

Heroes of History: Nehemiah

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 1 October 2006

Difference Makers

What is today? It's World Vegetarian Day, according to some calendars. But it's also the United Nations International Day of Older Persons, a day when people right around the world are remembering and celebrating the older people in their communities. Today we're finishing a series that we've entitled *Heroes of History*. I thought it would be good to just pause and remember some of the past heroes of Milford Baptist, older people who have now passed on into history, but who made a difference in our lives ... In their own way these people were heroes. They were Difference Makers. I guess inside every one of us there's a desire to make a difference. I want to feel that the world has become a little more like God wants it to be because I've been alive. Don't you? That's why today I thought it would be good for us to look at the life of Nehemiah. He was a Difference Maker. What I want to do as we walk through the story of Nehemiah is to ask, "What are the characteristics or qualities of someone who God uses to make a difference in this world?" So turn with me to the book of Nehemiah, chapter 1 (p.469).

Let me set the context. A quick timeline. Moses, as you'll recall from a few weeks back, led the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. This happened around about 1300 BC, give or take a hundred years or so. Their mission in the Promised Land is to live together in a way that shows all the surrounding nations what God is really like, how this world really could be. They are to be a redemptive community through which God can bless or redeems this world. But it doesn't happen. Repeatedly, the people of Israel ignore God's law, his covenant. So eventually, around 587 BC the Babylonian army sweeps through the lower part of Israel, conquers the kingdom of Judah, destroys Jerusalem, and leads many of the people off into exile. Sometime after this, the Babylonian Empire is itself defeated by the rising Persian Empire. This is good news for Israel, because a significant number of Israelites are allowed to return to Jerusalem. But not all of them do. Nehemiah, like Esther a generation before him, lives in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire around 450 BC. If you look at the map of the Empire, you'll see that Nehemiah is a long, long way from Jerusalem. He is serving in the Persian government as cupbearer to the King of Persia. It's his job to taste the wine before it is presented to the king, not to make sure that the wine is good enough, but to make sure it hasn't been poisoned. (So you never had to ask a cupbearer, "How did your day go?" If he hadn't died, you could assume it had gone pretty well). So why would anybody apply for a job like that? Well a cupbearer was more than a butler. He was someone the king trusts, someone with considerable access to the royal throne. There is at least one case that we know of in the ancient world where the cupbearer was actually number two in the empire. So Nehemiah is doing very well for himself. He is well connected to the king. He's on a successful career path. His life is going pretty well, until one day, he says...

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire." (1:1-3)

Holy Discontent

Do you see what's happened? It's not just that the walls of Jerusalem are in ruins. The people of Israel are in ruins. God's whole dream of redeeming the world – of forming a community for himself, the people of Israel, and working through them to transform the world – is at risk. So Nehemiah says (v.4), "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept." The first characteristic of someone who God uses to make a difference in this world is pain. Difference-making often begins with a sense of "holy discontent." Deep frustration over some area of brokenness in our world. Let me give you a loose little picture of this. One of my heroes growing up was Popeye the Sailor Man. He had a saying. When something was going wrong – when Brutus, for example, was picking on his girlfriend, Olive Oyl – Popeye would get angrier and angrier until eventually he'd say, "That's all I can stand. I can't stand no more." I've got to do something. I'll do whatever it takes. I'll eat spinach, if that's what it takes. (Do you know, by the way, that in the 1930s spinach sales increased by 33%.) Popeye is credited with saving the spinach industry because he said, "I can't stand this anymore. I've got to do something."

If you think about the great heroes of history – people who God has used to make a difference in this world – it all started with an intense level of frustration or holy discontent over some issue or area where God's will was

not being done on earth. I think of William Wilberforce, who led the movement against slavery in England two hundred years ago. I think in our day of Bill Wilson, who helped start Alcoholics Anonymous, a guy who knew firsthand the pain and devastation that alcoholism causes in the lives of so many people. Or Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat for Humanity, who looked at children with no roof over their heads. Before any of them had a vision of what they ought to do, they had a burning sense of outrage, "That's all I can stand. I can't stand no more." Question: What is it that you can't stand? What is your "holy discontent"? This last week I read this from someone who's visited an orphanage in Zambia: "In this next generation, ten percent of all the children in the world will be raised in orphanages in poverty." Maybe you're struck by the needs of children or young people overseas or here in New Zealand. Whatever it is, if God has given you a throbbing sense of pain and frustration about something, maybe he's calling you to make a difference there. That's what happens for Nehemiah. He says (v.4): "When I heard these things, I sat down and wept."

