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Nehemiah 1:1–11, ESV, abridged.

1 The words of Nehemiah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, ²that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. ³And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”

***Nehemiah’s Prayer.** ⁴As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying. ⁵I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. ⁷We have acted corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, that you commanded Moses. ⁸You commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen.’ ¹⁰They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. ¹¹O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.” Now I was cupbearer to the king.*

Weeping, fasting, and praying.

Nehemiah was a layman, a Jew, not a priest like Ezra, and not a prophet. In the Book of Nehemiah, he is living in a city called Susa, which is the capital of the Persian Empire. He is called the “cupbearer to the king”, but this understates the

significance of his position: he is a close confidant of the king, and Nehemiah is in charge of protecting the king from being poisoned – thus, he tests the king’s wine cup at every meal. A half century before, the Persians had conquered the Babylonians, and their new overlord allows the Israelites to go free. Some, but not all of them, choose to go home. They are the descendants of those who had originally been captured by the Babylonians and taken into exile. It is the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia. A “brother” of Nehemiah, named Hanani, who is probably just another male Jew, tells him that the wall around Jerusalem has never been repaired since the Babylonians destroyed it so long before. This means that Jerusalem is highly vulnerable and certain to be conquered again – and possibly soon. Nehemiah goes to Jerusalem, rebuilds the decrepit wall, enacts economic reforms, aids the poor, and makes sure that descendants of the original tribes of Israel populate the city. The book is written by Nehemiah, in the first person. What I want to focus on is the prayer he offers to God when he first learns about the state of the wall, and before he goes to Jerusalem:

“O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. ⁷We have acted corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, that you commanded Moses. ⁸You commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹but if

you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen.’¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

We see the standard Old Testament statement of the covenant between God and the People of God: they must obey God’s laws if they want to remain on the land God gave them. When they fail, they will be scattered. Nehemiah confesses that the people have broken the laws of God – and he asks God for mercy. But now focus on what he writes before he offers this prayer, just after he learns the terrible news of Jerusalem’s vulnerability: *4 As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying.* He is mourning for the lost safety of Jerusalem, and he weeps, fasts, and prays. He acknowledges the just nature of God sending the Babylonians to punish the sinful People of God, to destroy their Temple and city, and take much of the cream of their population into exile. Notice that to Nehemiah, there are three things he does when mourning a loss and coming before God to ask for protection for the people of Jerusalem, and for God’s protective hand while he goes about his mission: weeping, fasting, and praying. Weeping and praying certainly make sense to us. But why did he fast?

Consider a New Testament statement about fasting, from Mark:

¹⁸ Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. And people came and said to him, "Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?" ¹⁹ And Jesus said to them, "Can the wedding guests fast while the bridegroom is with them? As long as they have the bridegroom with them, they cannot fast. ²⁰ The days will come when the bridegroom is taken away from them, and then they will fast in that day. ²¹ No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. ²² And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins—and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins."

These are parables of Jesus, albeit compressed ones. The "John" in verse 18 is John the Baptist. He is in prison. As we all know, he will be beheaded eventually. The Pharisees are fasting to show piety, to demonstrate that they are disciplined spiritually. They did it twice a week, regardless of what was going on in their lives or within their community. John's disciples, however, are presumably fasting for the same reason that Nehemiah was fasting: to humble themselves, to expose themselves to God, all in preparation for prayer. They are appealing to God on behalf of John. They don't know God's plan and they will put their trust in whatever God does - but they are already mourning his loss. If he dies, they will weep. They might also be fasting in part because they live the same way that John lived: ascetically, with minimal belongings, clothing, housing, even minimal food.

Jesus explains why his disciples, the Apostles, are not fasting as well. He uses parables to do so. There is a wedding. The bridegroom is in the room, celebrating his wedding with his friends. Jesus is, of course, the bridegroom. The wedding is

the world with Jesus present in it. The bridegroom will leave at some point. Jesus will leave the world at some point. When the bridegroom leaves, when Jesus leaves, that will be the time for sadness, as the joy of the moment will be over. There are two other parables that Jesus uses to explain why the Apostles are not fasting. I am no tailor, but apparently, if you sew a new, unshrunk patch on an old garment, the fix will fail. If you put new wine in old wineskins, the wineskins will simply fail. New wine needs to be put in new wineskins. I don't know much about patching clothing, but I can tell you that fresh wine is still fermenting and giving off gas. This is why it would burst old wineskins, I presume. What is the point of these parables? And what is the difference between Nehemiah fasting and the fasting done by the Pharisees and the followers of John the Baptist? I'll get back to this.

