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Nehemiah receives news from Jerusalem. The calling of the first disciples.

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Transcript

Nehemiah chapter 1. The words of Nehemiah the son of Hekeliah. Now it happened in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that 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.

And 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. As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

And I 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, let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before

you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel which we have sinned against you, even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses. Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples, but 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, to make my name dwell there.

They are your servants and your people whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. 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. Now I was cupbearer to the king.

Along with Ezra, Nehemiah was one of the chief among the leaders of the Jews in the 5th century. He was appointed as governor of Judah by the Persian king Artaxerxes, coming to Jerusalem, according to the traditional chronology, around 445 BC, just over a decade after Ezra had arrived in the city with his company of returnees. As we see later in the book, he is a contemporary of Ezra and the time of their ministries overlapped.

The book opens with an attribution of authorship to Nehemiah. While there are parts of the book that seem to come from the editor's hand, the backbone of the book seems to be Nehemiah's own memoirs. Nehemiah's father, Hekeliah, is not mentioned outside the book of Nehemiah.

The exact dating of the events of this chapter are debated, as it isn't stated to what the 20th year relates. Is the 20th year the 20th year of Artaxerxes reign? Elsewhere, when Nehemiah refers to dates, he references them in terms of the years of Artaxerxes reign. He speaks of the 20th year of Artaxerxes reign in the next chapter.

The fact that Artaxerxes is not mentioned here is peculiar if the year is being dated according to the years of Artaxerxes reign, although it is possible that the year dropped out at some point in the transmission. One of the problems that we have to resolve with the dating is the fact that the month of Kislev would be in the preceding year of the month of Nisan, mentioned in the 20th year of Artaxerxes in the following chapter. Since this is likely taken from Nehemiah's own memoirs, another possibility is that this reference to the 20th year is the 20th year of his own service or of his presence in Susa.

The latter, Charles Fentum argues, is unlikely as a cup-bearer would most likely move around. If it is dated according to Nehemiah's personal service, as Andrew Steinman notes, it would suggest that what we have here is a passage taken from the middle of a larger body of material. Fentum maintains that it is more likely that the year refers to the

year of Artaxerxes reign and that the reference to his reign has dropped out.

He resolves the problem of the months falling in different years by claiming that the calendar is being calculated from the autumn, not the spring. This is not entirely satisfying as an explanation to me. Susa was the winter residence of the Persian kings.

It is also the setting of the events in the Book of Esther. Hinnaynay, mentioned here, is also mentioned in chapter 7 verse 2. He might be Nehemiah's literal brother, but he might also be his fellow countryman. Steinman notes that two of the Aramaic letters from Elephantine in Egypt, written around 419 BC, refer to a Hananiah, of which Hinnaynay was likely a shortened form.

Some scholars have speculated that this might be an extra-biblical reference to a character found in scripture. Hinnaynay's message is a profoundly discouraging one. Some work had already been undertaken to rebuild the walls of the city and re-establish its fortifications in the near centuries since Cyrus's decree.

Earlier, in the reign of Artaxerxes, in events mentioned in Ezra chapter 4, work on the re-fortification of Jerusalem was halted by the king. Presumably the parts of the wall that had been rebuilt were largely demolished and burnt down. The remnant there, the people who had returned under Shesh-Baza at the time of Cyrus's decree, the company of Ezra who had more recently joined them, and other Jews, were beleaguered.

Their city was in a sorry condition, far diminished from its former glories and offering them little security. Nehemiah is devastated by the news. He responds with days of fasting, mourning and weeping.

Verses 5-11 records Nehemiah's prayer concerning the situation. He seeks the Lord's ear, confessing the faults of the people and of himself. He calls upon the Lord to remember his promises in his covenant.

He prays that his prayer would be heard and that the Lord would grant him the success that he needs as he presents the situation to Artaxerxes. In describing his prayer he seems to allude to Solomon's prayer at the dedication of his temple. We might especially hear the words of 1 Kings chapter 8 verses 46-53 behind Nehemiah's words here.

