

THE KIND OF PERSON GOD USES

Nehemiah 1:1-4

The book of Nehemiah neatly divides into two parts. Chapters 1-7 record how God used Nehemiah to rebuild the walls the Jerusalem. And chapters 8-13 record the revival that took place among the people, in response to power, faithfulness, and grace of God that allowed them to rebuild the wall. The entire book of Nehemiah hinges on the story of the walls of Jerusalem. However, the opening chapters of this book do not focus on the walls. It doesn't tell us who broke down the walls, when it happened, or why it mattered. Instead, in the opening chapters of this book, the walls of Jerusalem are just obscure props sitting at the back of the stage. But the man, after whom this book is named, stands front and center. And that's significant, because the way this book begins is meant to teach a lesson itself. And here is it: A great move of God always begins with a great man of God. Let me say that again: When God wants to do something great in the world; he always begins by calling and preparing a person he will use to bring that work to pass. And so the book of Nehemiah hinges on the story about the walls of Jerusalem. But when you go through the door, you will find that the story of Nehemiah teaches us the kind of person God uses to do great things. And I am personally encouraged by the fact that God chose Nehemiah to teach this lesson. In this book there are no overt miracles associated with Nehemiah's story. Rather, this is a tale of hard work, prayer, and the providence of God at work behind the scenes. Now, don't get me wrong. If we could heal at will, part the red sea with a flick of a wrist, or walk on water, it would make the process of accomplishing our goals much simpler. We don't have a supernatural ace up our sleeves like many of the Old and New Testament heroes. And Nehemiah teaches is that it's okay. He was just a regular guy who caught a divine glimpse of what could and should be. And then he went after it with all his heart. And so we can look at Nehemiah's like and truly say, "If God used him, he can use anybody."

Do you really want to be used of the Lord? Well, I have good news for you. God wants to use you. In fact, he will use you. In **John 15:8**, Jesus says, "By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be my disciples." In other words, it is God's will to use you. Therefore, we really are being redundant when we ask God to use us. We are asking him to do something he already desires to do. So maybe we should amend that prayer. Instead of praying, "Lord, use me," perhaps our prayer should be, "Lord, make me usable." And Nehemiah models for us three basic characteristics that God looks for when he searches for someone to use his service.

I. DEPENDABILITY

The first verse of the book of Nehemiah introduces the opening scene of the book. It begins by telling us that the story is primarily a narrative taken from Nehemiah's personal and official journal of the events. It tells us his daddy's name, Hachaliah, in order to distinguish this Nehemiah from other Nehemiah's mentioned in scripture. Then, in order to put the story in historical context, it dates the opening scene in the month Hebrew Chislev, mid-November to mid-December in our calendar, during the 20th year of the reign of Persia's king Artaxerxes. And then the verse closes by pinpointing the geographical location of the opening scene: *"I was in Shushan the citadel."* That is, he was in Shushan or Susa, the winter resort of the Persian king.

What was Nehemiah doesn't answer that for us until the end of chapter one. The final sentence of 1:11 says: *"For I was the king's cupbearer."* And the role of the cupbearer was just about the most important job a person could have in an ancient kingdom. You see, ancient kings either inherited their thrones as a birthright or captured their throne by military force. There was definitely no such thing as an Electoral College, recount or "pregnant chad" in the ancient near east. So if you wanted to remove a king, you had to move him permanently. And poison was the easiest way to permanently remove a king without having a bigger and better army than his. Consequently, the choice of a cupbearer was one of the most important cabinet appointments a king could make. The cupbearer would pre-taste all food and drinks to insure they were safe for the king's consumption. And although, on the surface, this sounds like dangerous and degrading work, in reality, and being appointed cupbearer was a great honor. Think about it. The person had to be a man of sterling character, total honesty, and outstanding wisdom. Literally, the king had to trust this man with his life. The cupbearer had to be with the king wherever he went. In fact, 1:1 tells us that Nehemiah was even with Artaxerxes at the king's winter vacation spot. And so the king and cupbearer would inevitably develop a special bond. The king would never make a decision without first consulting his cupbearer. And, on the other hand, the cupbearer had intimate access to the king that was unrivaled, even by the king's wife. Oh, she may have had the king's heart in her hands. But the cupbearer had the lives of the entire royal family in his hands. In short, the cupbearer was the secretary of state, chief-of-staff, head of the secret service, national security director, and press secretary all rolled up in one. And when King Artaxerxes selected a cupbearer, he chose Nehemiah. And when God needed a godly governor to lead the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls and gates, he also chose Nehemiah. It made perfect sense. Here is why: God always uses people who are faithful, committed, and trustworthy.

