem* to praying for a *plan, resources, & permission*.

10. Then, as a postscript, Nehemiah says – “I was the king's cupbearer.”

II. BODY

A. The Task of a Cup-Bearer

1. We know a few things about cupbearers in the Persian court.
2. As we saw a couple weeks ago that the Persians just about *invented* the idea of

- the king who basks in the lap of luxury.
- a. Persian kings were surrounded with the marks of power & wealth as they sat on a sumptuous throne, bathed in gold & jewels, feasting on delicacies & throwing lavish parties for their nobles.
 - b. These parties often went on for *weeks!*
 - c. And central to the festivities was a constant flow of wine.
3. The royal cupbearer had the job of making sure the court was supplied with a steady stream of libations.
 - a. He oversaw the royal vineyards & entire wine-making process.
 - b. He also oversaw the *rest* of the kings' table.
 - 1) He coordinated the menu,
 - 2) And supervised the palace kitchens & cooks.
 4. But his most important role was to check for poison in the food & drink served the king.
 - a. He did this by tasting it himself right there before the king.
 - b. Ancient rulers had food-tasters because poison was a favorite form of assassination.
 - c. Many palace conspiracies used poison to replace one ruler with another.
 5. Because of the trust the role of cup-bearer required, Nehemiah became one of the king's closest confidants.
 6. Though the king had his *official* counselors, *their* advice was often couched in their own interests.
 - a. So he often asked his cup-bearer's advice since *his* only concern was the welfare of his boss.
 - b. *This* is why Nehemiah tells us he was the royal cup-bearer; it meant he had special access to the king to make his request to go to Jerusalem.
 - c. But because of how heavily the king *depended* on him, getting permission would be difficult.
 7. Artaxerxes, the king referred to here, would have been *especially* reluctant about letting Nehemiah go since his father Xerxes, the previous king, had been murdered by a courtier in a palace conspiracy.
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8. How Nehemiah, a Jew, had attained this place of prominence is an interesting story.
 - a. Artaxerxes' step mother was the Jewish beauty *Esther*, the 2nd wife of his father Xerxes.
 - b. No doubt Esther reminded Artaxerxes how loyal the Jews had been & had proven to be excellent administrators.
 - c. So Artaxerxes appointed skilled men like Ezra & Nehemiah to key positions.
 - d. Artaxerxes had already sent Ezra to Jerusalem 12 years before.
 - e. Now Nehemiah prayed for an opportunity to ask the king for permission to return.

B. The Opportunity Comes

1. In ch. 2, after 4 months of constant prayer, during which God gave Nehemiah a vision & plan for rebuilding Jerusalem's walls, that opportunity finally came.
2. One day as Nehemiah was doing his usual job of serving Artaxerxes, the king

- saw Nehemiah's distress & asked him why he was so bummed out.
3. Nehemiah told him of the burden he'd been carrying for 4 months.
 - a. It distressed him that his people were suffering so greatly when the solution to their needs was so obvious.
 - b. If someone would just build walls around Jerusalem, it would make all the difference.
 4. Though the prospect of losing Nehemiah wasn't something Artaxerxes looked forward to, he was concerned for his friend & granted him permission to go, along with whatever authority & resources were needed to get the work done.