If they sin against you, for there is no one who does not sin, and you are angry with them and give them to an enemy, so that they are carried away captive to the land of the enemy, far off or near. Yet if they turn their heart in the land to which they have been carried captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors, saying, We have sinned and have acted perversely and wickedly. If they repent with all their heart and with all their soul in the land of their enemies, who carried them captive, and pray to you toward their land, which you gave to their fathers, the city that you have chosen, and the house that I have built for your name.

Then hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions that they have committed against you. And grant them compassion in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them, for they are your people and your heritage, which you brought out of Egypt from the midst of the iron furnace. Let your eyes be open to the pleas of your servant and to the plea of your people Israel, giving ear to them whenever they call to you, for you separated them from among all the peoples of the earth to be your heritage, as you declared through Moses your servant, when you brought our fathers out of Egypt, O Lord God.

Nehemiah takes these words and applies them to his situation. He appeals to the Lord on the basis of the Lord's character and on the basis of His covenant. He addresses the Lord as the great and powerful ruler of all of His creation and the God who is utterly faithful to His covenant and His people.

Much as in the ministry of Ezra, the law of Moses lies behind so much of what Nehemiah says here. It is the measure for how the people have gone astray, but also the source of hope for their future. Nehemiah appeals and alludes to several passages within the Pentateuch, presenting their promises to the Lord as grounds for his prayer.

Perhaps the most prominent passage behind Nehemiah's prayer is Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1 to 6. And when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before you, and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you, and return to the Lord your God, you and your children, and obey His voice and all that I command you today, with all your heart and with all your soul, then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you, and He will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there the Lord your God will gather you, and from there He will take you, and the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it, and He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

The chapter ends by telling us that Nehemiah was Artaxerxes' cup-bearer, an extremely important office. The king would have placed great trust and confidence in his cup-bearer, and some cup-bearers were second only to the king in their power and influence. The cup-bearer had the ear of the king, he offered him counsel, and also would often administer affairs for him.

A question to consider. Verses 5 to 11 are the longest of Nehemiah's prayers within this book. What can we learn about Nehemiah himself by his prayer, and what lessons might we learn about prayer more generally? John chapter 1 verses 29 to 51.

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me comes a man who ranks before me, because he was before me. I myself did not know him, but for this purpose I came baptizing with water, that he might be revealed to Israel.

And John bore witness, I saw the Spirit descend from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but he who sent me to baptize with water said to me, He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen and have borne witness that this is the Son of God.

The next day again John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as he walked by and said, Behold the Lamb of God. The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, What are you seeking? And they said to him, Rabbi, which means teacher, where are you staying? He said to them, Come and you will see.

So they came and saw where he was staying, and they stayed with him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John speak and followed Jesus was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother Simon and said to him, We have found the Messiah, which means Christ.

He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, You are Simon the son of John, you shall be called Cephas, which means Peter. The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee.

He found Philip and said to him, Follow me. Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter. Philip found Nathanael and said to him, We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.

Nathanael said to him, Can anything good come out of Nazareth? Philip said to him, Come and see. Jesus saw Nathanael coming toward him and said of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit. Nathanael said to him, How do you know me? Jesus answered him, Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.

Nathanael answered him, Rabbi, you are the son of God, you are the king of Israel. Jesus answered him, Because I said to you, I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these. And he said to him, Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.

Each of the Gospels in its own way begins with the ministry of John the Baptist. However, perhaps above all of the others, it is John's Gospel that most emphasises the witness of John the Baptist. In the other Gospels we read about the baptism of Christ and the events surrounding it, as the Spirit descended upon him and later brought him out into

the wilderness.

Yet within the Gospel of John, it is in the witness of John that this event is recalled, not with the objective narrative voice of the Gospel writer, but within the witness of the character of John the Baptist. John is also the one who introduces Christ as the Lamb of God. As the Lamb of God, Jesus is perhaps to be connected with the Passover Lamb and the people's deliverance through sacrifice.

He is pure, without defilement or spot, and prepared for the sacrificial task of bearing the weight of the world's sin, for which he is already marked out at this point. John presents Jesus as the one who takes away the sin, singular, of the world. The sin of the world is something more characteristic of the world as a whole, not so much an assortment or collection of sins, but the fundamental enmity that exists between the world and God.