Now, take note of the fact that Nehemiah definitely demonstrated competence, character, and commitment. However, his dependability was not expressed in the area of work that God wanted to use him. Nehemiah's education, expertise, and experience were all directly tied to his official palace duties. And becoming the leader of a wall reconstruction project is not a natural promotion from

being a king's cupbearer. In fact, it may even be a demotion. But we can definitely say that the nature of the two tasks is absolutely independent of one another. Yet, God chose this white-collar political operative to do the blue-collar industrial work of rebuilding Jerusalem's broken walls and gates. And the fact that God used Nehemiah warns and challenges us to never, ever, underestimate the significance of your present assignment. No matter how mundane, unfulfilling, or dead-end it may seem, give God your best right where you are. Be dependable. Luke 16:10 says, "One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much." So be careful not to criticize, resent, or sleepwalk through your present assignment. Your present assignment is a divine setup for a future promotion. God always finds those who are faithful at a lesser task and then entrusts them with a greater responsibility. That's the Bible:

- **Moses went from shepherd to a great emancipator.**
- **Joshua went from being Moses' assistant to be Moses' successor.**
- **Joseph went from a prisoner to a prime minister.**
- **David went from a shepherd boy to a mighty king.**
- **Elijah went from being Elisha's servant to receiving a double-portion of Elisha's spirit.**
- **Peter, James, and John went from fisherman to apostles.**
- **Even the Lord Jesus himself went from being a lowly carpenter to being the one who declared: "I am the way, the truth, and the life."**

Let me ask you something.

Is there anything honorable about filling bags with dirt? Well, it depends. There is nothing glamorous or fulfilling about filling bags with dirt, in and of itself. But filling bags with dirt to build a dike is a different story. That can save a city. Building a dike gives meaning to filling bags with dirt. And so it is when we have a sense of divine presence, purpose, and providence.

Am I talking to some whose daily routines feel like shoveling dirt? I recommend that you take those same routines and responsibilities and view them through the lens of providence, and everything will look different. It will bring your world into focus. It will bring order to chaos. And it will bring a "well done!" from the master. Just start where you are. Do what you can. Use what you have. And give it your best. And in God's own time and in God's own way, God will promote. So, next time you feel discouraged, frustrated, or useless, remember this:

It may be on a kitchen floor
Or in a busy shopping store
Or teaching, nursing, day-by-day
Till brain and limb almost give way

Yet if, just there, by Jesus you are found
The place you stand is holy ground

II. SENSITIVITY

After introducing the opening scene in 1:1, the story itself begins in 1:2. Picture the scene. Nehemiah was in the king's palace, faithfully discharging his official duties. But his work is interrupted when a servant comes to his quarters with a message. "Nehemiah," he said, "pardon the interruption, but there is a group of men from Judah at the gate. They requested to see you. And one of them says he's your brother. His name is Hanani." "By all means," Nehemiah replied, "send them in immediately." And, of course, Nehemiah rolled out the red carpet for his brother. Can't you see them sitting around a large, elegant table enjoying a meal fit for a king, prepared by the royal chefs. However, the mood abruptly changed when Nehemiah began to ask about the remnant of Jews who had returned to Jerusalem. "How are those who went back to the homeland doing?" he inquired. "And how are things in the old city these days?" 1:3 records their response. They used two words to describe the condition of the remnant in Jerusalem. One word described the internal condition: "distress." The other word described their external condition: "reproach." And they empathized these two terms with the word "great." The people were suffering anguish of heart and the ridicule of their neighbors. And the last sentence of 1:3 tells us why: "The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire."

Now, I'm sure that this hoopla about walls and gates may sound strange to us. However, in the violent, aggressive, and non-democratic culture of the ancient near east, it was essential that cities be surrounded by high walls and secure gates. A city was only as great as its walls were strong. They offered safety from raids and symbolized strength, peace, and dignity. But unwalled cities had no defense against their enemies and were, consequently, dismissed as insignificant. And that was the condition of Jerusalem. Every time they tried to rebuild, their surrounding enemies – who didn't want them to regain political and military strength – would come in and shut them. And at some point the Jews just gave up trying. The walls remained broken down. The gates remained burned down. So the people were in great distress and reproach. And when Nehemiah received the bad news and sad report about the walls and gates of Jerusalem, 1:4 tells us that he did five things in response to the news. He sat down. He wept. He mourned. He fasted. And he prayed. Now, let me summarize these five actions with one word: SENSITIVITY. Nehemiah was the kind of person God could use because he had a humble spirit, a caring attitude, and a soft heart.

Now, let me put a footnote here.

