

What Is the Problem?

How do you solve a problem? You study its origin, the history of its development, the major players and their interests, and formulate possible steps to resolution. From a faith perspective you also factor in God, his purpose, his character, and his promises. In commercial or social conflicts you have the option of firing



Michael K. Olmsted

people or changing corporate policies and structures, but in the realm of faith there is God and his grace, which makes for a much different dynamic. God's grace is our greatest hope in all of life, but our human thinking is predominantly shaped by self-serving desires and often convenient moral amnesia.

Our text opens over a hundred years after the Babylonians defeated Israel and destroyed Jerusalem and the temple built by King Solomon. What seemed to be the citadel of God was a ruin and the best of its populace had been exiled in servitude to pagan kings. This is not the failure of a great corporation. This is the failure of God ... the denial of his power and promises ... the death of a national delusion! Or, so goes the usual thinking. What happened to our national dream, our power, our standing as a chosen people?

Whether on a national or personal level, accepting responsibility for failure is never easy. But when God is involved the whole situation is different because the human heart can change, circumstances can be transformed, and a new beginning is possible.

Our story begins with the conquering of the Babylonians by the Persians, the rise of King Cyrus and his new policy that resettled foreigners could now return home and restore their lands for the overall good of the empire. Nehemiah is in the Persian capital of Susa, when Hanani and a companion returned with the sad news that Jerusalem was a ruin, which moved Nehemiah to weep and fast for several days. This was preparation, the passion of a broken heart for the restoration of their city, but even more, the restoration of a rebellious people to the God who never stopped loving them (vv. 4-6).

Review the checkered history of this people called Israel: their nomadic heritage, God's promise to Abraham,

the indignities of slavery in Egypt, the exodus to freedom, the conquest of what became their national territory, followed by prosperity and a terrible collapse. They forgot their history, reveled in success, and compromised their faith until all was lost in a second exile.

Is there some hint of hope in the message of Hanani and the other men returning from the ruins of Jerusalem? Yes! Real hope is found in Nehemiah's prayer. Commentator Judson Edwards lays out the careful structure of that prayer:

1) *The adoration of God.* Whatever the challenge or problem, our hope is found in "the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments" (v. 5). It is only in the love and grace of God that anyone can overcome life's challenges.

2) *Confession of sin.* There is no pretense with God, no anonymity. Nehemiah declares: "Both I and my family have sinned. We have offended you (God) deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses" (vv. 6-7). There are no secrets with God, yet he loves us beyond our limitations.

3) *Statement of faith.* Prayer is based on our trust in God, knowing full well we can seek him because of what he has done for us. This is the God who called Moses to serve him, guided the people to the land of promise, blessed them with impossible victories, and who would once again restore their hope (vv. 8-9). We come to God in our need because his grace is our hope when all else seems lost.

4) *Petition of hope.* Without tangible evidence Nehemiah voices his trust in the God who is still available to his people, that God will "give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man" (v. 11). "This man" is the Persian king Artaxerxes, who allows Nehemiah to return to Jerusalem. There are times in life when no one seems to know the answer to a situation and we realize God is our refuge. Like the prophet, we hold on to God.

Nehemiah has heard the stories of God's blessings for Israel long before his lifetime and the splendors of Jerusalem during the days of David and Solomon. He knows the saga of Israel's claiming the promised land. Now he confronts the truth that Israel's tragedy of a lost Jerusalem is much more

than broken walls and a ruined temple. The problem is in the hearts of the people, their turning to idols, indifference to God's laws, and their embrace of the world's values.

Memorizing doctrines, observing rituals, and building great edifices cannot substitute for personal faith in God. We must cultivate a moral lifestyle, compassion for the downtrodden and disadvantaged, and love as God loves. The prophet confronts the truth that Israel needs more than independence and an impressive city. He can lead them as did Moses and Joshua, but unless God has first place in their hearts there will be no change in their world.

What is the real problem you face today: finances, stress on the job, a strained marriage, illness, loneliness, addiction, or a difficult child? Life can be stressful in so many ways, and there are therapists, financial counselors, doctors, and friends who can help. But there is only one place that offers any of us real hope beyond our circumstances: God's welcoming and unflinching love.

Nehemiah's people lived in despair, but returning to Jerusalem would not change their hearts. God's love was their only real medicine, but they would, once again, choose other remedies that would prove insufficient. Israel's history is filled with stories of failure, restoration, and then another failure. Who among us hasn't said something like "I knew better, but I did the same thing again!"

Life is an ongoing challenge, but faith in God can guide us to a new pattern of living, new expectations, and a new outlook. Nehemiah would experience success in the rebuilding of Jerusalem, but the old problems would return. The heart is at the center of our problems. Until we know the freedom of God's love, the power of God's grace to help us see and feel differently, and the joy of trusting God with our lives, we will always face the crumbling walls of hopelessness and loneliness.

The Apostle Paul, who faced incredible challenges and threats, points us to "hope (that) does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us" (Romans 5:5). There will always be challenges and failures, but in God there is a forever hope and help that can help us face and solve any problem.

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques. Formations is a curriculum series from Smyth & Helwys Publishing, Inc. through NextSunday Resources.