



Notes

Once More Around the Sun

By Leston Blackburn

Text: Nehemiah 1:1-11 (NIV) ¹

The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

3 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."

4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. 5 Then I said:

"Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 6 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. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

8 *“Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’*

10 *“They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man.”*

I was cupbearer to the king.

Introduction

Once more around the sun! We are where we were 365 ¼ days ago (well, at least in a manner of speaking). It is that time of year again, isn't it? A new year – and Happy New Year to you! I don't know about you, but to me, a new year always brings a sense of excitement and anticipation – this year in particular as we are just weeks away from the completion of the new church building. Exciting, isn't it? It is a new beginning in many respects, a fresh start, and this, for me, at any rate, always brings with it a real sense of expectancy.

It is not surprising that this is the time of year when people make a concerted effort to better themselves in some way, so after the Christmas feast comes the New Year famine. Who knows what I'm talking about? Who needs to lose weight this year (no looking around – and no nudging the person next to you!)? Who needs to exercise a bit more? Who has some other personal challenge that you have set yourself this year? Who is already asleep?

It's an interesting time of the year, isn't it? January is often an interesting month; one I like to describe as a month of enthusiastic despair because it is usually a month of 2 halves – the first half is spent dieting, and exercising, and trying to adopt new life patterns with great gusto and determination, and the second half is spent easing back into the patterns of the previous year while trying to find a justifiable excuse why it's okay. It's an interesting month indeed! Not surprising, then, that February is usually a month where depression rates increase, because people come to realise that it isn't quite so easy to change old habits! We end up feeling the great

enthusiasm of the first few days give way to the foreboding sense that we are just going round the sun yet again, and, as the author of Ecclesiastes points out, there is nothing new under the sun! Now you look as depressed as I feel!

Sometimes, even as Christians, we feel a bit disappointed by our spiritual progress don't we? We find, at times, that it is hard to break old habits, sinful habits that plague us, bind us, rob us of our joy. We desperately want to grow in our faith, but we somehow often seem to slip back into old ways. The old man, the old devil-nature rises up. And it disappoints us, doesn't it? If truth be told, it is a complete juxtaposition to the kind of Christian life God talks about giving us.

John 10:10 (NIV) - The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

John 10:10 (NLT) - The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life.

But if truth be told, we end up feeling more like Paul when he writes,

Romans 7:19 (NIV) - For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do--this I keep on doing.

Romans 7:19 (NLT) - I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway.

It's that impending sense of despair that leaves us wondering whether by this time next year, we will still be as we are, what we are, who we are, how we are in our personal walk, in our relationships with one another, only to have travelled another 365 ¼ days around the sun unchanged.

As Peter Scazzero points out in his book entitled Emotionally Healthy Spirituality, one man commented that although he had been a Christian for 22 years, he wasn't a 22-year-old Christian but a 1-year-old Christian 22 times over.

So what then is wrong? Why can't we seem to change as we should or would like? Why do old habits have such a hold over our hearts? Why can't we seem to break free?

I think the reason is simply because it is impossible. In fact, God doesn't call us to change when you think about it. He calls us to die. When God says, "Take up your cross and follow Me," He isn't implying that we need to try to adjust who we are – He is actually inviting us to stop being who we are entirely so that He can live through us instead. Transformation is not simply rearranging the furniture – it's becoming something or someone completely new. A butterfly is not a caterpillar in a trench coat; it is a completely new insect! It hasn't received a new wardrobe, it's a completely new design altogether, and that is precisely what Jesus is inferring here when He says that *He* has come that we may *have* life.

The reason I am powerless to change is because I can't. My old nature cannot change. 'I' is the middle letter of sin. The 'I' is the old sinful nature. It can't be tamed. It can't be moulded. The only thing it can do is die. There are two natures at war for our loyalty – the old sinful selfish nature and the Spirit of God.

Galatians 5:17 (NIV) - For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want...

