

**Series Title / Holy Discontent: Lessons from Ezra and Nehemiah**  
The courage to change what needs to change when God says it's time to change  
May 20 // Renewed Vision // Nehemiah chapters 1-2

**Starting Point:** Where the story of Israel left off...

Ezra began to lead a revival among the people of God who followed him in consecrating themselves to God. Now the story is going to switch gears to a leader named Nehemiah. We'll encounter Ezra the scribe and priest in this book—but Nehemiah was a servant to the King and is being sent to govern the newly formed state of Israel.

**The Main Text:** Nehemiah 1:3 “The remnant is in great trouble...”

**The Main Idea:** Godly leaders take the time to prepare for challenges and then to courageously call others to join God's plan.

**Background:**

- **The Citadel in Susa (Neh. 1:1).** Artaxerxes had his primary fortress in the city of Susa, which today is Modern Shush in Iran. It was conquered by Cyrus the Great, the King we encountered in Ezra 1, it was rebuilt and expanded by Darius the Great who reissued Cyrus' decree for the people to return to the land, and now Artaxerxes has taken up residence in it and will reissue the decree for Judah to be rebuild under the leadership of Nehemiah.
  - The biblical prophet and statesman Daniel lived there where he had a vision of the coming invasion of Persia by the Greeks.
  - The story of Esther takes place there where Xerxes threatens the Jews with extinction.
- **Nehemiah the cupbearer to the king (Neh. 1:11):** Nehemiah's name means “Yahweh has comforted.” From all the archeological data collected in this region of Persia, it is likely that Nehemiah was a Eunuch. Nehemiah's name appears on an ostrakon from Arad dated in the 7<sup>th</sup> century.
- **The people beyond the river:** Again, this is a designation of those northern and eastern nations who initially wanted to syncretize or blend their faith systems. Many people from this region have names that bear this out: a combination of “Yahweh” (Israel's exclusive God) and their regional deities. These folks were rejected by the initial group under Zerubbabel who came to rebuild the city—and in return they have systematically and repeatedly caused Israel to abort its reconstruction project on numerous occasions.

Scripture: Neh. 1:1-4

These are the words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

It so happened that in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year, I was in Susa the citadel. <sup>2</sup> Hanani, who was one of my relatives, along with some of the men from Judah, came to me, and I asked them about the Jews who had escaped and had survived the exile, and about Jerusalem.

<sup>3</sup> They said to me, “The remnant that remains from the exile there in the province are experiencing considerable adversity and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem lies breached, and its gates have been burned down!”

<sup>4</sup> When I heard these things I sat down abruptly, crying and mourning for several days. I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

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**Principles for Today:**

1. **A vision starts with a problem that becomes a concern and then a passion.** A God-ordained vision will first present itself as a challenge you cannot ignore—a concern you cannot avoid. Then, it becomes a passion, an obsession, a driving force that moves you in God's direction for change.

**The first thing that Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the king sees is a problem.** The report (1:3) is that Jerusalem lies vulnerable to the aggressive, merciless, pagan peoples surrounding Israel. Without the Wall at the base of the city—the people will not be able to build the terrace walls up the hill that are needed to secure their holy city. Leaving them forever vulnerable to the people beyond the Euphrates river.

**The second thing that happens in the text is that this problem is obviously a grave concern for Nehemiah.** (1:4) “When I heard this I was floored.” The Hebrew text literally reads “I sat down” but the context makes it clear—it was sudden, abrupt, because he was so shocked by the news. Now, the rest of the chapter is Nehemiah doing exactly what Ezra did—he confesses sins in solidarity with the nation of Israel—as an earthly proxy for the state. This problem now has become Nehemiah's overwhelming concern—a burden he cannot shake, leading us to stage three of the vision...

**The third thing that happens in the text is that Judah's plight becomes his inextinguishable passion.** He can't sleep, he can't eat, he can hardly work his day job as cupbearer and confidant to the King. He is utterly upended and captured by the challenge.

**New Testament:** And this is a foreshadow of Jesus the Messiah's passion as well. Jesus comes on the scene in the NT and everyone wants to know “**By what authority do you do these things? Who gave you this authority?**” They want to know “Tell us, are you the Christ the one who was to come...” They want to know, “Lord is the Kingdom of God going to suddenly appear now—out of heaven?” Their expectations are revealed in their questions of Jesus.

**And Jesus' answers are falling on deaf ears.**

- **Mt. 9:2** Some locals brought Jesus a man on a stretcher—lame and unable to walk from birth. And Jesus declared, “**Have courage, son! Your sins are forgiven.**”
- **Mt. 9:13** Jesus went to a dinner party to fellowship over a meal with notorious “sinners.” The Pharisees saw this and asked the disciples, “Why does your rabbi fraternize with the riff raff—the worst of sinners?” Jesus responded saying, “It's the sick people who need the physician. **For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.**”
- **Mt. 26:28** “for this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, that is poured out for many for the forgiveness of **sins.**”
- **Jn. 8:24** “For unless you believe that I am he, you will die in your **sins.**”
- **Luke 12:50** “I have a baptism to undergo, and how distressed I am until it is finished!”

