

I. Introduction:

- A. The books of *Ezra*, *Nehemiah* and *Esther* should be studied together or in succession, because they are interrelated and interlocked.
1. The *Book of Nehemiah* follows the *Book of Ezra* in time, and *Ezra, the man*, is found in both books.
  2. *Artaxerxes* is named in two of the books, and *Ahasuerus* is also mentioned in two, but not the same two.
  3. Esther was Ahasuerus' Queen some time after Cyrus, but before Artaxerxes the king in this chapter.
- B. Before we go on, we need to tie two statements together.
1. **Verse 1** concludes with the words, *"Now I had not been beforetime sad in his presence."*
  2. And **verse 2** ends with *"Then I was very sore afraid."*
  3. Nehemiah wasn't simply afraid when the king pointed out his obvious sadness.
  4. He was *"VERY sore afraid."* He was **exceedingly** afraid – **terrified**.
  5. How odd that seems to us. How could Nehemiah's attitude or sadness be a reason to fear the king?
- C. There is a statement in *Esther* which sheds light on this.
1. In the midst of the three emigrations of Jews to Judah, racial prejudice among the heathen below the level of king, was rampant.
  2. Everywhere they turned the Jews were either loved or hated – often out of envy, as in the case of Daniel.
    - a. Esther's cousin was hated because he honored God and wouldn't play the political games of the day.
    - b. Anti-Semitism is nothing new.
  3. Not only was there hatred in Judah led by Sanballot & others, fomenting persecution against the returnees.
  4. But even in Shushan the hatred against Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah still roiled in the hearts of some Chaldeans and Persians.
  5. If **you** hate God's people – Israel and the Jews – you are living in very dangerous territory.
- D. While Ezra was in Jerusalem a man named Haman incited the king and others toward a mass slaughtering of the Jews back in Shushan.
1. **Esther 4:1** – *"When Mordecai (Esther's cousin) perceived all that was done (against the Jews), Mordecai rent his clothes, & put on sackcloth with ashes, & went out into the midst of the city, & cried with a loud & a bitter cry; and came even before (or in front of) the king's gate: for none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth."*
  2. Notice – **"For none might enter into the king's gate clothed with sackcloth."**
  3. I bring this up to point out that there were laws in place that no one could come near the king of Persia in mourning, showing grief – or displaying any kind of *"sadness."* Not even the queen herself.
  4. There are other examples of this kind of stupidity throughout history.
- E. But *Nehemiah* was not out in the courtyard, like Mordecai; he was in the king's inner chamber.
1. He was not a petitioner; he was one of the most trusted – or distrusted – men in the king's inner circle.
  2. He said, *"For I was the king's cupbearer."*
- F. Herodotus and other historians colorfully describe the duties and practices of the cupbearer.
1. Wearing the proper attire and without the least bit of open emotion, the cupbearer went about his work.
  2. If the king wanted a drink – water, wine, fruit juice, milk, whatever – it was Nehemiah's job to give it to him.
  3. He approached the king with the decanter balanced on his finger tips, not in his grasp.
  4. He would then pour some of the drink into the palm of his hand in the king's sight, and then drink it, proving it was not poisoned.
  5. I picture Nehemiah with his hand and the decanter close to his face.
  6. Without intending to draw attention to himself, Nehemiah inadvertently exposed his grieving expression to the king.

