

I hope you enjoy this chapter of a book that played a major role in my life.

Chapter 2

BHAA!

In Exile

It was just a few weeks ago that I saw images of the damage caused by Super Storm Sandy that devastated much of the East coast of the USA. Whether it is a super storm in the USA or mudslides in South America or the devastating and on going civil war in Syria, seeing people being displaced from their homes is always tragic.

Aside from the incredible loss of property and personal history that goes with losing one's home, there is the immediate anxiety of "where to now", and the long, hard road to recovery to be dealt with. No one deserves this type of experience.

This is the story of Nehemiah and the Jewish people. Not only have they lost their homes and their farms, they have lost their country and been carried off as the spoils of war into another country, another city, Babylon. Before we even attempt to understand the metaphor of being exiled in Babylon, take a moment to try and imagine what it must be like to have everything stripped away from you. You lose your home, your place of worship, you are carried off into a foreign country and in exile you are nothing more than a slave. This is a recurring theme of Jewish history, making them a displaced people seeking to be restored to their homes and homeland. Considering the thousands of years that the Jewish people were threatened and displaced it's no wonder that there is a perpetual crisis in the Middle East. Their need for survival is way beyond my understanding!

For our Jews in the story of Nehemiah, life has become "normal" while in Exile. The Babylonians who had originally destroyed Jerusalem and taken the Jews into Exile have now themselves been overthrown by the Persians who now occupy Babylon. Darius, the Persian King, has a different attitude to the Jews and begins to allow a few of them to start returning to Jerusalem and Judah. Many of the Jews in Exile have built "normal" lives for themselves. Even though this is the case they remain "second-class" citizens of their "adopted" countries. Expatriates would perhaps say the same thing today!

In the heart of every Jew there is the longing and the lament to once again go back to Jerusalem. No matter how well they would do in Exile, there is this inner call for their homeland, their people, their worship and their traditions.

Listen (read) to this song that was written while in Babylon. It is recorded under the title of Psalm 137:

*Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept as we thought of Jerusalem.
We put away our harps, hanging them on the branches of poplar trees.
For our captors demanded a song from us.*

*Our tormentors insisted on a joyful hymn:
 "Sing us one of those songs of Jerusalem!"
 But how can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a pagan land?
 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget how to play the harp.
 May my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I fail to remember you, if I don't
 make Jerusalem my greatest joy.
 O Lord, remember what the Edomites did on the day the armies of Babylon
 captured Jerusalem.
 "Destroy it!" they yelled.
 "Level it to the ground!"
 O Babylon, you will be destroyed.
 Happy is the one who pays you back for what you have done to us.
 Happy is the one who takes your babies and smashes them against the rocks!*

Quite some song! A lot of passion and commitment in their longing for their homeland. How is that last line? Wow, there is not much left to the imagination when it comes to how the writer feels about being in Exile.

And under the rule of Darius, they were now able to go back. Imagine how it must have been for those who decide to go back to Jerusalem. For decades they have longed to return home. They have written songs about it, dreamed about it. Those born in Exile have heard stories about Jerusalem, the temple, the beauty of Mt Zion and much more. I think their expectation in going back could perhaps have reached fantasy proportions. "When we get back to Jerusalem, then everything will be all right".

But for these returning Jews going back to Jerusalem, life proved to be incredibly hard. They were jumping from the "fat into the fire". In returning and attempting to re-establish themselves, things just kept going from bad to worse. Because the city walls had been ruined and the city gates burned, every time these returning exiles began to make progress, their neighbors and enemies would simply plunder them. It was a simple case of one step forward, two steps back.

Great trouble and disgrace:

As we read Chapter 1 of Nehemiah, we pick up the story a few years after some of those returning exiles had been attempting to make a go of life in Jerusalem. Darius is dead, and Artaxerxes is now king. Hanani, the brother of Nehemiah was one of those who had gone back to Jerusalem. Now, with a few friends he comes back to Babylon and reports on the condition of Jerusalem to Nehemiah.

Neh 1:3, 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."

We don't know what Nehemiah was expecting to hear, but his reaction is remarkable. Before we see Nehemiah's reaction however, let's pause a while

and interrogate this brief, but devastating report. “*They (those who have returned) are in great trouble and disgrace*”. The Amplified Bible uses the word “reproach” for the word “disgrace”.

