

Nehemiah 1:1-11

I love the story of Nehemiah – it's fast moving; it's full of blood, sweat, and tears; it is all about one man and his God. He's an amazing character, I think you'll like him.

I want us to take a few minutes and blow the dust off his memoirs, we want to learn some timeless lessons on serving the living God, we want to see what God can do in the lives of very ordinary people.

Four words give you a quickie summary of the book: small man, big God! That puts the spotlight where it belongs – we see a tiny man, a little man, an insignificant man, but we're also aware that behind him is a great, big, wonderful God. Put another way, we could call it: "Ordinary man. Extraordinary God!"

When I read through the journal of Nehemiah – and you can do it in an hour and a bit, there's one question in my mind: can one person really make a difference? Well, one person can make a huge difference! I think of Abraham, he obeyed God and a new race was born; Joseph met the needs of his own people in a time of severe famine; Moses led the Israelites across the Red Sea to freedom; Joshua conquered a hostile country; Gideon raised an unlikely army; David established a city; Solomon built a temple – these seven guys have one thing in common, all of them made a significant difference.

What about the likes of Florence Nightingale, William Wilberforce, or Lord Shaftesbury? I think of John Wycliffe, Martin Luther, and John Knox – men who brandished the flaming torch of truth in an era of inky black darkness. Then there is Alexander Graham Bell and the telephone, Thomas Edison and the light bulb, Alexander Fleming and penicillin.

The list goes on, and on – but it proves the point, **one person** can make a mega difference! That's true, but **one day** can also make a huge difference ...

So, tell me what happened, you say! For Nehemiah a new day was dawning – unknown to him, this would be the first day of the rest of his life, a different kind of day, he would never be the same again – one day can make a difference!

He meets his brother Hanani and a few other guys who have just returned from a trip to the old country – there they are, sipping a cappuccino and having a good chat, when Nehemiah fires a couple of questions in their direction – tell me, how are the people getting on? And what's it really like in Jerusalem?

He nearly fell off his seat when his brother told him the answer – it left him shaken and emotionally distraught. He was keen to know the facts, that's why he asked, but nothing could prepare him for what his brother would tell him. Awfully bad news. It was unthinkable. He told him that the people were struggling, and the city was a real shambles. It was grim. There was a palpable feeling of despair in the hearts of the people – they felt so vulnerable. Instead of Jerusalem being a light to the nations, it was an international joke – it was that bad! It was tough, really tough!

The big question is, what did Nehemiah do? What was his response? We see his immediate reaction in verses 4-11. He realised there was a tremendous need, he recognised there was a gigantic problem. We read: 'when I heard these things' (4).

Here's a man who wasn't preoccupied with his own agenda; a man who didn't live in a dream world of fantasy or make-believe. No, this guy listened and he heard – you can listen and not hear, but Nehemiah listened and heard! He is in touch with reality, he has his finger on the pulse, he feels the heartbeat of his people, he is deeply sensitive to their needs.

Nehemiah is a man whose heart bleeds with concern, we see that in verse 4. He's a man of unbelievable compassion, a man with a big heart! Even though he

was separated from them by a vast track of desert, their needs were close to his heart – there’s nothing remote or distant about him. He felt for them, and he felt their pain deeply.

This man was called by God to build the walls, but first he had to weep over the ruins. He had enormous compassion, he has a heart oozing with genuine love and care – in fact, he was so moved that he melted in the Lord’s presence. The tears flowed freely. I wonder, when was the last time any one of us cried over our broken world or for the lost souls of men and women? He prayed because he was really burdened, he was crushed on the inside.

This was no flash in the pan for Nehemiah – he did it for the best part of four months, for that’s the time lapse from 1:1 to 2:1. That takes a high level of commitment, he has lots of it! He sets the pace, he sticks the pace ... could we keep up? Did you see all the verbs in verse 4? He sat down, wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed – there’s nothing passive or sterile about him, he’s on the ball, he’s hyperactive! He’s up for it! He means business.

He devotes himself to the Lord to seek his face, he zooms in on his walk with God, he concentrates his mind on God. The lesson is: the more responsibility we shoulder, the more time we need for contemplation before the Lord.

We need to spend quality time in God’s presence, not just ten minutes at the end of a busy day! It’s all down to our priorities. In fact, such is the pain in his heart that Nehemiah has lost all appetite for food – he’s so upset that he can’t eat a square meal.

It’s worth noting that Nehemiah wasn’t the last person to weep over Jerusalem – Jesus did it in Luke 19:41, he found it impossible to hold back the tears when he looked out over the city and its rebellious people. For both of them, Jesus and Nehemiah, people mattered. It wasn’t bricks and mortar, it was people, real people. That’s what ministry is all about – it’s people!

Nehemiah wears his feelings on his sleeve, but they also drove him to his knees. He stormed the gates of glory in verse 5 as he pleaded for God to intervene. When he prayed, it was the natural thing for him to do, it was spontaneous. It was immediate.

Actually, this was his first response to the problem, he didn’t see prayer as a last resort, something to do when all else failed! He didn’t scratch his head and call a committee; he didn’t ask, how can we work this one out; he didn’t say, what Charlie got us into this mess? If it had been one of us, what would we have done?