**Jesus saw a problem that everyone else had missed.** They thought the problem was that they were simply missing an earthly king who would upend the Roman war machine and lead them to a geo-political Kingdom.

The Pharisees thought the problem was that the nation was full of reprobates and degenerates who weren't as religiously pure as they were.

Everyone, it seems, had misdiagnosed the real problem.

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For all of us are born into Adam—all of us have inherited a sinful nature and what's worse we have acted on it. And fallen short of the glorious standard—the righteousness of God. Each has turned to his own way. None of us sought God. None of us went out looking for salvation.

And all of us have been exiled from the Garden of God's grace and fellowship in His presence. And Jesus came to show us the way. He came to bring us back into right relationship with God. He came to heal and address our true ailment.

Jesus saw the real problem, he was distressed until he could finish his work, and this passion was his vision. He saw the world as without God and without hope. And he dreamed of a church that would some day grow and spread into all corners of the globe reaching men and women from all nations.

Nehemiah is similarly gripped by a problem. The people of God are vulnerable to raiders from the north and east. This problem become his burning concern—the burden he can't shake. So much so that his holy discontent leads him to take bold steps.

**Application:**

**Let me ask you—What problem has presented itself to you—in your marriage, in your parenting, in your relationships or your job?**

**What concern keeps you up at night?**

**What vision might God give you to solve it?**

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## 2. Leaders have patience for God's timing.

**Nehemiah doesn't just rush into the King and tell him about his vision of rebuilding the wall or Judah.** He faithfully serves (2:1). Now notice Nehemiah got his original report in the month of Kislev, which is equivalent to our Nov.-Dec. 2:1 states that Artaxerxes didn't notice Nehemiah was dejected until Nisan—which is March-April. So he lives with this burden and this vision to rebuild the walls for 3-5 months. **All the while, patiently praying and letting God stir in him a sanctified annoyance for the situation in Jerusalem.**

**Definition:** Patience is defined as the capacity to accept delay; it is to possess the faculty of tolerating trouble, to suspend our need for immediate resolution. And it can be difficult to wait patiently for God's timetable.

Nehemiah served patiently, learned, and served as the cupbearer, all the while patiently praying for an open door. He just kept on doing his job—risking his life every day in service to the King. Patient endurance refines the character needed to lead change. While he waited for God's timing, God refined and matured his character.

**When I think about all the trouble Moses got in—it was because he had a tendency to be a hothead.** He is commanded in the desert to speak to the rock for water to flow out of it, and he's so annoyed with the Hebrews that he takes his staff and strikes the rock instead. He receives the commandment tablets from God on the mountain, descends to find the people just partying and worshipping a false idol that they've coerced Aaron into making. In his anger he smashes the tablets, and slays the people.

**The people learn patience for the Promised Land the hard way. Moses learns that there is a high cost for a short fuse.**

**Waiting isn't doing nothing. It's not laziness or idleness.** Waiting for God's answer, for his timetable, may very well involve a great deal of activity. Faithfulness to what God has given us. Diligence in prayer and seeking God's will. Education—gaining new knowledge and skills or taking in wise counsel.

**Do not let the culture lie to you and invade your mental space with the belief** that you have to have everything now. Today.

There is value in the waiting. There is great worth and purpose in developing a capacity to accept delays; to endure trouble—in developing the faculty of suspending our need for an immediate resolution. God is working in us.

And he was working great patience and vision in Nehemiah.

**Think about it. How old was Jesus before he entered the ministry?** Probably around 30 years old? Why did he wait so long?

Can you imagine Jesus as a little worshiper—meeting with all the men of his local synagogue and listening to the rabbis debate over the newest halakhic regulation for the people. Just loading more and more religion—saddling them with more fastidious and burdensome regulations. And he spends his youth merely asking insightful questions of his elders and memorizing the Scriptures. Jesus' life is one characterized by singing the TeNaK, rehearsing his national stories each week in Synagogue, occasional festival observance in Jerusalem and calloused hands from the chisel and the hammer. **A life with the greatest potential of being used by God the Father, and patiently waiting, learning, and working—in the wings.**

Can you see him in numerous pilgrimages to the Temple in order to celebrate the feasts—observing season after season, year after year the corruption that has the Sanhedrin in its grip.

How many times did he want to stand up in the temple courts or on the temple steps and cry aloud “Woe to you Scribes and Pharisees. You hypocrites.” – at age 15, 17, 25, 27—he doesn't. He wants to. But he waits.

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Don't let our culture—a self-indulgent society that is addicted to instant gratification, resolution, or success—don't let them fool you into thinking there is no value in the waiting. No purpose in the silent years of prayer. **Nehemiah gets this burden of heart that becomes a passion and a vision—but he has to carry it for nearly 5 months between Kislev and Nisan.**

### 3. Change-agents pray for miracles but they look for opportunities.

While they pray for God to move, and ask God to supply the solution—God is preparing them to be a major catalyst for change. To be a significant part of that solution.