This is not what Nehemiah and those Jews in Babylon wanted to hear. “Great trouble and disgrace!” As I have tried to imagine what it was like for these people (something that is certainly beyond the realm of my own experience) I think one way of describing it would be “loss upon loss”.

The idea of having a set back, then another set back while you’re still in the first, is incredibly crippling. Just the words “trouble and disgrace (reproach)” are loaded with insight. I mean, you can kind of get through “trouble”, but when your trouble becomes rooted in your identity, and your trouble becomes psychological and spiritual as well as being circumstantial, you are in trouble! And when your troubles are psychological and spiritual, then not only are you trapped by your circumstances, but you become trapped by your view of your circumstances.

A few years ago a friend of mine was retrenched from his job. He was given a fairly generous severance package and was actually quite pleased. He was not very happy in his work, and when retrenched he was optimistic that this could mean a positive change for him. Although feeling threatened at losing his job, he had some financial reserves and now would be able to give some time to find a new and better job. However, things never went according to plan. He struggled to find a work. He began to come to the end of his financial reserves. Understandable all of this eventually resulted in him feeling disillusioned, passive and pessimistic.

Although my friend eventually found a job, he still went through quite a painful process. He experienced the feelings of being in trouble and all that comes with being without a job. During that time words of encouragement were sometimes met with a cynical and negative retort.

Take this story, or a story like this, and multiple it by ten or even a hundred to try and get what was going on with these returning Exiles. One blow after another, one set back after another, and an ongoing sense of, “no matter what they do, nothing seems to help” had now become their story.

Torn down walls and burnt gates

The second part of Hanani’s report was that the walls of Jerusalem were “torn down and the gates had been burnt”. Of course with no walls and gates for protection, the city lay exposed for the enemy to plunder. But I think this is a powerful metaphor for an inner condition. And this was this case with the remnant and the returning exiles.

The national identity of the Jews was and is still pretty much rooted in the city of Jerusalem. I can’t describe the overwhelming sense of hurt and disappointment that these words would have brought to Nehemiah. By his

reaction in the following verse we can see that this news was devastating. But we will come back to that.

As you read this story of Nehemiah, you may be able to relate. So often we come to a place in our lives that we feel vulnerable, that we land up being both spiritually and emotionally exposed. Sometimes we feel that “one more thing” could be devastating and that something needs to be done. Even as you read this it may somewhat describe your current experience or the experience of someone you know. Things are deeper than normal, and simply “being positive” is not going to resolve this current crisis.

I can’t imagine what it must have been like for these Jews, but relatively speaking, I know what it is like to be in situations like this. Live long enough, and you are going to experience some devastation.. How we respond in these seasons will have a huge impact on the kind of people that we will become one day.

Let’s see how Nehemiah responds.

Nehemiah’s response.

Nehemiah 1:4, *When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven.*

Again, in this one verse, just these few words, we get a fairly intense view of what this news means to Nehemiah and how the situation in Jerusalem impacted him. The history of the nation of Israel, with its ebbs and flows of obedience and disobedience are captured in this verse. There must have been this expectation that after all the nation had been through, things would surely now begin to turn for the better. Surely, the fact that Darius and Artaxerxes had allowed Jews to start returning to Jerusalem was a sign that God was going to restore Israel and the city of Jerusalem.

No, sadly the people were in “trouble and being disgraced”. The walls of the city were in ruins and the gates had been burned, leaving them fully exposed to their enemies. Instead of a national turn around, there was an ongoing disaster.

Nehemiah is broken by the news. He carried the restoration, the destiny and the vision of this country deep within his heart. To hear that things were not going well, that in fact they were going terribly, put him into a state of desperate agony. On hearing this news, it seems that it literally “floored” him. Like a heavy-weight boxer receiving a powerful punch to the jaw that puts him on the canvas, Nehemiah is floored by the “punch” that had come his way... *“When I heard this, I sat down and wept...”*.

When I read this verse for the preaching series that our church did around Nehemiah it struck me as perhaps the key verse to understanding the book of Nehemiah and what it takes to live a Missional life. It is because of the impact

that this news had on Nehemiah that he would put everything at risk, take on a huge mission that would change the course of the history for this nation and lead a charge that would see the walls being rebuilt in 52 days, worship being restored, and commerce once again becoming part of the nation.