Let me see if I can explain it this way:

I have two jugs here. Who knows what this jug is full of? Water. Who says that this one is empty? Actually, it isn't. It is full of air! Now think of yourself as being the jug. Can the jug change its shape? No. It is powerless to do so. All the jug can do is reflect and reveal what is on the inside. Who would agree with that? So then, if there are two natures at war in us – the fleshly nature and the life of the Spirit, then think of the contents of the jug as being symbolic either of the flesh (or the old sinful self) or the Spirit. Let's say, for a moment that the water represents the flesh, the old sinful nature, and let's say that the air represents the Spirit, the evidence of whose indwelling is the fruit of the Spirit. Does the jug have the power to change? No. All it can do is reveal and reflect what is on the inside, would you agree? The jug is simply designed to be a jug – a vessel, a container to house whatever it is filled with. So it either reveals the water, or it reveals the air. And here's the thing; if the jug is full of water, it can hardly be full of air at the same time, can it? The only way to get the water out is to get the air in – would you agree? All the jug will do is reveal what is already on the inside. The only way to get more air into the jug is to get more water out. Similarly, the only way we change is when we stop focusing our efforts on trying

to and surrender instead to the Lordship of Christ in us. We simply need to invite more of God into our lives so that there is less room for the 'old us.' He must increase; we must decrease. That is why spending time in God's presence is so imperative. When we walk full of the Spirit, we do not fulfil the lusts of the flesh (Galatians 5:16). In this way, we simply become what we have been designed to be – His vessels, housing and revealing His presence.

You see, Jesus said that the thief comes to steal and kill and destroy, but *He* comes to *bring* life, and life in its fulness. The key to living a victorious Christian life is actually all about letting Jesus live His abundant life through me! It's choosing in any given moment, in every situation to yield my will to His, to be open to His prompting and to choose to reflect His heart and purpose.

Paul never said, "I can do all things." Rather, he said, "I can do all things *through Christ's strength in me.*"

We decrease when God increases in us. It's not a case of trying to become like God – it's a case of inviting God to invade our lives! You see, friends, for me to live (the Christ life) is for Christ to live in me. I'm not striving to try become like Christ; I am simply surrendering, taking up my cross and saying, Jesus, come and live Your life through me! What do You want to do through me in this situation, Lord? Let me be Your vessel! It's actually quite simple when you think about it. Who can separate us from this body of death? Jesus Christ our Lord (Romans 7:24-25)!

Watchman Nee puts it so well, when he writes:

"God's normal for a Christian can be summarised as follows: I no longer live! Now it is Christ who lives His life in me. There are two aspects of salvation that should be manifest in a Christian's life: the first is the forgiveness of sin; the second is the deliverance from sinning. Anyone who is not experiencing both of these aspects in his life is living beneath the privileges that God has accomplished for us in Christ. Because of our limited comprehension of the state of our fallen nature, we do not have a true appreciation of how helpless the natural man really is. Thus we still have some expectations in ourselves. And as a result of this faulty line of thought, we think that we can please God.

The blood can wash away my sins, but it cannot wash away my old man. For this we are in need of the Cross. Though the blood deals with sins, it is the Cross that deals with the sinner... There is an old world and a new world, and between the two there is a tomb. And although God has crucified me with Christ, I must still consent to be consigned to the tomb. Presenting myself to God implies a recognition that I am already altogether His.

In ourselves we are not able to deal with the flesh, the practices of the body, or the satanic self. For years, we have tried to be the pilot, but we have failed. No longer should we try to be the pilot. We have a wonderful Pilot, the life-giving Spirit in us; we just need to cooperate with Him...obedience will become your cooperation with the Spirit.

In order to experience the life of Christ in a practical way, a day must come, as definite as the day of our conversion, when we give up all rights to ourselves and submit to the absolute lordship of Jesus Christ in every area of our lives. A revelation of this requirement is the first step to holiness; consecration (the offering of our whole lives) is the second step.

Until the Lordship of Christ is a settled thing in our hearts, the Spirit cannot operate effectively in us. If we do not give Christ absolute authority in our lives, though He may be present, He cannot be powerful. The power of the Spirit is held back. A forgiven sinner is quite different from an ordinary sinner, and a consecrated Christian is quite different from an ordinary Christian.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Next time you face a temptation, remember that you have been given a choice. You can either allow the water or the air to invade the jug. You have a choice! You can turn that TV off. Nobody is forcing you to watch what you shouldn't. You can hold back that sniping remark. Nobody is putting a gun to your head to speak it. You can do all things through Christ's strength in you! It's just a case of choosing to let Him be Lord.

Why is that so vitally important? Because we cannot experience more of the Spirit unless or until we experience less of the flesh any more than the jug can be completely full of air and water! Every time I choose the flesh, I choose against the work of the Spirit in my life, and it comes at a price! How many

times do we read in the book of Acts of the apostles being *full* of the Spirit when signs and wonders followed?