I had a friend a while back who used to fast. I do not fast. Wendy will tell you that if I miss a meal, I soon have low blood sugar and I get light-headed and shaky. But my friend, we'll call him Allen, regularly fasted. He talked about it endlessly. He was a fasting guru, a fasting salesman, a man who believed that this one practice of denying oneself food on a regular basis could transform your life in beautiful ways. I don't want to dismiss Allen and his way of life. He didn't need much. He lived in a very modest fashion. He had a calmness about him. But I believe that he fasted because it was his nature to be ascetic, like John the Baptist.

I don't believe that fasting made him what he was. I think it was the other way around: denying himself was simply in his personality. I think he was wrong in what he told us, that if we fasted the way he did – by regularly going forty-eight hours without anything to eat, we would find the same kind of peace that he had found.

One day, I happened to be at a lunch meeting with a half dozen other people, one of whom was Allen. It was one of his fasting days, and so while the rest of us ordered from the Italian restaurant's massive menu, he sat there drinking a soda water and lime. As our food was arriving, someone teased him about eating a lime when he was supposed to be having water only. Instead of taking this as the obvious joke that it was, he got defensive, arguing that he hadn't even squeezed the lime into his water. He was not eating the lime, he declared, as we dug into our spaghetti, lasagna, and pizza. I was very annoyed with his pious attitude. He liked being the tough, self-denying person who was only drinking sparkling water while the rest of us stuffed ourselves. I felt like insisting that the bubbles had calories in them, that carbon dioxide was known to be fattening. I'm sure he would have loudly denied this, arguing that he was certain there were zero calories in his water.

There is a lesson from Jesus' parables about fasting. He is saying is that there are times for fasting and there are times when fasting is not appropriate. We don't fast when we're not presenting ourselves to God. Fasting goes with weeping and

praying. It's for when we're mourning. It doesn't have to be a terrible, rock bottom, worst imaginable situation. It can simply be one of those daily things when we're under pressure, when we're depressed, when an ongoing struggle has become routine, like taking care of a sick loved one or managing finances that don't ever seem to go into the black. It can just be a tough day, when little things keep going wrong. Maybe you have simply gotten to the point in life where you realize that your faith needs feeding. To do that, you must turn to God. The point, though, is that fasting is done to prepare yourself. It is not an end in itself.

It might be that the parables that compare old and new, a new patch on old clothing or new wine in an old wineskin, are more relevant to this point. Jesus is saying that times have changed. We have moved from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. The Israelite faith was very works oriented. Remember that Jesus also said: *"When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others."* Fasting, in that it is part of praying, can also be done for the wrong reason. Nehemiah knows when to fast. He needs God's help in carrying out a mission that will take him many years - making his holy city strong again. Nehemiah is like us. He isn't a king or a prophet. He isn't David or Isaiah. He is an ordinary Israelite, someone who knows that God has a mission for him. Much of what he

does has very little to do with faith. He is an Old Testament civilian living the way Jesus would one day teach us to live. In his time, people fasted for both the wrong and the right reasons. They fasted so that people would see them do it, to make themselves feel holier than others. They also fasted for the right reason. Jesus tells us in his quick series of three little parables that the days of fasting for ourselves are over. In New Covenant times, there is only one reason to fast, and that is when it is accompanied by weeping and praying. And it is always done in private.

Allen was not a bad guy. In fact, he was kind to people. He didn't live a commercial life. But he fasted like a Pharisee, not like Nehemiah.

Fasting isn't the only way to bare our souls before God. When we deny ourselves something that we enjoy or need, when we do something for someone else when we could be doing something for ourselves, these are opportunities to prepare ourselves for prayer, to get ourselves into the right frame of mind to come before God. These can be forms of fasting. We just need to remember that there is a right way to fast and there is a bad way to fast. Please pray with me.

God, help us present ourselves to you. Help us to remember that we are not humbling ourselves so that others see us. We are not denying ourselves so that we can feel better about ourselves. The goal isn't to pat ourselves on the back. May we never forget that this is a private thing, just between us and you. Amen.