- G. Out came the question, *“Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick?”*
1. That question can be asked in any number of ways – kindly, accusingly, with concern – without emotion.
  2. Could it be that Artaxerxes asked the question with anger in his voice?
  3. Our first response is – *“No, this was not anger. We certainly wouldn’t ask with any kind of accusation.”*
  4. And then he softened the question with the comment, *“This is nothing else but sorrow of heart.”*
  5. But if there was no anger or accusation, why did Nehemiah write, *“Then I was very sore afraid?”*
  6. And why was his next sentence *“Let the king live for ever?”*
- H. I apologize for making the introduction to this message a bit long, but I must bring out this critical point.
1. There is something hidden from our English eyes here in this text.
  2. The word Hebrew *“sad”* is *“ra’rah”*, and **verses 1 & 2** are the only places where it has this translation.
  3. It makes perfect sense being rendered this way, because Nehemiah really was deeply and horribly sad.
  4. As I say, that Hebrew word is translated *“sad”* only 2 times, but it is a very common word in the Bible.
  5. And its first, and by far, foremost translation and meaning is entirely different from *“sad.”*
  6. *“Ra’rah* is almost always translated with some form of *“evil”* or *“wickedness”* – 500 times.
  7. Quite legitimately, Artaxerxes could have been asking, *“Why is thy countenance evil?”* or *“wicked.”*
- I. Remember, Nehemiah is serving the king something which has been used to kill hundreds of kings in the day.
1. Artaxerxes may have glanced up and seen an expression on his cupbearer’s face which worried him.
  2. *“Why is thy countenance evil? What are you doing? Is this an assassination attempt?”*
  3. *“Then I was very sore afraid.”* No, no, O king, *“Let the king live for ever.”*
  4. Whether or not that last phrase was common verbiage or not, Nehemiah meant it more than most.
  5. *“I am not here to harm you in any way, my king. I am burdened about the city of my father’s sepulchres.”*
- J. I have said all that to introduce the question to **you** – *“Why is **THY** countenance sad?”*
1. This time it is not the King of Persia asking the question, it is the King of kings.
  2. *“Why is **THY** countenance sad?”*
  3. I live in the same shoes as the rest of humanity, so I know there are a thousand answers.
  4. But for the sake of a lesson, let’s try to separate those answers into two groups.
  5. Simply put, there are legitimate reasons to be sad and there are reasons that are not legitimate.

## II. Let’s start with the negative.

- A. Our King asks us from time to time, *“Is that really something over which to be sad?”*
1. Notice Artaxerxes’ ties two pieces of anatomy together – *“Why is thy **COUNTENANCE** sad?”* and *“This is nothing else but sorrow of **HEART**.”*
  2. Simply put, someone’s countenance is his face – his facial expression.
  3. The king could see Nehemiah’s sadness in his eyes, perhaps all over his face.
  4. But the man’s face was nothing more than the expression of his heart.
  5. Sometimes it is possible to mask our true emotions, pasting on a smile, hiding the heart.
  6. But generally speaking that heart will reveal eventually itself.
  7. And of course, our King, knows perfectly well what lays in the heart.
  8. And He is far more concerned with that part of our spiritual anatomy than He is our physical face.
- B. How many times do we become grumpy, down, sad, blue, unhappy or dejected **for fleshly reasons?**
1. Us? Never. Our bad days always have legitimate causes (He said facetiously).
  2. But often, it is easy to see that our neighbor’s unhappiness is the result of disappointments to his flesh.
  3. For example, **jealousy** can strip the smile from a person’s face, and **unfulfilled greed** can keep it off.
  4. We will get to this, but that was a part of Haman’s *“sadness.”*
  5. **Hebrews 13:5** was directed to Christians – *“Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have.”*

6. Paul told Timothy – partly for his benefit and partly to be shared by him with others.
  - a. **I Timothy 6** – “*Godliness with contentment is great gain*” – it is a huge benefit to life.
  - b. “*For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content. But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.*”
  - c. See that – the love of money and the things of the world pierce the heart with sorrow.
  - d. “*But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.*”

C. Why are thy heart and countenance sad? You say it’s due to the **problems of life?**

1. I hope this doesn’t come as a surprise, but problems are often the building blocks of life.
2. “*Man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward*” – **Job 5:7.**
3. And “*there hath no (problem over-taken) you but such as is common to man.*”
4. You have a choice whether or not they can bring you a smile or to bring your heart down.
5. Three times in **Psalms 42 & 43** Psalmist asks himself – “*Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted in me? hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him for the help of his countenance.*”
6. Soul, you don’t need to be sad, because you have a faithful God, who will with the problem make a way of escape that ye may be able to bear it.
7. Ah, but here is the real problem for most of human beings – they do **NOT** have the same faithful God to bless us in our dark days.