C. Nehemiah's Preparation

1. It's not hard to figure out why *Zerubbabel* led the 1st return nearly a hundred years before. He was of the royal line of David & someone the returning Jews would look to for leadership.
2. *Ezra* was an obvious choice to lead the 2nd return because he was honored by all as a priest & scribe who knew the Word of God better than anyone.
3. But *Nehemiah*? He was an *administrator*, a *really good* one!
 - a. He wasn't of the nobility; no royal blood flowed in his veins.
 - b. He wasn't a priest.
 - c. Today, we'd call Nehemiah a *businessman*, a *manager*.
 - d. He was the kind of guy who *got things done*.
4. Picture the scene: There he is in the palace, doing what he'd done for years, serving the Persian king.
 - a. Word reaches him of officials who've just returned with a report from the southern frontier.
 - b. His brother had been among those who'd gone on the mission so he goes to see him.
 - c. Hanani gives him the sad report of Jerusalem's broken down condition.
 - d. That report becomes the *turning point* in Nehemiah's life.
 - e. From that point on he prepares to go & rebuild the ruined walls of Jerusalem.
5. I wonder if in the days before his brother arrived, Nehemiah asked himself what he was doing.
 - a. Would he spend the rest of his life as a cup-bearer?
 - b. Was this really his life's work?
 - c. Were grapes & casks & menus what he was about?
 - d. Nehemiah knew his life was about more than that. He knew it in his bones!
 - e. He knew it just like *you* know it!
 - f. Because he believed in God & knew he was one of God's covenant people, he knew God had some greater work for him to do.
 - g. But he didn't know what it was – so he faithfully did that which *was* before him, trusting that as he did, God was at work to prepare him for whatever future awaited.
6. During the 4 months between his brother's report & the day the king gave him permission to go, Nehemiah came to see how everything he'd done over the previous years as the cup-bearer had served to *prepare* him for the task ahead.
7. Indeed, had Nehemiah *not been* the cup-bearer to Artaxerxes, he never would

have been in the position to secure all that was needed to accomplish the task of rebuilding Jerusalem's walls.

8. **God** put Nehemiah in the Persian court.
9. And as Nehemiah went about his task as cup-bearer, God was giving him the **skills** he would later draw on to build gates & walls.

D. God is Good at This

1. God is good at this – at preparing His people for what's ahead.
 2. A generation before Ezra & Nehemiah, He put **Esther** in the Persian court so she could intercede on behalf of her people who were destined for destruction.
 - a. But do you know where it began for her? With a beauty pageant!
 - b. God created Esther a beauty so that she'd be selected to be in a special contest to pick a new queen for the Persian king.
 3. She not only saved the Jews from genocide, she set the stage for both Ezra & Nehemiah to become trusted officials in the royal court of Persia.
 4. God put Joseph in Egypt with all the skills needed to not only save the lives of his family but of hundreds of thousands of Egyptians as well.
 5. When God wants to accomplish a work, He prepares His workers & puts them in the right place at the right time.
 6. Though **Moses** had been educated in Egypt in the best schools of the day, he didn't know how to lead.
 - a. Yet **leader** was his calling. So God took him to a wilderness classroom where he spent 40 years tending sheep.
 - b. Once he had a shepherd's heart, God took him back to Egypt where he led the Exodus.
 - c. Before that time in the wilderness Moses **knew** he was destined for greatness.
 - d. But his attempts to achieve it failed miserably; he murdered a man.
 - e. How many times during that 40 years of tending sheep, all alone out there in the desert, do you suppose Moses wondered what was going on?
 - f. Though he couldn't see it, he was learning the skills needed to lead a much larger flock of people.
 - g. When God finally gave Moses his mission at the burning bush, he begged off thinking he was no longer qualified.
 - h. He couldn't see how it had taken the last 40 years to get him ready.
 7. David was another God used the task of being a shepherd to teach a leader **how** to lead.
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8. **Peter & Andrew, James & John** were fishermen.
 - a. They were washouts from the schools that trained rabbis.
 - b. They'd gone instead into the family business of fishing.
 - c. Then one day, Jesus stepped into their boat & gave them a new task – to catch men for the kingdom of God.
 - d. The skills they'd practiced as commercial fishermen had a spiritual application that became clear as they followed Jesus.
 9. Like those fishermen, **Levi's** childhood dreams of becoming a rabbi had been dashed as well.
 - a. So he went into the family business of collecting taxes.