Which brings me the long way round to our opening text. Nehemiah, that great man of God through whom God changed the course of history. I think he is a wonderful example of the flesh warring against the Spirit and the Spirit prevailing because Nehemiah chose the way he did.

Nehemiah let God invade his heart, and all that was accomplished was accomplished as a consequence of that very truth! He chose the purposes of God and the good of the nation above self-preservation, and a world was changed as a result!

1. Nehemiah's heart was broken

Nehemiah went from cupbearer to governor because Nehemiah's heart was broken. His transformation was a consequence of his heart condition.

V2-4 - Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. 3 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." 4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.

How many people do you think had heard the news about the walls in Jerusalem being broken and the people of Jerusalem being harassed as a consequence? Would you agree that it was probably quite a few? How many people other than Nehemiah actually did something about it? I think it is fair to say that the vast majority probably thought, "What a shame, but you know what – it's not my problem! What could I do about it anyway?"

Why do you think that is? Here's what I believe. Nehemiah allowed God's heart to invade his heart. It was simply a case of the air replacing the water. Nehemiah simply couldn't go along with preserving his own life and interests at the expense of the burden in his heart to fulfil God's will.

Nehemiah's heart was broken. Just look at his prayer to God...

5 Then I said:

"Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 6 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. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

8 "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.' 10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man."

Amazingly, Nehemiah actually prays God's heart back to Him! Nehemiah even quoted God to God! He prayed God's own words back to Him!

I think it is fair to say that Nehemiah's heart had been invaded by God's own heart, wouldn't you agree? He was merely expressing what was already on God's heart!

I believe, friends, that true transformation happens not when we try to change, but when we simply invite and allow God to invade our lives and take His rightful place as Lord, as Master. When the things that break His heart begin to break ours to the point where we pray for Him to do whatever needs to be done and to use us to do it, well, that is a recipe for transformation!

So my question to you today is not, "What do you want to change about yourself this year?" but "Will you allow God to break your heart?"

2. Nehemiah's heart was broken by divine design

I don't know if you realise this, but Nehemiah's response came on the back of several key events that had already happened in history. In fact, by the time this story unfolds, the Israelites have already been restored to Jerusalem and have lived there close on 90 years. 70 years before, Zerubbabel had returned from exile to rebuild the temple. 14 years before, God had sent Ezra to stir the hearts of the people; and some 440 or so years later, a Saviour would walk into history, through the very gates of Nehemiah's wall into the very temple Zerubbabel rebuilt to stand trial for crimes He never committed so that He could go to a cross he never deserved in order to save the people He never stopped loving! It's not about who changes the jug – it's about who fills it!

3. God changed the story of history through the life of Nehemiah

Andy Stanley actually puts this well when he asks what hung in the balance as far as Nehemiah's life was concerned. I mean, think about it for a moment. What if Nehemiah had never allowed God's heart to invade his? History hinged on the response of one man!

So then, what hangs in the balance because of your life? We have no idea what hangs in the balance in our decision to either embrace or ignore the burden that God has placed on our hearts! What hangs in the balance if you will walk full of the Spirit this week? This month? This year?

This simple cupbearer became the instrument of God. One day a servant of the king decided not to simply journey one more year around the sun as usual. And the rest, as they say, is history!

Conclusion

So, let's land the plane. As we stand on the brink of a brand new year, if you feel the need to lose some weight, good. There's nothing wrong with that. If you need to exercise a bit more, by all means do (responsibly of course). It will do you good. But why not let this year's journey around the sun be a little different. Why don't you invite God to invade your heart? You may just find that a lot changes in the process - a lot more than you ever anticipated!

Prayer

Lord, I want to invite You to live Your life through me this year. In every situation help me to ask for, wait for and yield to the prompting of Your Spirit in my life. Be Lord of my heart. Be Lord of my mind. Be Lord of my tongue. Be Lord of my hands. Be Lord! I realise that I am only victorious in as much as I am yielded to Your Spirit in me. Come Holy Spirit. Come have Your way, Lord God. Amen.

ⁱ Unless otherwise stated, all Scripture references are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® Anglicised, NIV® Copyright © 1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.®

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ⁱⁱ The Normal Christian Life by Watchman Nee – excerpt from Secrets to Spiritual Power.