



Nehemiah - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

Nehemiah was working as the cupbearer to the King of Persia in the city of Susa when he received news of the poor condition of the city of Jerusalem with its broken walls. This saddened him greatly and so he prayed to the Lord, acknowledging that it was Israel's guilt that had brought about this situation.

I Nehemiah 1:1-2:20 - Nehemiah Returns to Jerusalem to Rebuild Its Walls

This section recounts Nehemiah's burden for and first efforts in rebuilding Jerusalem. He learns of Jerusalem's decrepit condition (vv.1-11), gains permission to rebuild the city, inspects its walls (2:1-16), and endures the first wave of opposition (2:17-20).

I.a Nehemiah 1:1-11 - Nehemiah Prays for His People

Refer to the chapter summary above.

¹ The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, ² one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. ³ They replied, 'The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.'

Nehemiah 1:1-3

Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. Nehemiah's name means 'Yahweh has comforted.'

The twentieth year refers to the reign of King Artaxerxes of Persia and is 445 BC; thirteen years after Ezra's arrival in Jerusalem: <<*Some of the people of Israel, and some of the priests and Levites, the singers and gatekeepers, and the temple servants also went up to Jerusalem, in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes*>> (Ezra 7:7).

Chislev is the ninth month, i.e. November/December in the winter months when the rains came: <<*Then all the people of Judah and Benjamin assembled at Jerusalem within the three days; it was the ninth month, on the twentieth day of the month. All the people sat in the open square before the house of God, trembling because of this matter and because of the heavy rain*>> (Ezra 10:9).

Susa the capital, citadel, or fortress, was one of the royal seats. Ecbatana referenced in Ezra 6:2 was a royal summer residence, and Susa was a winter palace. That Nehemiah lived and worked in the citadel, the main fortification of this capital city, shows that he was a man of some importance in Persia.

Susa was a principal city of the Elamite, Persian and Parthian empires, and was originally known to the Elamites as 'Susan' or 'Susun'. The Greek name for the city was Sousa and the Hebrew, Shushan. The modern city of Shush, Iran, presently occupies the ancient site.



One of my brothers, Hanani. This brother is referenced again once Nehemiah is serving as the governor: <<*I gave my brother Hanani charge over Jerusalem, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel – for he was a faithful man and feared God more than many*>> (Nehemiah 7:2).

Came with certain men from Judah. It is not known whether these men were residents of Jerusalem or of Persia, nor is the nature of their mission known.

I asked them about the Jews. Nehemiah's body was in Persia but his heart and his interest were in Jerusalem nine hundred miles away. He wanted to know from those returning how the people and the city were doing. The reader might think that an important man like Nehemiah had more important things to think about than a distant city he had never been to, and a people he had mostly never met. Yet, because his heart was for the things of God, his heart was not on himself, but on others. Nehemiah had the heart of: <<*If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither! Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy*>> (Psalm 137:5-6).

The Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity. These survivors or remnant refer to the returned exiles living in Jerusalem and Judah.

The idea of a remnant could be attached to notions of God's judgement, for it can refer to a small remnant left afterward, or to the subject of renewed punishment: <<*Even if a tenth part remains in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak whose stump remains standing when it is felled*>> (Isaiah 6:13a), <<*But thus says the Lord: Like the bad figs that are so bad they cannot be eaten, so will I treat King Zedekiah of Judah, his officials, the remnant of Jerusalem who remain in this land, and those who live in the land of Egypt*>> (Jeremiah 24:8). However, prophets also spoke positively of a remnant of Israel who would repent and be restored after the purifying judgement of exile, and who would continue to bear the identity and destiny of Israel: <<*On that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no more lean on the one who struck them, but will lean on the Lord, the Holy One of Israel, in truth. A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God*>> (Isaiah 10:20-21); Jeremiah 24:4-7 also has the idea, although not the term. Ezra applies the term to the returned exiles: <<*But now for a brief moment favour has been shown by the Lord our God, who has left us a remnant, and given us a stake in his holy place, in order that he may brighten our eyes and grant us a little sustenance in our slavery*>> (Ezra 9:8).

Paul confirms that the Lord will keep for himself a remnant of the Jews even throughout the church age: <<*But what is the divine reply to him? 'I have kept for myself seven thousand who have not bowed the knee to Baal.'* So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace would no longer be grace>> (Romans 11:4-6).