This so often the case. A big enough shock, or a desperate diagnosis and it is as if we are sobered up to some new reality that is significantly important to us. Being floored by the circumstances of our lives or of someone we love deeply causes us to re-evaluate and take action.

A Big Hairy Audacious Ask – BHAA!

The news of the condition of Israel was taken so personally by Nehemiah that it eventually led him, at the risk of his own life, to make a Big Hairy Audacious Ask of the King.

Let me take a moment to share how I came up with this “cheesy” acronym, which by the way we have found “sticky”. A few years ago I read Jim Collin’s book, *Good to Great*. A wonderful book that has had a huge impact on my life and I strongly recommend anything by Jim Collins should you wish to improve your leadership abilities. Anyway, in this book he speaks about having a Big Hairy Audacious Goal (BHAG). To state the obvious, I changed the “goal” to “ask”. Through out the course of this book I refer to the “Ask”. Nehemiah’s big “ask” was made to King Artaxerxes. I have used some “preachers license” to speak about the “ask” we make as being something we ask God to do or for Him to intervene.

Now with that out the way, we can get back to the BHAA. Nehemiah is broken by the condition of Jerusalem and the state of the people of Judah. His response is to turn to God and he prays a compelling, passionate, heart felt prayer. Neh 1:6-11 *“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. 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.*

“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.’

“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.”

You can tell a lot about a person by the prayers they pray. And this prayer confirms some of the things we already know about Nehemiah. He knows the

history of the Jews, he knows that they have had this roller-coaster ride of obedience and disobedience for generations. He also understands the covenant that God has made with Israel, and what he said to Moses. He knows that the promise of God is to restore the nation on the condition that the people will obey and turn their hearts to him.

I think it may be safe to say that this prayer gives us some insights into why Nehemiah responded the way he did. Maybe he thought that the Exiles who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon were already fulfilling the *“if you return to me and obey my commands.... I will bring you back to the place I have chose for my name to be honored.”*

Maybe he wondered whether God was not keeping his part of the bargain. Israel’s part was to return and obey, God’s part was to bring them back.

Whether this is true or not, the conditions and circumstances facing Nehemiah were cause enough for him to pray like this. This prayer, filled with passion and intercession leads Nehemiah into a time of protracted prayer and planning.

A Missional Ask

In the last line of this prayer, the tone of prayer makes a significant shift. *“Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me”.*

The last line of the prayer is Missional in its urgency. This line is loaded with action, loaded with something big and audacious. Nehemiah is praying about success and favor with the king. He prays, “put it into his heart to be kind to me”. Yes, Nehemiah is not going to hear about Jerusalem and tell his brother, “I will pray for you”. No, Nehemiah is about to step into the action. He is about to pray a prayer that says something like Isaiah did, “Here I am Lord, send me”. This prayer is not asking that someone else would do something, but that I am going to do something.

The thing that struck me when I read this verse was the passion and the motivation and conviction that stood behind this prayer. Nehemiah was seeking God for something that was completely compelling – the state of Jerusalem. He was going to risk everything on this conviction. The prayer that he was praying was accompanied by some seriously committed action. And to me that is what makes this prayer Missional.

A great definition for Missional prayer is “prayer companied by action”!

I feel so convicted by the passion and commitment that is behind Nehemiah’s prayer. I sometimes think that I have lived such an ordinary life, praying “nice” prayers will with spiritual jargon, simply expecting things to be as they are. That I have all but “backslid” in my approach to prayer and the mission that

God has called me to. This may not be your story, but if it is, you will know exactly what I mean.

I began to look at my BHAA and how deeply I was being affected by the “torn down walls and burnt gates” that existed in my life. I began to feel the “trouble and reproach” that the situation made me feel. As I took the time to allow the brokenness of some aspects of my life to occupy space in my heart and soul, I began to feel something of what I imagine Nehemiah must have felt.

I found myself weeping for these broken and ruined walls in my life. I realized that I needed to raise my intensity before God if I was going to make a Big Hairy Audacious Ask around the circumstances of my life or “broken walls”. I began to think about the price that I was willing to pay to see the “ask” answered, that in “52 days” the walls would be rebuilt and dignity would once again be my experience.

