

We are in the middle of a yearlong series of messages that is taking us through the Bible (Garden to City 2016). We believe that it's within God's story that we find the meaning and purpose for our own stories. The point of all this is to learn what Scripture teaches us about God. In these pages we learn about our Creator and we discover His great love for us- how He designed us to be- and who we are in Him. Today we begin a new section of this journey. We're calling it, Nehemiah: A Comeback Story.

I love comebacks. Do you? Have you ever actually been a part of a comeback? Maybe 30 years ago you were on a team that managed to comeback from certain defeat and instead you walked away from a game victorious. Or maybe you were once looked down on by your peers (for your appearance or for the way you interacted with others), and your comeback was at the reunion when you showed up looking and acting with confidence. Maybe your comeback was finding a new job after you got laid off, or finding recovery after years of addiction, or learning to love again after someone broke your heart. The truth is, we've all been a part of a comeback at some point in our lives, right? We thought all was lost when Full House got cancelled, but they came back with Fuller House and now everything is right with the world again!

Comeback stories are fantastic. I want you to think back to some of the comeback moments in your life, or a comeback that you witnessed- one of those moments where you were thinking, "That was amazing! I can't believe I got to experience that!" This will take a bit of courage, but turn to someone around you and talk about that comeback for just a moment. (1-2-3 go...)

(3-2-1) What did we come up with? What was your comeback story?

Here are some of my favorite comeback stories:

My young heart was broken just before the beginning of the **1993-94** NBA season when Michael Jordan "retired" to pursue a career in baseball. But all was forgiven in March of 1995 when he appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated in a Bulls' uniform along with two simple words, "I'm Back!" Jordan went on to win three more championships in 1996, 1997, and 1998, including a then-record 72 regular-season wins in the 1995-96 NBA season.

Probably my favorite sports comeback story was the 2004 ALCS between the loveable losers of the Boston Redsox against the evil empire of the NY Yankees. The curse of the Bambino ended that year in the most unbelievable way. That bearded crew of misfits lost the first three games of a seven game series. No team ever comes back once they're down 3-0! But those Sox did. They won four in a row against one of the best teams of all time- the best closer of all time (Mariano Rivera) blew multiple saves- it was crazy!

What we want to do in this series is to learn about an incredible comeback story from Scripture. It's the story of how God restored the city of Jerusalem and the people of Israel. In the next four weeks we're going to watch as He uses a man named Nehemiah to bring about an incredible comeback in the lives of God's people. (Prayers are answered, lives and a city are restored, obstacles and opposition are overcome, and a victory celebration begins as God's people are reunited with their Loving Father.) Along the way, I'm praying that each of us will be inspired- that we will be filled with hope for our own comeback stories.

I want to lay all my cards out on the table here. At the end of this series, my hope is that if you're on the fence about who God is (if you just don't know if you can believe in Him or trust Him with your life- maybe you don't believe there's any hope for you), by the end of this series my desire is that you would be able to place your trust (your life) in His hands. So let's get started...

Most of us are familiar with the story of God's deliverance of Israel through the leadership of Moses, but the story that we are about to learn takes place one thousand years after Moses brought Israel out of

Egypt, which means God's people are closer in time to the birth of Jesus than to the parting of the Red Sea. In the wake of a great disobedience by God's people, a man prays on behalf of his broken and wayward nation. He offers a plea for their restoration. His name is Nehemiah and, along with most of his fellow countrymen, he is living in exile. Nehemiah serves as the cupbearer to the Persian King, Artaxerxes and when he learns that his home city, Jerusalem, is in ruins, his heart breaks with the news.

(Nehemiah 1:1-4)

In late autumn, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was at the fortress of Susa. 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem.

3 They said to me, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire."

4 When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.

Nehemiah responds to terrible news the same way that we do. Everything stops. There is mourning. There are tears. You've been there- I know I have. You wish you could think about something else, but your mind is fixed. You can't eat. You can't sleep. Nehemiah is devastated. Consider where he is right now. He's living in exile along with most of Israel. What's the one thing you long for more than anything when you're stuck in a place you don't want to be? What's the one thing that brings you comfort when you're surrounded by the unfamiliar? HOME! Thoughts of home bring peace of mind. Home is out there and that means there's still hope. So you can imagine how shattering it would be for Nehemiah to learn that his home is in ruins. He is heartsick. His dream just died.