Jesus comes to deal with that. Verse 29 declares that this occurred on the next day. As we go through John chapters 1 and 2, we will see a series of days, and they invite our attention.

They do not seem to connect events to a fixed date or point in time. Rather, they connect a series of events in a numbered sequence of days, which move from the initial presentation of John to the wedding at Cana. Given the creation themes that are prominent from the very beginning of this chapter, several commentators have speculated that they should be thought of in terms of creation days.

Peter Lighthouse has suggested that verses 1 to 18 begin with the light of the world as the first day of creation. Christ is the light of the world that comes into the world. The baptism of John is described in verses 19 to 28, which is the division of the waters above from the water beneath.

Jesus' baptism in verses 29 to 34 is the emergence of dry land from the water, the dove descending like the dove descended upon the land after the flood. Day 4 is John pointing the disciples to Jesus in verses 35 to 39. The multiplication of the disciples that the disciples bring their brothers is the fifth day, where the creatures swarm and multiply in the seas in verses 40 to 42.

In day 6, we have the episode with Jesus and Nathanael, who is the Israelite indeed, the man in whom there is no guile. That happens on the following day in verses 43 to 51. On the seventh day, the Sabbath, there is rest.

Nothing occurs on that day. And then on the third day, we have the wedding of Cana in chapter 2. That is day 8, the start of a new week pattern. This is all speculative, but it seems to be a suggestion with a reasonable likelihood to me.

We might also see parallels with the end of the book, where Christ rests on the Sabbath day in the tomb, and on the first day of a new week, the third day, he is raised from the

dead. All of this said, I would put more weight upon the claim that there is a creation sequence being alluded to here than I would upon any specific suggestion of whether or how that plays out in specific details. John is sent that he might be the means by which Christ is revealed to Israel.

His witness to what occurred at Christ's baptism is crucial to this. Christ is the one on whom the spirit descends and remains. That this happened in the form of a dove might recall the flood in the story of Noah.

Jesus is the new creation emerging out from the waters. Word of mouth plays a crucial role in the gathering of the first disciples. Personal invitations, summons, eyewitness testimony and recommendations are the means by which new followers are recruited to the cause.

John's mission of making straight the way of the Lord leads him to throw his weight behind Jesus' kingdom campaign. He points two of his disciples towards Jesus as the Lamb of God. In verse 35, one of these two disciples, Andrew, then proceeds to call his brother Simon.

The next day, in a strikingly authoritative action, Jesus summons Philip to follow him. In verse 43, Philip then finds Nathaniel and calls him to come and see Jesus. The narrative of the calling of the first disciples involves a number of paradigmatic features.

While the account could be read just as prosaic description of concrete actions, the references within these verses to following and seeking, the invitation to come and see, to go to the place where Jesus dwells and the act of staying with him, all involve terms or concepts that are deeply resonant within Johannine theology. To abide with Christ, to come and see, to bear witness, to follow. Within this account then we can see the spiritual pattern that holds for those who become disciples of Christ, seeking and committing themselves to following him, coming to him and receiving new spiritual vision, abiding with and dwelling with and in him.

The summons to come and see is an invitation to move beyond just taking someone else's word for Jesus' identity or to regard him from a distance. One must experience him directly and personally. Such an invitation is extended in the assurance that Jesus is the real deal.

The witness of John and others concerning him will be vindicated by the test of close and extensive personal examination, taste and see that the Lord is good. Christ is everything that he is declared to be by his witnesses. It is a challenge to move beyond reliance upon word of mouth alone and to enter into a deeper acquaintance with the person of whom one has heard testimony.

While we are reading an account of historical events, John also wants us, his hearers, to

recognise the resonance for our own lives. We as readers of the text or hearers of it ought not just to take the word of John or of the evangelist and of the various disciples for the identity of Christ and his goodness. Rather, heeding their testimony, we are supposed to come to Christ for ourselves, to experience him for ourselves and to discover that, as the Queen of Sheba said to Solomon, the half was not told us.