By sensitivity, I am not referring to an overly-emotional, weak person who runs, quits, or cries at every hardship, rejection, of failure. It is a sad indictment that the army of Jesus Christ often fails to advance, because too many soldiers are in the infirmary. And they are not there as a result of the inevitable wounds and scars that occur when you champion a great cause. Instead, the beds of the spiritual infirmary are filled with coward soldiers who are nursing hurt feelings. And they never heal because they keep removing the bandages, peeling off the scabs, and refusing to let go of their offended feelings. That's why Dr. Karl Menninger responded the way he did when someone asked, "What would you advise a person to do if he felt a nervous breakdown coming on?" They expected him to say, "Consult a psychiatrist," since that was his profession. But to their astonishment, Menninger replied, "Lock up your house, go across the railway tracks, find someone to need, and do something to help that person." Got that. True sensitivity is not about how you feel about what others say about you and do to you. It's about caring for the hurts of others and to sharing the heart of God.

A. Usable people are sensitive to the hurt of others.

There are two basic ways to test a person's character: What makes them laugh and what makes them cry. And Nehemiah's godly character is revealed in the fact that when he received the news from Hanani, he broke down and cried. There was no pseudo-macho attempt to be cool. His heart was broken and he couldn't hide it. And so Nehemiah – white-collar, middle-class, well-to-do Nehemiah – broke down and cried when he heard about the condition of people many miles away that he had never even met.

In preparing this message, I ran across a haunting quote from G. Campbell Morgan. He said: "It is possible to be homiletically brilliant, verbally fluent, theologically profound, biblically orthodox, and spiritually useless." I wrestled with that for a while. And it came up with a several interesting implications of that statement. But let me share just one with you: In order to be fruitful in the work of the Lord, you must not only love ministry, you must also love those to whom you minister. I don't care how much knowledge, skill, and experience you have in what you do for God. If you do not genuinely love people, you are spiritually useless. And that's not just H.B. That's the Bible. 1 Corinthians 13:1-3 says: "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have, and if I deliver up my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing."

In the comic strip Peanuts, Linus was watching a football game on television, cheering “Go! Go! Go!” When the game ended victoriously, he jumped up in a surge of emotion and ran out to find Charlie Brown.

“What a comeback!” he exclaimed. “The home team was behind six to nothing with only three seconds to play. They had the ball on their own one-yard line. The quarterback took the ball, faded back behind his own goal and threw a perfect pass to the left end that whirled away from four guys and ran in for the touchdown! The fans went wild! You should have seen them! And when they kicked the extra point, thousands of people ran onto the field laughing and screaming and rolling on the ground and hugging each other and everything!”

Charlie Brown turned to him and asked, “How did the other team feel?”

Let me ask you something.

- **Do you ever stop to think how often the other team feels?**
- **How do you respond when you hear about others people’s needs, sorrows, and problems?**
- **Are you sensitive to other people’s hurts?**

Mark it down.

“Christian spirituality is the spirituality of the poor man of Nazareth who took upon himself the form of the servant,” wrote Kenneth Leech. “To follow the way of the kingdom therefore is to follow him who fed the hungry, healed the sick, befriended the outcast, and blessed the peacemakers.” Usable people are people who are sensitive to the needs of others.

B. Usable people are sensitivity to the heart of God.

I submit to you that Nehemiah’s broken heartedness was not just an expression of personal concern. It was not a cry for social justice. And it was not a display of national pride. Nehemiah was troubled over the condition of Judah because he was passionate about the will of God. If you x-ray Nehemiah’s broken heart, you will find a pulse that beats in rhythm with the very heart of God. Remember that the Jews were not just any old group of people. And Jerusalem was not just any city. The Jews were God’s chosen people. Jerusalem was God’s hoy city. It was a negative reflection on God’s name that the Jews were in distress and reproach, and Jerusalem had broken walls and burned gates. And knowing the vital role Israel had and has in God’s eternal plans; Nehemiah became depressed over the fact that people were not living up to God calling on their lives.

Nehemiah was no just concerned about the people. More than that, he shared God’s concern for the people. His heart was broken by the things that broke the heart of God. And that teaches us that usable people are sensitive to the heart of God.

Their love for people is the overflow of hearts that are filled with the love of God. And that teaches us that usable people are sensitive to the heart of God. Their love for people is the overflow of the hearts that are filled with the love of God. People that are used by God in a great way are not motivated by social, political, or racial factors. They are motivated by the authority of the King who will judge the nations, saying: "In as much as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it even to Me." (Matthew 25:40)

Here's my point:

As the Church of Jesus Christ, we are called to do many things that non-Christian people, groups, and agencies do. The distinguishing factor is our motivation. The reason we do what we do is clearly stated in 1 Corinthians 10:31: "So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God." Did you get that? Contrary to the popular belief, the church does not exist to meet human needs. The church exists to glory God. And it just so happens that God is glorified when we meet human needs. And so we do it – not as democrats, republicans, Americans, blacks, or even as Baptists. No. Matthew 5:16 says, "In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." And I stand to say: Let the church be the church!