When he prayed, how did he do it? It was believing prayer. I can almost hear him say: I don’t know how prayer works, but I know it works!

Nehemiah begins by praising God for who he is. A good place to start! He homes in on eight relevant aspects of God’s nature, an octave of attributes. He is bowled over with an awesome sense of God’s majestic glory – he is exalting a God who is sovereign, and mighty, and holy, and loving, and faithful, and vocal, and attentive, and merciful. The bottom line, this God is a hands-on God, a can-do God. He is the God who runs the entire show from start to finish.

When he prayed, the problems didn’t go away, but they were soon dwarfed by an awareness of who God is and of what God can do – he is the Lord of heaven and earth. The problems were seen in their proper perspective; they’re like grasshoppers, and God is a giant. He’s the one who can turn mountains into molehills! God is bigger than all our problems!

The next thing he does is say sorry for their sin, we read that in verses 6-7. He doesn’t make excuses. He goes for the jugular. Did you notice the words ‘I’ and ‘we’ in his prayer – that tells me he identifies fully with the people, he’s standing shoulder to shoulder with a generation of people he doesn’t even know; he doesn’t play the blame game and point a finger at them – he is devastated over a problem he didn’t create.

He is razor sharp in his honesty when he says in verse 7: 'Lord, I'm not only wanting to be part of the answer, I'm part of the problem.' Hey, that takes humility. And there are times when we have to go down that road if we're going to see God work in the lives of other people.

What a lesson – broken hearted people are mightily used by God to restore a broken world. Why? Because they have come to see the greatness of their God, and they've come to admit their personal guilt before him. They have caught a fresh glimpse of the sovereignty of God and their own sinfulness.

That's prayer, and that's when time spent down on your knees is well worth it. If you take a quick look at Nehemiah's prayer, you'll discover there was intensity, and honesty, and realism, and urgency in his heartfelt confession.

The next thing he does is seen in verses 8-9 – that's where he reminds God of his many promises. He earths his prayer to the word of God. He claims the promise and pleads for it to be realised – he more or less says: 'Lord, it is time for you to work!' You've said it, we've done our part, now it's over to you, the ball's back in your court.

Nehemiah quotes from Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 30 – not too many of us could do that! But this man knew his Old Testament, and he knew it well. He reminds God of what he had written – he asked God to forgive his people, to regather them, and restore them to his favour and blessing. Nehemiah had a good grasp of Scripture, and the Word had a grip on him. He knows he can trust God, for he always delivers the goods!

And then, in verses 10-11, he leaves it all with the Lord. Here is unshakeable confidence in God's character, he has a firm belief in God's power, here is a solid acknowledgement of God's faithfulness. The God who said it is the God who has done it – ah, the God of revelation is the God of redemption!

This is the God who graciously redeemed them a long time ago, he did it in a stunning display of strength and power; and so, as Nehemiah scanned their glorious past, he reminded the Lord of the many times he intervened in their history. Yes, the God of yesterday is the same God of today, and he will be no different in all our tomorrows. He is a God of transforming wonders, a God who performs miracles – and he's unchanging. He's the God who has done it before, surely he can do it again.

I reckon there were three wonderful blessings in this whole incident for Nehemiah. One, the whole exercise gave him a deeper experience of God – he proved God in a way that he had never done before, he found in the Lord someone whose grace was truly sufficient. That's why tough times often intrude into our lives, it's so that we might learn something new about the Lord.

Two, it also gave him a greater sense of indebtedness to his prayer partners, the fact is, others have joined him in seeking God's face. What a difference it makes when people pray together. Three, it gave him a wider perspective on the problem – before the sovereign Lord, the king is only a man! A teeny individual. Wow! only God can do that!

That's the essence of true prayer – it's when we throw ourselves at the feet of Jesus. And when we pray like that, it sets our faith on fire for we focus on a God who can do more than we ask or think.

It reminds me of the chorus: Got any rivers you think are uncrossable, Got any mountains you can't tunnel through, God specialises in things thought impossible, He does the things others cannot do!

In your life and mine, no river is too wide for him, no water is too deep for him, no hill is too high for him, no road is too long for him. The question is: can God? The answer is: God can! Nehemiah's favourite position when faced with a problem was the kneeling position – when you're down on your knees, they don't knock!

The reality is, prayer makes a world of difference,
prayer makes all the difference in the world.

I don't know what challenge you may be facing right now, I have no idea what tomorrow will bring into our lives – but look, the needs all around us are enormous, the stakes are high, time is fast running out; no matter how big the challenge, and no matter how tough the decision ... don't just stand there and think about it, or talk about it, pray something. It's the Nike philosophy, when it comes to prayer, just do it!

We can't rewrite history, we can't turn back the clock; but with God's blessing and God's help, we can all be history makers. We can shape the course of future history by being the kind of people God wants us to be today! We can make an impression, we can leave a lasting legacy. In the hand of God, we can be a powerful force for good. We can be a replica of Nehemiah and rock our world for Jesus. It's one day at a time, one step at a time, one person at a time.

At the end of the day, that's why this man was so used by God. An ordinary man with an extraordinary God. Small man. Big God! Yes, one man really can make a difference. Here's a take-home message for you: it's not the size of the man that matters; the mega question is: how big is your God?