- b. A job that required meticulous record-keeping.
 - c. The skills he used in his tax-booth near Capernaum were part of God's grooming for the day when he would pen the Gospel that bears his name – ***Matthew***.
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10. The point is this – **God trains His workers.**
 - a. He grooms His servants.
 - b. He prepares us for the work each of us is uniquely called to do.
 11. Sometimes that preparation seems a ***waste of time***; it appears ***petty***.
 12. We sense a call to ***greatness***, some important task we were created for.
 - a. But as we look at what we did yesterday & are doing today, it seems vain.
 - b. We feel we're ***missing*** something.
 13. Learn the lesson Nehemiah teaches – faithfully serve in whatever capacity you're currently in.
 14. Bloom where you're planted. Because **tomorrow's mission is rooted in today's faithfulness.**

E. Joseph

1. **Joseph**, the 11th son of Jacob, had dreams & visions of greatness. He knew he was destined to do some great work for God.
2. It came as a crushing disappointment when his brother threw him into a pit & he listened as they talked about ways to kill him.
3. Then they sold him into slavery in Egypt.
4. Instead of throwing himself a pity-party, he did the best job he could as a slave & ended up being promoted to manager over an important official's entire estate.
5. When his master's wife falsely accused him of attempted rape, he was thrown into prison.
6. Instead of getting mad at God, he trusted He was at work & prison is where he needed to be.
7. He ***again*** did whatever he could as an act of worship to the Lord.
8. And again he was promoted so that eventually he came to the attention of Pharaoh who made him 2nd only to him as ruler over all Egypt.

G. My Story

1. I worked for 13 years in fast-food. I was a manager at a taco & burger joint.
2. When I say I was a taco bender – I mean I did exactly that; we made our own taco shells!
3. I was driving north on Victoria Rd. one day just north of Gonzales, when I had an anxiety attack.
4. I had no prospect of ever doing anything else.
 - a. Being a pastor wasn't anywhere on the horizon.
 - b. As I looked into the future I saw one thing –taco-bender, burger slinger.
 - c. I saw myself as an old man, all gray haired & wrinkly, hunched over in my uniform.
 - d. For the first time, the idea ***that*** was my future caused a dread so strong I ***felt*** it physically.
5. So I cried out to God, asking for something different.

6. I knew I wasn't destined to manage fast-food for the rest of my life but I had no idea what else to do.
 7. As quickly as the anxiety came – just that quickly it left as God responded to my prayer with a deeper confidence He had my future well in hand.
 8. And I was learning skills in my job as a fast-food manager I would need for whatever that calling was.
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9. It was about a year later that it began to become clear I was to be a pastor.
 10. And many of the things I learned as a restaurant manager have been put to good use in ministry.
 11. I'm thankful for the years I spent at Del Taco.

III. CONCLUSION

A. *Your Story*

1. That's my story. Yours is different.
2. We're not all called to be pastors or be on a church staff.
3. But we *are* all called to be ministers; to serve God in whatever capacity He's called us.
4. What Nehemiah was called to do wasn't what most would call "religious."
 - a. His was a *building* project.
 - b. It required a specific skill set best met by a leader & manager.
 - c. Yet what Nehemiah did was no less important to the plan of God than the rebuilding of the temple.
5. I thank God for the men & women God has called to be a part of this church because the work He has for us to do is far bigger than what I or even our great staff can accomplish.
 - a. Really, ours is only a *tiny* part of the ministry & outreach of Calvary.
 - b. We need businessmen & women who know how to get things done.
 - c. We need managers who know how to administrate.
 - d. We need bean-counters to count the beans.
 - e. We need singers, & musicians, engineers & secretaries, mechanics & construction workers.
 - f. We need teachers.
 - g. We need moms—women who understand that raising children is one of the most noble callings in all God's inventory.
 - h. We need dads—men who understand the same.

B. *Our School*

1. All of this is what we're shaping our school around.
2. We believe God has a specific plan & purpose for every one of us.
3. Education *ought to be* preparation for that *vocation*, that God-ordained calling.
4. So our goal will be to help students *identify* their calling by giving them the *tools* to *discover* it –
 - a. Whether it be scientist or brick-layer.
 - b. Electrical engineer or domestic engineer.
5. Then we'll introduce them to the *skills* they'll need to excel at whatever they're called to.

C. *Whatever*

1. I titled today's message "Whatever" because in Colossians 3:23-24 we read this -

Whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.

2. Today "whatever" is all too often used by young people as an expression of boredom.

3. Let's reclaim that word & invest it with the kind of *excitement* Paul gives it here.

4. ***Whatever*** you're doing, do it as an act of worship & devotion to God. //
Brother Lawrence