Scripture: Neh. 2:1-5 “Then in the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought to me, I took the wine and gave it to the king. Previously I had not been depressed in the king's presence. <sup>2</sup> So the king said to me, “Why do you appear to be depressed when you aren't sick? What can this be other than sadness of heart?” This made me very fearful.

<sup>3</sup> I replied to the king, “O king, live forever! Why would I not appear dejected when the city with the graves of my ancestors lies desolate and its gates destroyed by fire?” <sup>4</sup> The king responded, “What is it you are seeking?” Then I quickly prayed to the God of heaven <sup>5</sup> and said to the king, “If the king is so inclined and if your servant has found favor in your sight, dispatch me to Judah, to the city with the graves of my ancestors, so that I can rebuild it.”

Artaxerxes responds favorably and v. 8 says, “So the king granted me my request and the good hand of my God was upon me.”

**Illus. Mark and Huldah Buntain...** Mark was an energetic young evangelist in the early 60's, married Huldah and they felt called to go spend a year in Calcutta India. While there he had a sudden epiphany after a year—they immediately started a school with a handful of students, a kitchen to feed the poorest of Calcutta's poor—and a clinic.

Under their leadership, the ministry has grown to include over 100 primary and secondary schools, Bible and vocational schools, children's homes, a daily feeding program for 10,000 people, rural clinics, and a 173-bed hospital serving 100,000 patients each year and providing 40% of them with free care.

A man with no training in education, soup kitchens or medical training. But they were available when God called them.

We look for God's intervention in the world, in our community, in the church, but God is looking to activate and catalyze his followers to be part of the solution.

When we look in the book of Acts we see that stories of God's supernatural intervention have a curious pattern—often God supplies just enough relief, just enough power, just enough deliverance to get the people of God moving and working in the right direction. God often opens a door and it's the open door that we look for.

And that door is often a moment of crisis that propels them forward.

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**4. A visionary leader doesn't hesitate to call others to a great task.** I love the directness of Nehemiah.

**Scripture:** Neh. 2:16-20 “The officials did not know where I had gone or what I had been doing, for up to this point I had not told any of the Jews or the priests or the nobles or the officials or the rest of the workers. Then I said to them, **‘You see the problem that we have:** Jerusalem is desolate and its gates are burned. Come on! Let’s rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that this reproach will not continue.’”<sup>18</sup> Then I related to them how the good hand of my God was on me and what the king had said to me. Then they replied, “Let’s begin rebuilding right away!” So they readied themselves for this good project.<sup>19</sup> But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard all this, they derided us and expressed contempt toward us. They said, “What is this you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?”<sup>20</sup> I responded to them by saying, “The God of heaven will prosper us. We his servants will start the rebuilding. But you have no just or ancient right in Jerusalem.”

Nehemiah is sneaking around at night inspecting the walls, and all the gates that are charred and broken. After he assesses the damage, the officials, priests, nobles and all the workers in Israel—he turns to them and asks:

**Do you see what I see? And this is the first task of the visionary. Do you see what is broken here and what’s more—can you see this whole thing rebuilt, strengthened?**

**Then without hesitation, he calls them to this great task.** Good leaders will not flinch in calling people to give their lives for the Kingdom of God. **And the leaders and officials and nobles, priests and builders—the all sign up!** Let’s do it. We can do this.

God’s good hand is upon you.

God’s blessing and favor is evident. Let’s take this hill.

### **Don’t you love Jesus’ approach to calling disciples?**

He simply walks down to the beach in Galilee—finds Peter and James and John and Andrew and says, “Come follow me.” You see in that world, you always did what your father did. And it was a high honor to go into the business or trade of your fathers.

And it was a great dishonor to disgrace your family by choosing not to go into the family business or trade.

And yet here is Jesus, knowing the consequences of having these men forsake their livelihoods, their means of employment—and to follow him in faith, trusting God will provide, he will supply all they need for this mission.

Leaders, good ones, don’t hesitate to ask people to give up some things to follow Jesus.

Look, If we find ourselves too busy for Christian community and fellowship,

If we are too swamped in our personal lives with sports and travel and all the rest—to busy to prioritize God and his family.

If we are too maxed out and can’t squeeze a few fishes and loaves to give to the master—then we are too busy.

**Illus. I had a friend who called me to level up and it cost me, but I have never regretted it.** To this day I cannot imagine where my life would be if I had chosen not to answer the calling. Yes I lost some income, yes I lost a few travel or vacation opportunities or some things on the weekends I wanted to do with my family—but I have absolutely zero regrets about the choice to follow Jesus in service and what it cost me is nothing to compare with the reward of service.

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- **When Peter was being nailed upside on a Roman crucifix**—do you think he thought in that moment at the end of his life “yeah—this life in Christ was worth it.” I do.
- When righteous Stephen was being pummeled with stones by an angry mob—as he looked upward and saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God—do you think he thought it was worth it.
- When Mark and Huldah Buntain left behind their dreams of church evangelism in the states to go start a hospital, schools, and kitchens for the poorest of the poor in Calcutta—at the end of their lives do you think they believed their sacrifice for Christ was worth it? I do.

**Godly leaders take the time to wait on God, prepare for the challenges ahead, and they don't flinch to call others to sacrificial service.**