Urgent Prayer

That brings us to the second characteristic of someone who is a Difference Maker. It's urgent prayer. Most of this first chapter is Nehemiah pouring out his heart to God in prayer:

"O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel" (1:5-6).

In chapter 2 we're told this: "In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king." This is interesting. The month of Nisan is four months after the month of Kislev, the first month in this story. So Nehemiah spends four months praying about this situation, before he does anything. That's incredible when you think about the kind of person Nehemiah is. I read this week that you can divide most people into one of two categories: either you're an Activist or you're a Contemplative. Contemplatives tend to be reflective and cautious and patient. They often find that prayer comes relatively easily. By contrast, activists tend to thrive on activity, and movement. They want to do something right now. Prayer can be difficult. Here's an indicator of Nehemiah's temperament. When he learns in chapter 13 that his people are disobeying God by marrying outside the faith and becoming idolaters, this is his response (13:25): "I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name." Is Nehemiah a Contemplative or an Activist? He's a racehorse, a rocket. But when he gets the news about his people, he stops and prays. For four months the fire is burning inside him, but this activist, this racehorse, this hair-puller doesn't do anything except pray.

Archbishop Temple once said, "When I pray, miracles occur." A friend replied, "Perhaps what you call miracle is nothing more than mere coincidence." To which Temple replied, "Yes, I suppose so. But I have noticed that when I don't pray, the coincidences don't occur." We've got a group that meets every Wednesday morning at 6.30 at the church here just to pray for our church and our outreach in the community. We have another group that meets on the first Saturday of every month at 7.30 am for breakfast and prayer. I know others of you pray together in your home groups. And coincidences keep occurring. Because that's where it starts. Difference-making starts with God. With urgent prayer.

Decisive Action

After he's prayed for four months, Nehemiah finds himself in chapter 2 standing before the king. It's an incredibly dramatic scene. One of the reasons why Jerusalem is in ruins is because this king, Artaxerxes – the son of the king who married Esther – has issued an edict that says Jerusalem is not to be rebuilt (Ezra 4:17-22). He's convinced that Jerusalem, with its walls rebuilt, might rebel against him. So Nehemiah goes to this king and tries to convince him to change his foreign policy. Amazingly, the king does. What a coincidence. But Nehemiah recognizes this coincidence for what it is. He says in 2:8, "Because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests." So Nehemiah travels to Jerusalem. And when he gets there, before he does anything else, he goes out at night and secretly inspects the walls to see how bad things really are. Then he pulls the leaders of Jerusalem together and says to them:

"You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace. I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me and what the king had said to me. They replied, 'Let us start rebuilding.' So they began this good work." (2:17-18)

That brings us to the third characteristic of a Difference Maker. First, there's a sense of holy discontent, then a commitment to urgent prayer, and then Difference Makers take decisive action. Most of us, when we hear about brokenness in our world – children being raised as orphans in poverty – we say, "That's just so sad. I wish it were different." I'm even tempted to give myself a little credit for having a soft heart and feeling such empathy. But Difference Makers actually do something. Nehemiah, even though he's living a long way away, and his life is going well, when he hears about the broken walls of Jerusalem, he goes to the king, gets foreign policy changed, resigns his high-level job, travels to Jerusalem, calls the leaders together, casts a bold vision, and then – miracles of miracles – the people agree. They have a ground-breaking ceremony and begin work on the walls.

Stubborn Persistence

You think it would all just be a walk in the park from here, right? It's all downhill from here:

But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?" (2:19)

Now when they say, "What is this you are doing?" they are not looking for information. This is like a parent asking a child, "Do you want a good spanking?" You don't expect the child to say, "Well let me give it some serious thought. I know my character is in need of moral formation, and this might be the best thing for me." "What is this you are doing?" is not a question. It's an accusation. Sanballat, Tobiah and Geshem are suggesting that Nehemiah's claim to have permission from the king is a lie. They're slandering his integrity. Then in chapter 4 they go after the people:

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, "What are those feeble Jews doing? ... Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?" Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, "What they are building—if even a fox climbed up on it, he would break down their wall of stones!" (4:1-3)

