

CHALLENGED TO ACT

I think it is interesting how things get started. Many times new services or activities are created by the drive and energy of just one person or maybe even a small group of people. In the town in which I live, The Boys Club is an example of the dedicated efforts of a small group to make something worthwhile happen. Many times, in that small group a specific individual can be identified. Several years ago a man saw a need for a Christian ministry to men who were passing through our area or perhaps had just arrived to look for a job. From his vision grew the ministry of Hope Haven. Another citizen who was a Presbyterian layman saw the need for providing a means to help people that were getting out of prison a chance to transition back into society. Hopefully, providing this type of help would break the cycle of people winding up back in jail or prison after they had been out a while. More recently, a Mission has been started in area of the town where poverty and crime are more the rule than the exception. The objective of the Mission was to interrupt the cycle of poverty and crime that repeats in the next generation. There are many other examples of people who see a need and take action to make a difference.

Not only does seeing a need and taking initiative work in various ministry efforts, the same can be said of what happen in the secular world. Someone has said “For God's work to prosper, two things are necessary. First, an aggressive and consecrated leader is needed. Second, the people must follow their leader into new and venturesome paths of service.” We see this truth in action in the life and career of Nehemiah. He saw a need, was dedicated to providing a remedy to meet that needs, and he was able find people that would follow his leadership in building the wall around Jerusalem.

Seeing the Need and Caring – 1:1-4

¹The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachabiah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol, ²that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped *and* had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³They said to me, “The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.” ⁴When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven. Nehemiah 1:1-4 (NASB95)

Nehemiah was the descendant of a Jewish family that had not returned to Jerusalem when the people were allowed to return under the reign of Cyrus the Great. In fact, almost 100 years had passed since that time. Nehemiah, a court official in the government of Artaxerxes, was a highly trusted individual in whom the king placed his very life. In fact, Nehemiah put his life on the line several times a day for the king. You see, Nehemiah was the cupbearer for the king. As such he was responsible for choosing the wine for the king and for ensuring that the no harm came to the king from someone trying to poison him. He would taste the wine to make sure that it was not poisoned. He was in the king's presence many times a day and as such many thought that he was a possible route of access to the king.

A delegation of Jews from Judah came back to Babylon and they saw in him a way to get their message of concern to King Artaxerxes. The leader of the delegation was named Hanani and he is described as a brother of Nehemiah. (There is some controversy about whether he was the actual blood brother or just that he was a fellow Jew.) Nehemiah asked about the conditions in Jerusalem and he was shocked to hear that the people were in great affliction or having to endure suffering. They used words such as “reproach” to indicate the shame the people felt living in a city without wall. They were practically helpless to defend themselves. Several years before, the Jews had started to rebuild the wall and political opposition had caused the work to stop. Perhaps

Nehemiah was not aware that the work had not been completed. Nevertheless, he was devastated by the news of how bad things were in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah was a man that knew his own limits and he realized that he did not have the means to correct the situation that existed there in Jerusalem. When we come up against situations that are beyond our own resources, the proper action is to appeal to a higher power and there is no higher power than the Lord God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Creator of the universe. That is exactly what Nehemiah did. He prayed.

Getting Started in the Right Way – 1:5-6

⁵ I said, “I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, ⁶let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father’s house have sinned. Nehemiah 1:5-6 (NASB95)

We notice the sense of reverence that Nehemiah had for God. God is great and He is awesome. I think that we err in referring to Him in terms that do not give honor to His name. When Jesus taught His disciples to pray, He taught them proper reverence for God – “hallowed be Thy name” is a phrase He used. We see also in Nehemiah’s prayer a realization of obligation on our part to be in right relationship to God both in action and attitude. Our disposition toward God is a key to effective prayer. Humility rather than arrogance is appropriate when we seek God’s attention. The need for action on our part is captured in the words “love and obey.” This requirement did not change between the Old and New Testaments. In fact, Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments, and I and My Father will come to you and make our abode with you.”

It is interesting that Nehemiah confessed not only his own sins but those of his family and his nation. The lesson for us is that we need to pray for ourselves and to be intercessors for others. He knows what we do and say and think. We cannot hid anything from God and for that reason it is important that we acknowledge our sin before Him and turn from that sin so that there is nothing to hinder our relationship.

In verse eleven we see that Nehemiah appealed for God’s attention. We should realize that we always have God’s attention. In fact, God was already at work in bringing about the restoration of His Chosen people to their homeland. Nehemiah was going to have an important role in that restoration.