- **Let's serve to the glory of God.**
- **Let's give to the glory of God.**
- **Let's preach to the glory of God.**
- **Let's witness to the glory of God.**
- **Let's sing to the glory of God.**
- **Let's pray to the glory of God.**
- **Let's worship to the glory of God.**

III. AVAILABILITY

Notice 1:4 again.

When Nehemiah received the bad news about Judah and Jerusalem, he got out of his chair and sat on the floor. He began to weep and mourn. And he began a fast right there on the spot. And it lasted for many days. That's intensity. The Jews were only legally required to fast one day a year, on the Day of Atonement. And the fact that Nehemiah fasted at another time is remarkable. But it is all the more noteworthy that he did it for many days. And all the while he prayed "before the God of heaven." Now underscore that phrase, "before the God of heaven." It does not say He prayed to the Lord. It says he prayed "before the God of heaven." And all the major translations back that wording up. To the Lord would mean that God was the

object of Nehemiah's prayers. But before the God of heaven" is idiomatic of submission, yieldedness, and availability.

Here's the point. 1:4 is not just the record of Nehemiah's reaction to the news about Jerusalem. It is, moreover, the record of Nehemiah offering himself to God as an instrument to use to do something about the situation. And I know I'm right about it because 1:5-11 records what Nehemiah said to the Lord in prayer. And 1:11 says: "O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who desire to fear you're your name; and let your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." And this man is King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah asked God to convince Artaxerxes to give Nehemiah the permission, provisions, and protection he needed to take a leave-of-absence from his cupbearer duties, in order to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls. And I declare that's the kind of person God uses. God uses people who are available. People who are willing. People who will say: "Lord, here I am. Send me."

William Secker wisely said: "It is lamentable, that we should live so long in the world, and do so little for God, or that we should live so short a time in the world, and do so much for Satan." And that means if you reject this message, you are not choosing between letting God use you and doing your own thing. You are choosing between letting God use you and letting Satan use you. I repeat: If God is not using you, Satan is. Yes. It's true that Satan is no respecter of persons. He'll use anyone too. And if you are not making yourself available to God to help people, you are automatically making yourself available to Satan to hurt people.

A man who wanted to join his church approached a certain pastor. "But." The man said, "I have a very busy schedule. I cant' be called on for any service, such as committee work, teaching, or singing in the choir. I just won't be available for special projects or to help with setting up chairs or things like that. And I'm afraid I'll never be able to go on visitations, or be at Bible study and prayer meeting, as my evenings are all tied up."

The Pastor though for a moment, and then replied, "Brother, I believe you're at the wrong church. The church you're looking for is three blocks down the street, on the right." The man followed the preacher's directions and soon came to an abandoned, boarded up, closed church building. It was a dead church – gone out of business.

Now, I hear someone saying: "I want to be used by God, but I'm just not able to do something great for God. I don't have the skills, experience, knowledge, gifts, resources, etc., that other people have. And so God can't use me." Well let me tell you that your ability does not matter to God as much as your availability. It doesn't matter who or where you are, if you are willing, God will make you able. And Nehemiah highlights God's ability to use any available person by calling the Lord "the God of heaven." I like that. Our God is God of heaven. Nehemiah was willing to

take bold steps of faith because he knew that his God was not some dead, earthly idol. But his God is the living, holy and sovereign God who reigns over heaven and earth. God is in charge. God is in control. God has the last word.

Psalm 103:19 – *“The Lord has established His throne in heavens, and His kingdom rules over all.”*

Psalm 115:3 – *“Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases.”*

Jeremiah 32:37 – *“Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all flesh. Is there anything to hard for Me?”*

I'll close when I tell you the story my daddy used to tell about a man who sat in his car one day to eat the lunch his wife had prepared for him. And after a few bites, he decided that he didn't like the mean, so he put it all back in the bag, twisted the top of the bag, and then tossed it to the trashcan on the curb. Well, of course, he missed. But he didn't get out to pick it up. He just drove off. Now, there were some birds sitting in a nearby tree, watching the whole thing. And when the man pulled off, they swooped down and started picking at the bag. But, try as they might, they could get the bag open. And after some time, they heard footsteps and raced back up to their perch at the top of the tree. And as the passerby walked along, he looked down and saw the bag, looked up and saw the birds, and then figured it out. He picked up the bag, ripped it open, poured its contents on the grass, and threw the bag away. And when he walked a far enough distance away, the birds came down and had a good meal. Now, I used to think that was a rather simple, silly little story. But I stand today as a living witness that God will open some bags for you.

**Like a ship that's tossed and driven,
Battered by an angry sea,
When the storms of life are raging,
And their fury falls on me,
I wonder what I have done that makes this race so hard to run,
Then I say to myself,
Take courage, the Lord will make a way somehow**