The purpose of such eyewitness testimony is seen in places like 1 John 1 1-4. Witnesses make concerning the Christ in order that persons might enter into fellowship with him and with his people. In John 1 we see that those disciples who respond to Jesus' personal invitation proceed seemingly unprompted to extend that same invitation to others.

Having himself been invited to come and see, Andrew later finds and calls his brother Simon, Philip having been found and called by Jesus to follow him, finds Nathaniel, encouraging him to suspend his scepticism long enough to encounter Jesus for himself. Within these verses Andrew, Philip and Nathaniel all present startling and spontaneous declarations concerning Christ. He is the Messiah, in verse 41.

He is the one of whom Moses and the prophets wrote, in verse 45. He is the son of God and the king of Israel, in verse 49. The scepticism of Nathaniel swiftly evaporates when he meets Jesus.

The significance of Nathaniel being seen beneath the fig tree is not immediately obvious. The fig tree could be seen as having a connection with Israel, which is elsewhere spoken of as a fig tree. Why this has such a strong effect for Nathaniel is not immediately apparent.

Perhaps Nathaniel received some sign at that time under the fig tree and Jesus' statement taken together with that served as a sort of confirmation. But at this point we are just speculating. Nathaniel is described as an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile.

Perhaps this is to be seen as a recollection of Jacob the patriarch. Jacob, the man first called Israel, was a man in whom there was arguably a lot of guile. He was the deceiver in Genesis chapter 28.

He had a dream in which he saw angels ascending and descending upon a ladder. Later when he woke up, he erected a pillar and called the name of the place Bethel, house of God, seeing the place as the gate of heaven. The ladder of Jacob is the conduit between heaven and earth.

In speaking of angels ascending and descending upon the son of man, Jesus presents himself as the ladder of Jacob. Within that theophanic vision he is the one who is the conduit between heaven and earth. We probably ought also to hear an allusion here to the eschatological figure of the son of man who is mentioned in places such as Daniel chapter 7. This is the third time that Jesus is either explicitly or implicitly presented in

theophanic terms within this chapter.

In verses 14 to 18 he is presented as the glorious revelation of God that Moses witnessed upon Mount Sinai. In verses 32 to 34 John the witness sees the spirit descending and remaining upon Jesus in another theophany. In verse 51 Jesus speaks of yet one more theophany in which Nathaniel will see the angels ascending and descending upon him.

Perhaps there is a progression to be observed here. The first theophany is of the descending word. The second theophany is of the descending spirit upon the descended word.

And the third theophany is of the angels ascending and descending upon the descended word upon whom the spirit rests. In Christ heaven is coming down to earth much as we see at the end of the book of Revelation. Such a passing on of personal witness can be seen at yet another key point within the narrative of John's gospel.

It's another point where the character of Philip appears. He only appears on three other occasions in the gospel but one of them is the critical juncture in what might be seen to be only a minor occurrence but which leads Jesus to say that his hour has come. In chapter 12 verses 20 to 22.

Now among those who went up to worship at the feast were some Greeks. So these came to Philip who was from Bethsaida in Galilee and asked him, Sir we wish to see Jesus. Philip went and told Andrew.

Andrew and Philip went and told Jesus. There is a similar pattern here as we see in chapter 1. Some people are coming to see Jesus and there is a movement from one person to another by word of mouth. The message is going out and new people are hearing.

Reading such an account of trustworthy and spontaneous word of mouth, of a proclaimed truth that punctures scepticism, of a reality that does not merely withstand but rewards closer scrutiny, and of a personal encounter that excites people to pass on the news, it can all seem too good to be true. Especially to those with jaded and cynical ears. We are a people worried about deceptive testimonies, about fake news, about overhyped disappointments and unfulfilled promises.

To such persons the gospel writer would extend the same simple invitation received by the first disciples. Come and see. A question to consider.

The testimony of scripture to Jesus of Nazareth is an important part of Philip's witness. He describes Christ as the one of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote. To what scriptures do you think he might be referring?