This is sledging or trash talk back in the ancient near east. And the people start to get discouraged. Seven times in this story you find the formula: the work advances, something good happens, and then you read the phrase, "when they heard" – when Nehemiah's enemies hear that the wall is being rebuilt – they try to stop it. Every single advance in Nehemiah's mission is met by opposition. I don't know about you, but there's part of me that thinks, "I'm trying to do good, so life ought to be easy." But a guy called Patterson wrote about this. He said, "No soldier ever goes into battle and says, 'Hey! They're shooting at me! Time out. I wasn't expecting this.' No football player goes into a game and says, 'They're trying to tackle me!'" Life is difficult. We should expect opposition and contempt when we try to make a difference for Jesus in a decidedly post-Christian country like ours. That brings us to another characteristic of a Difference Maker: stubborn persistence. Jeff Pugh is an Australian who's studied broken churches that have been restored. You know what he's discovered about "change-agents" or Difference Makers in this context? They are not necessarily the most gifted or charismatic people. They are simply stubborn. They refuse to give up. Some of you are trying to make a difference for God, trying to rebuild something through his power. Maybe it's a relationship, a marriage. Maybe it's a habit. And you've hit a wall of opposition. Don't be surprised. We live in a fallen and broken world. And we're engaged in a kind of spiritual battle. When the fighting is hardest, our job is simply to persist. To keep going. To say, "God, I'm trusting you and I won't give up."

Profound Joy

But the greatest threat to Nehemiah's reconstruction effort doesn't come from outside opponents. It comes from within. In chapter 5 you read that the countryside is in the grip of a famine. The economy is in a recession. Lots of poor occupants of Jerusalem are struggling to pay for grain to stay alive. And what do the rich and the powerful Israelites do? They lend them money and grain, but at inflated interest. They're exploiting their own countrymen, taking their land, forcing them to even sell their sons and daughters into slavery. Nehemiah goes to these wealthy, powerful people – the leaders – and says (5:9), "What you are doing is not right. Shouldn't you walk in the fear of our God to avoid the reproach of our Gentile enemies?" He says, in effect, "This isn't just about rebuilding walls. This is about rebuilding God's people. Becoming a redemptive community through which God can draw the nations to himself." The leaders realize he's right. They give back to the poor what they've taken. And then together, as one people, they continue the work – everyone playing their part – until one day it's finished. The wall is complete. Now, turn to a person near you and ask them, "How long do you think this project took? How long did it take for Nehemiah and the people to rebuild the wall surrounding Jerusalem?" "So

the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days" (6:15). Fifty-two days. How many cases have you heard about where a construction project was completed before deadline and under budget? And this was a government project!

This leads us to the last characteristic in the life of a Difference Maker: profound joy. In chapter 8, the people gather together, and they celebrate and worship God by renewing their covenant with him. It says in 8:3 that Ezra the priest read aloud from the Law of Moses "from daybreak until noon ... and all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law." Six hours of preaching, and people listened attentively. For us the word "Law" has negative, restrictive connotations. But not for these people. For them the Law was the Covenant that God made with them. It expressed God's gracious promise to them when he said, "You will be my people, I will be your God, and through you I'm going to show people what I'm really like, the way this world really could be. Through you I'm going to bless and redeem the world." It's such a beautiful and powerful vision that when they see it again, and realize how far they have fallen short from it, they weep. Their hearts are broken, as they look at the broken walls of their own lives. "That's all I can stand; I can't stand no more." But then Nehemiah makes one more difference in their hearts. He gives them one more instruction. He says: "Go and enjoy choice food [not just any food, but choice food] and sweet drinks [not Diet Coke but real drink], and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is sacred to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (8:10). In other words Nehemiah says, there is a time for weeping and confessing our brokenness and our sin, but the bottom line is not our brokenness. It is the Good News that God loves us and that, even though we fall so far short of his ideal, we are his people. Through Jesus, the One who was broken on our behalf outside the wall of Jerusalem, we have become the people of God. Through us, God is making a difference in this world.

Questions

1. Read Nehemiah 1:1-11. Max De Pree says that, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality." Do you agree? What was the reality for Nehemiah and his people? What was Nehemiah's "holy discontent"? What is yours? If you don't know, what steps could you take to find it?
2. The hymn writer, Joseph Scriven, wrote these words: "O what peace we often forfeit, O what needless pain we bear, all because we will not carry, everything to God in prayer." Is there something grieving or troubling you that you could stop and pray for right now? Is there something that your home group, like Nehemiah, could commit to praying for over the next four months?
3. Read Nehemiah 2:1-18. Don Carson says that, "although God sometimes works through supernatural and spectacular means, he commonly works through ordinary people who take responsibility ... and seek to act faithfully even in difficult circumstances." Do you agree? How might God be calling you to take responsibility?
4. Read Nehemiah 4:1-15. How do we, as followers of Jesus in New Zealand, face opposition in our attempts to make a difference in this world?
5. Upon conclusion of the wall, Nehemiah instructs his people to celebrate with "choice food and sweet drinks ... for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (8:9-10). Do you build into your life moments of intentional celebration? What's the basis for your joy? Spend some time thanking the Lord.

Acknowledgement

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