D. The difficulties of life come from three general sources.

1. There are some, probably not as many as most people imagine, which have a **spiritual sources.**
  - a. Satan came to God and was given permission to make Job’s life miserable.
  - b. And for some time Job became the saddest man on the planet – and with good reason.
  - c. It might be said that **Satan** made his life miserable.
  - d. And it might also be said that **God permitted** problematical tests in his life.
2. If Job had been able to pull back the curtain or if he had heard the conversation between the devil and God, then his attitude throughout those attacks may have been different.
3. Job, “*Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art suffering from a God-permitted attack?*”

E. Probably far more frequent are the sadnesses which are sparked by our fellow **sinner**s.

1. There was a slight – an over-sight – a hasty, thoughtless word – a betrayal.
2. Over the last week you might be able to think of a dozen things which might have stung you and had the potential of making you sad.
3. But thankfully, during these past seven days you have been strong and they didn’t bring you down.

F. Perhaps the most dangerous source of depression is **self-inflicted.**

1. I acknowledge that there can be physical, medical causes to depression, but they are not my subject.
2. There are just too many **sins** living in us, like latent viruses, ready to invade our hearts and countenances.
3. And every one of those sins has the potential to become an illegitimate source of sour sadness.
4. I’ve mentioned some already, so how about adding – **pride**, a ready source of sadness.
5. And how about **rebellion**? There is nothing so depressing as thwarted coup attempt.
6. Who would you say was the saddest man in the **Book of Esther?**
  - a. You might point to Mordecai all decked out in his sackcloth and ashes, but I think you’d be wrong
  - b. The most sad and miserable man in Shushan was rich and powerful Haman.
  - c. And for him – his **hatred** of Mordecai was the source.

7. We could run through the lists of sins in several of Paul's epistles, and we'd find things like **emulation**.
  - a. To emulate, to aspire, to copy in dress, appearance and manner is only going to make you miserable.
  - b. You are never going to have the face or the body of that Hollywood star, so don't even think about it.
8. I won't press this subject any farther – but it is an obvious fact that sin results in sadness far more than genuine happiness

G. But let me get back to *"ra'rah"* which is here translated *"sad."*

1. 90% of the time, perhaps 95% of the time, what we call *"sad"* the Lord calls *"evilness"* or *"wickedness"* – 500 times more frequently.
2. There are hundreds of illegitimate causes or sources for our sadness – they are all rooted in sin.

### III. However there are more legitimate causes, which are not of the flesh and therefore not of sin.

- A. Nehemiah tells us, Artaxerxes *"the king said unto me, Why is thy countenance sad, seeing thou art not sick? this is nothing else but sorrow of heart. Then I was very sore afraid, And said unto the king, Let the king live for ever: why should not my countenance be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers' sepulchres, lieth waste, and the gates thereof are consumed with fire?"*
  - B. I have an unanswerable question for you to mull over later today.
    1. Between Nehemiah's conversation with Hanani about Jerusalem in **chapter 1** and this conversation with Artaxerxes in **chapter 2** – four months have passed.
    2. Nehemiah tells us the first took place in the month of **Chisleu** and this was now **Nisan** – something like January to April.
    3. Where has Nehemiah been all this time?
    4. My guess is that he has been carrying out his duties; serving the king completely without expression.
    5. Has he been at work, but successfully covering his feelings. That is my guess.
  - C. But what has happened to change things?
    1. This is entirely out of my own imagination; no expert has been brave enough to suggest it to me.
    2. For some reason, between the days of Moses and the fall of Jerusalem, Israel changed the names of their months.
    3. This **Nisan** had formerly been called **Abib**, & **Abib** was the month when the **Passover** was to be observed.
    4. For four months the desolation and backslidden condition of Judah had been a burden on Nehemiah's heart but when the week of Unleavened Bread and the Passover arrived – unobserved – it was more than the heart of this righteous man could bear.
    5. He could not contain his grief over the spiritual condition of his far away kinsmen.
  - D. If I might use Nehemiah as an example – or excuse – we have a right to be sad at the bad news of friends, relatives or even perfect strangers who are suffering or are in physical peril.
    1. When there is a bad diagnosis for a friend, you have a right to feel sad – both for you and for him.
    2. When people are starving through no fault of their own, and especially through other people's sins, we have a right to be heart-broken.
    3. When a tsunami or typhoon sweeps thousands of people into the sea and destroys the lives of the living, it doesn't matter if they are Christians or not, we should be saddened.
    4. The way this current virus has devastated the Navaho nation, including Baptist brethren, we should mourn.
      - a. I know there are ways to cope & to explain the death of the Christian, but still our hearts grieve.
      - b. It is natural and it is right
    5. Earthquakes, plane disasters; tornados, hurricanes – any and all natural disasters – should make us sad, and there is no sin in it.
    6. Perhaps, **the sin** is in **NOT feeling** any emotion or concern.
    7. Perhaps, the sin is in finding mental explanations to justify those losses and death.
    8. Sometime there is sin is **not** being sad.