In short, I had a bit of a work out. The results were that I began to find my prayer becoming my mission. That everything began to change, affecting not only this BHAA that was on my heart, but also my whole approach to God, my faith and to those around me.

I began to experience what I now call “Missional prayer”.

Pause for a prayer comment

I would like to put the story of this Big Hairy Audacious Prayer /Ask on hold for a moment and make some comments on prayer. As you may be able to tell from this previous section, I have begun to feel amped up on certain issues around prayer.

One of the discoveries in the story of Nehemiah has been around how prayer directs action. Prayer can be easily reduced to a religious duty. Along with this religious duty we sometimes seek to formularize prayer. We use acronyms to provide models on how we should pray. These acronyms and formulas are not wrong in themselves. But they become religious when we reduce them to mere duty or obligation and they become void of passion or intensity. Surely speaking to God should extend beyond a ritual!

Another challenge around prayer is the whole issue of unanswered prayer. I have tried to give others and myself a variety of explanations as to why God answers or doesn’t answer prayers. I have used illustrations like, God answers all prayer with a “yes”, “no” or “wait”. This may be true, but try telling that to a family whose 9 year old has just been diagnosed with cancer!

The issue around motive is also a subject of concern when we discuss and teach on the subject of prayer. James talks about motives and asks the questions, are we praying simply to “heap on our own lusts” as the King James Version of the Bible put’s it?

This study in Nehemiah will hopefully help to make prayer more tangible and create a deeper, more personal interaction between us and God. Being “fired up” is not a requirement of effective prayer, but a sense of mission sure helps to get your prayer life going.

The Big Hairy Audacious Ask level 2

Getting back to our story with Nehemiah. In the second to last verse of Nehemiah 1 you get the feeling that Nehemiah’s prayer is about to shift gears. Verse 11 says, *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’s prayer has shifted from his reasoning with God about what’s happening in Jerusalem and is now being directed around king Artaxerxes. “Grant me success by making the king favorable to me. Put it into his heart to be kind to me”.

Nehemiah, with a good idea of what it is going to take to rebuild the city walls and hang the gates, realizes that he needs to get the king onto his side. Things are about to become dangerous. In the last verse of Nehemiah 1 we find this line – “In those days I was the king’s cup-bearer”. For me, reading this line again there is almost something ominous and dangerous around this comment. King Artaxerxes was becoming part of the Ask. Yes, Nehemiah was going to have to ask the king for something.

Time, Timing and Desire

The first line of chapter 2 starts like this, *“Early the following spring, in the month of Nisan”*. This is really interesting because according to Neh 1:1, everything that has happened up till now took place in *“In late autumn, in the month of Kislev”*. In other words, Nehemiah gets the report of Jerusalem’s condition in late autumn, but waits through the winter to early spring before he actually does something about his Ask. He waited around 3-4 months before actually making his big Ask.

Why did Nehemiah wait three months? Perhaps it was something very practical like knowing that he could not do anything until the spring anyway. Perhaps he was afraid to go to the king, or perhaps he wanted to “incubate” his Ask. We don’t know, but what seems clear to me is that nothing had changed in terms of his conviction, his passion, his desire to see something done and about making his request known.

I think that the test of time is a great test of conviction and desire. With time a person will either grow in their conviction of what it is that they want God to do, or the conviction will fade into a “passing fancy”.

One of the things that concerns me is how often I can feel strongly about something and yet under the scrutiny of time, this conviction often fades.

When this happens you have to ask yourself, “Is this a conviction? Do I just have a short attention span? Am I somewhat uncommitted?”

Missional living and Missional prayer has to be something that stands the test of time. We have to push through what I would call the “emotion” of the moment and gain a sober, honest conviction about things. I think that Nehemiah brooded on the condition of Jerusalem and even began to formulate a plan of action should he gain the favor of the king. In the same way, as Christine and I sought to make our BHAA of God, we have found that we have needed to formulate a plan of action and continue to keep the mission alive in our hearts.

This brings me to the whole aspect of desire. I think that we can be moved by our need as much as Nehemiah was. We can feel as strongly as he did around what we’re asking God to do. But I do believe that we need to stimulate desire for God to do something. Time can sometimes dilute our desire to see God act, and so we need to stimulate and keep our desire to see God move alive. Jesus uses these words in Mark 11:23 when talking about prayer, “What ever you desire”.