This is the moment where all great comebacks start. All seems lost. The chips are not just down they're subterranean. To the casual observer this is as low as it gets right? "There's no getting up from this," they would say. Nehemiah is stuck in a foreign land, he's living in exile along with his people, and they've been longing for home. It's the one thing that makes their lives worth living- just the thought that they might return and get back to life as they once knew it- but now even that is taken away. The walls of their city have been torn down. The gates have been burned.

Every comeback story has that moment when things are at their worst- and this is that moment for Nehemiah. Can you relate?

Think back- it probably won't be too hard- to that low moment in your life when all seemed lost. When your parents finally split up for good. When you lost that person who meant so much. When the foreclosure papers came in the mail. When they placed the handcuffs on your wrists. When your child told you they hated you. You fill in the blank. We can relate to Nehemiah, because we've been knocked to the mat too (and if you haven't been yet, you will). You find yourself flat on your back and the referee is counting to 10.

The one thing that's consistent in every comeback story is the decisive moment when things are at their lowest point and a choice has to be made. Do I roll over and give up, or do I keep fighting? Do I throw in the towel and lose all hope, or do I keep the faith? The one thing that's consistent in every comeback, no matter how big or how small, is that determining moment where a decision is made to soldier on or surrender. This is Nehemiah's moment and we can all learn from how he responds. (Nehemiah 1:4-11)

When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven. Then I said, "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of

unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands, listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel.

These words are the beginning of Nehemiah's comeback story. At his lowest moment, when all seemed lost, Nehemiah prayed to God. And you're probably thinking, "So what! Everybody prays when they're at their lowest." We all know the old saying, "There are no atheists in foxholes." People use that statement to argue that in times of extreme stress or fear, everyone believes in, or hopes for, a higher power to come to the rescue.

When you are deeply sad or frustrated over a difficult situation, my guess is that you pray too, right? So what's the difference? What makes Nehemiah's prayer any more significant than the countless other prayers offered by those in similar times of distress? Maybe you remember offering up earnest prayers to God when you were in a low moment and it's still a point of resentment because there was no answer, or at least not the answer you pleaded for. What makes Nehemiah's prayer special?

Let me start by saying I don't think it is. Actually that's not true- it is an instructive prayer; a prayer we can all learn from and in a moment I'll explain why- but when I say that Nehemiah's prayer isn't special it's because I don't believe God chooses to respond to "special" prayers. The impact of a prayer is not based on whether or not it's well worded. It's not as though God is saying to Himself, "Well, *that* prayer was really well spoken, I have to do something about that situation." That's not how He operates. In fact, I don't think there's any prayer formula that we need to follow in order to get an answer from God. There's no magic prayer recipe that requires God to act (Let's see there's two dashes of supplication, a smidgen of adoration, a sprinkling of confession- and here comes God's "Yes!") So when I encourage you to learn from Nehemiah's prayer today, it's not because he hit upon the perfect prayer template for getting God to do what we want. Such a thing does not exist.

Prayer is not our means to convince God to act- it's a vehicle to align our hearts with His. Prayer is not about getting what we want from God, it's about turning things over to God. In other words, prayer is not about a transaction (put your \$10 prayer on the counter and God gives you a \$10 answer), instead prayer is about a connection (because we draw close to God in communication).

That's why I love reading Nehemiah's prayer. He gets it. There are three elements to Nehemiah's prayer that can help us too.

Nehemiah begins with confession. Verses 6 & 7, "*I confess that we have sinned against you. Yes, even my own family and I have sinned! We have sinned terribly by not obeying the commands, decrees, and regulations that you gave us through your servant Moses.*" Listen, when you're at your lowest point, there's no place for posing, right? Nehemiah's prayer doesn't attempt to exert any leverage on God ("God, you owe me after last year." or "God, can't you see how hard I've been trying?") Nehemiah doesn't claim he's earned God's attention or favor, in fact, he acknowledges the opposite. ("God, I know I've broken your heart.") He submits to God's Lordship in His life. He humbles himself before God.