- E. Related to that point – we should be grieved at the **horrors of heathenism**.
1. The way that some of those people abuse their bodies – the saucer lipped people of Africa, the filing of children’s teeth, the practice of female circumcision, the deaths of spouses at funerals
  2. And what of various kinds of sacrifices – not of chickens, but of women and children – including abortion.
  3. Satan worship – demon worship – superstition of astronomical and astrological proportions.
  4. And the diseases which live among many of those people because of their heathen practices.
  5. It is easy for Christians, so many continents away, to look away or to explain away those horrors.
  6. *“They are wretched sinners, so what do you expect? Some of those people are beyond civilization.”*
  7. Someone has said that one of the saddest lost words among Christians is **“concern.”**
- F. The spiritual condition of people around us, near and far, should make us sad.
1. The Jews in Jerusalem had access to the Temple & the worship of God, but did they take advantage of it?
  2. They had the opportunity to properly celebrate the Mosaic feasts, but we are told that they didn’t.
  3. And **our** neighbors have access to the gospel, but do they hear it? Do we tell them?
  4. If Christians aren’t concerned about their friend’s salvation, how can the lost feel any concern.
  5. Are we inviting them to worship with us? Where are they this morning?
- G. **Paul** found himself serving the Lord’s cup to the people of Rome, perhaps thinking about the days when he lived and went to school in Jerusalem.
1. In **Romans 9** he says, *“I say the truth in Christ, I lie not, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Ghost, that I have great heaviness and continual sorrow in my heart.*
    - a. *For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh: Who are Israelites; to whom pertaineth the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law, and the service of God, and the promises;*
    - b. *Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came...”*
  2. But today those people are Christless; they are unsaved and spiritually dead.
  3. Notice again, *“I have **GREAT heaviness and CONTINUAL sorrow in my heart.**”*
  4. I don’t believe for a moment that the Lord would interpret that as sinful.
  5. Paul says in **Philippians 3:18** – *“For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ.”*
  6. Even the face and countenance of the Lord Jesus carried this sadness.
    - a. Just as did Nehemiah, on more than one occasion Jesus wept as looked upon Jerusalem.
    - b. **Luke 19:41** – *“And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, Saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes.”*
    - c. **Luke 13:34** – *“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen doth gather her brood under her wings, and ye would not!”*

#### IV. Conclusion:

- A. I’d like you to perform a little diagnostic test for me.
1. Ask yourself: *“What sort of thing in my life was the last to make me sad?”*
  2. Perhaps go back to the last three things. Now put them to the acid test and determine their true nature.
  3. Were you sad for spiritual reasons or fleshly reasons?
  4. You can be honest, because the answer doesn’t necessarily determine whether you are a Christian.
- B. But now ask yourself this: *“Do I **EVER** grieve over **spiritual things?**”*
1. *“Does my heart ever break and weep because some people enjoy Christ Jesus while I do not?”*
  2. The things that give you pain, may in fact reveal whether or not you are a child of God.
  3. Do you weep selfishly, or like Nehemiah is your grief spiritual?
- C. Do you need, this morning, to bow your knee and heart to the Saviour?