The simplest way to keep desire alive and the conviction strong is through an ongoing reflection of what it is that caused you to be “floored” in the first place. Sometimes we get “used” to our problems or are de-sensitized to what’s not right and grow accustomed to what we would long to see changed.

The Moment of truth

Another magnificent truth struck me when we come to the moment where Nehemiah makes his Big Hairy Audacious Ask. Neh 2:1-5, *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. 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, 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.” The king asked, “Well, how can I help you?”

With a prayer to the God of heaven, 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.”

The things that stands out to me here is that the king notices Nehemiah’s state of mind. I get the feeling that Nehemiah was good at his work. I think the king had noticed him before and was accustomed to Nehemiah being a positive, bright person. I think that Nehemiah was most likely a man of real integrity and character. I make these assumptions because the king really cares about his frame of mind and is open to having a discussion with Nehemiah, a mere servant. This was probably a little unconventional in those times.

The next thing is the actual Ask. When Nehemiah is asked why he's looking so sad, he is ready. I think that he has prepared himself for this moment and added to that, his passion and conviction are still very much alive. Listen to his words, *"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."* Nehemiah's sense of mission is alive. He says it in such a way that the king's only response is, "what can I do to help?"

Once again, we have arrived at another huge insight into Missional prayer. I feel like I keep saying this, but here is another favorite moment and favorite verse, *"With a prayer to the God of heaven, I replied...."* This is a prayer offered in the moment.

I think that our journey has reached a moment of truth. The need that we have been carrying in our hearts has now becomes something more than a desire, more than conviction, more than a longing. It has now become a force that is put into action.

I know that we don't necessarily have a king that we address with our BHAA. For me however, there is a moment a time in which we pray and make an Ask. This prayer is different to other kinds of prayers like the musings, the reflections, and the expressions of our heart.

Perhaps the best way I can describe how this may take place would be to share with you a little how this impacted me. As I studied this book I realized there are three Asks or needs in my life that made me feel a little bit like Nehemiah felt after hearing the report from Jerusalem. I began to think a lot more deeply about these three things. Yes, I had spoken to God about them, I had also often spoken to Christine and I knew that I had had a longing in my heart for these three requests to be granted for a long time. Each year our church would start the year with a 24 hour prayer and fasting vigil for the coming year. For 23 hours we would pray for the needs of our country, our city and our church, but during the last hour of this prayer of the day we would pray for personal issues in our lives., I would always pray about my desire to see these three things come to pass.

But, after reading Nehemiah, there was this moment. I took time to ask myself, how do these needs make me feel? I reflected on the fact that in one way, I had become accustomed to the fact that these three things were just a part of my life. Now I had reached a point where the way I prayed about them and the way I viewed them and the way that I would act around them needed to change. It was my moment in which, "with a prayer to God of heaven, I said...."

I knew that this moment of my desire to see God do something was going to affect the way that I would live my life from now on. Not only was I going to say, "Please God do something about...", but it was also the moment where I

was going to say, “and Father, I will do what you want me to do about these prayers I am praying ...”

Missional prayers are prayers with deep convictions, while at the same time they are prayers that demand a different approach to living.

There was a price for Nehemiah to pay. Nehemiah 2 and the last part of verse 2 says, “I was terrified...” What caused Nehemiah to be terrified? He knew that the moment he went public with His ask, everything was going to change forever. On the one hand he could have lost his position, and his job. He could have been executed for presuming that king Artaxerxes even cared. He is also aware that if the king would grant him his request, he would have to go to Jerusalem and do something about the walls and gates. There again, everything would change.

A big moment, a big Ask. Nehemiah made his Ask and the king gave him permission. Then Nehemiah made a further ask for resources and protection, and the king would give him these as well. Months of prayer and planning had come down to this Big Hairy Audacious Ask, and now the mission was about to start!

Personal reflection:

- What is broken in your life causing you “trouble and disgrace?”
- Take a moment to clearly define what your BHAA looks like.
- Ask yourself, how does this need make me feel?
- Ask yourself, how will your life be different if God was to simply give you what you ask?
- Think what difference making this ask may make to your current way of living.
- Now, write down your Big Hairy Audacious Ask and take a moment to pray the prayer of asking our Father to do what only He can do!