When you pray, is this the posture of your heart? If someone were somehow listen in on your prayers which would they hear more of, "Thy will be done" or "my will be done"? Are you able to humble yourself before the Lord, or do you believe He owes you? Nehemiah begins his prayer by acknowledging his poverty before God. He's in no position to make demands and he knows it. Do we?

In verses 8 & 9 Nehemiah continues his prayer with a request for God to remember His promises. "*Please remember what you told your servant Moses: 'If you are unfaithful to me, I will scatter you among the nations. But if you return to me and obey my commands and live by them, then even if you are exiled to the ends of the earth, I will bring you back to the place I have chosen for my name to be honored.'*"

Nehemiah doesn't demand God meet his expectations, he asks God to remember the covenant He established with His people. This is pretty bold on Nehemiah's part. "God, don't forget what you said..." It's like when a kid tells their parent, "But, you promised..." There's a weight to the words, because they are simply a reminder of a commitment that was already made. "I'm not making something up for you to do, this is what you said you would do."

How do you approach your prayers to the Lord? Do you ever pray bold prayers that remind God of His promises? Do you even know the promises of God? Or are you more interested in getting results from Him than knowing His heart toward you? Is your prayer life more about getting what you want or about seeking to understand and relate to God? Even when we're really desperate prayer is not the sledgehammer we wield to get God's attention. Don't you know that He's already diligently mindful of us? That's one of His promises!

In 1 Chronicles 16:34 God promises that His love will never fail. He is faithful in every way.

In Deuteronomy 4:29 God promises that if we search for Him we will find Him. He is not playing hard-to-get. "Our God is near us whenever we pray to him" (Deuteronomy 4:7).

God promises protection for His children in Psalms 121. He is the vigilant watchman over all Israel.

God promises comfort in our trials in (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

God promises to finish the work He started in us in (Philippians 1:6)

God even promises peace when we pray (Philippians 4:6-7). His peace is protection. It will "guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus."

Listen, prayer is an opportunity, every time we use it, for trusting God and placing our lives under His care.

Nehemiah finishes his prayer by explaining to God that he is ready and willing to be used. Verses 10 & 11 "*The people you rescued by your great power and strong hand are your servants. O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring you. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me.*"

Nehemiah doesn't expect God to do all the work. He's not looking for the miraculous, he's available to participate in the process- he wants to be put to work.

How many of your prayers require God to put in all the effort? Listen, faith is the belief that God can do the impossible, laziness is expecting Him to do it without you having to lift a finger. Nehemiah's one request is for an open door to walk through. He isn't asking for God to sprinkle magic dust on the walls of Jerusalem and spring them back up on their own. He doesn't even ask for an army of workers with all the provisions necessary to accomplish the job. He only asks that God will grant him favor with king Artaxerxes.

Then Nehemiah waits. For four months. We read about what happens in chapter 2.

Early the following spring, in the month of Nisan, during the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was serving the king his wine. I had never before appeared sad in his presence. 2 So the king asked me, "Why are you looking so sad? You don't look sick to me. You must be deeply troubled." Then I was terrified, 3 but I replied, "Long live the king! How can I not be sad? For the city where my

ancestors are buried is in ruins, and the gates have been destroyed by fire.”

4 The king asked, “Well, how can I help you?”

With a prayer to the God of heaven, 5 I replied, “If it please the king, and if you are pleased with me, your servant, send me to Judah to rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried.”

6 The king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked, “How long will you be gone? When will you return?” After I told him how long I would be gone, the king agreed to my request.

You might be tempted to think that Nehemiah’s comeback started on the day the king agreed to his request. It’s true this is the moment when the tide begins to shift and the momentum swings the other way, but we know the comeback didn’t start because the king said, “yes” to Nehemiah. The comeback began months before when a man found himself at the end of his rope, but instead of giving up he leaned into the Father. And this is only the beginning of a long and difficult journey for Nehemiah and God’s people. God doesn’t eliminate the hard work or even the opposition in order to bring about the restoration of His people. They still have struggle. They still have to endure. They still have to trust Him. Their comeback story isn’t an easy one. Great comebacks never are.

Nehemiah’s prayer when all seemed lost, was the catalyst for Israel’s comeback story. But even Nehemiah knew when to give credit where credit was due. In verse 8 of chapter two he writes, *“the king granted these requests, because the gracious hand of God was on me.”*