The report about the wall of Jerusalem might mean that the wall had never been successfully rebuilt since the first return of exiles, or that an attempt to rebuild it had been thwarted, perhaps by command of the reigning king, Artaxerxes: <<*Jerusalem has had mighty kings who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. Therefore issue an order that these people be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until I make a decree*>> (Ezra 4:20-21). A search of the archives was made and Artaxerxes discovered that one of his predecessors King Cyrus had issued a decree that the people could return and rebuild Jerusalem and its temple, and so he issued a further decree allowing for the work to resume. However, it seems that no one attempted to take on the task of rebuilding the city once the temple was rebuilt in 516 BC.

The poor state of the people and the ruined state of the city walls were intimately connected. In the ancient world, a city without walls was a city completely open and vulnerable to its enemies. They had no defence, no

protection at all. An unwalled city was always a backwater place, with nothing valuable in it. If there were anything of value in an unwalled city, it could be stolen away easily because there was no defence to stop it. Those living in an unwalled city lived in constant stress and tension; they never knew when they might be attacked and brutalised. Every man lived in constant fear for his wife and children. The temple could be rebuilt, but never made beautiful, because anything valuable would be taken easily. No wonder the people lived in constant distress, in constant disgrace or reproach, living only as survivors. God desires more for his people than for them to be mere survivors. God not only wants his people to be conquerors, but *<<more than conquerors through him who loved us>>* (Romans 8:37).

⁴ When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

Nehemiah 1:4

I sat down and wept. Nehemiah's immediate reaction was extreme. He did not just feel distraught for Jerusalem and its people; right away, there was no strength in his legs for he sat down and he began to weep and to mourn. This compares with the reaction of Ezra when he discovered sin in the community: *<<Then all who trembled at the words of the God of Israel, because of the faithlessness of the returned exiles, gathered around me while I sat appalled until the evening sacrifice. At the evening sacrifice I got up from my fasting, with my garments and my mantle torn, and fell on my knees, spread out my hands to the Lord my God, 6 and said, 'O my God, I am too ashamed and embarrassed to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens>>* (Ezra 9:4-6), and: *<<While Ezra prayed and made confession, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God, a very great assembly of men, women, and children gathered to him out of Israel; the people also wept bitterly>>* (Ezra 10:1).

And mourned for days. God was going to use Nehemiah to do something about this situation. But first, God did something in Nehemiah. Any great work of God begins with God doing a great work in somebody. God prepared this long ago, with Nehemiah's important position in Persia, with a heart curious about the welfare of Jerusalem and its people. Now it is seen that he had a heart that broke over their needy state. God saw the need in heaven, but little would be done until the right man also felt the need. God would do something great to meet that need through Nehemiah. However, there is no way Nehemiah could do this alone. He had to be a leader, one who influences other people, to get this job done. Nehemiah is a book all about leadership, something people obviously need today. Since leadership is influence, leadership applies to everyone. Everyone has an area of leadership. In

some way, each one is a leader; the question is if they are a good leader or a bad leader.

Fasting and praying before the God of heaven. Nehemiah's reaction went beyond an immediate emotion. Many times a concern will come over a person in a flush, and then quickly pass. But if it is from the Lord it will abide and grow and the burden will remain until the problem that prompted the burden is solved. It should be noted as well what Nehemiah did not do: he did not complain, whine, or 'see who could fix this problem.' He immediately did what he knew he could do - pray, and intensely seek God in this situation.

The God of heaven was a way of referring to God in international contexts: <<*The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from the land of my birth, and who spoke to me and swore to me, "To your offspring I will give this land", he will send his angel before you; you shall take a wife for my son from there*>> (Genesis 24:7), <<*Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem in Judah*>> (Ezra 1:2), <<*You, O king, the king of kings—to whom the God of heaven has given the kingdom, the power, the might, and the glory*>> (Daniel 2:37), and: <<*'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land'*>> (Jonah 1:9). Nehemiah also had a clear understanding of whom he fasted and prayed to. There are many 'gods' people trust in but only **the God of heaven** can really meet their needs.

⁵ 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; ⁶ 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 your servants the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned.

Nehemiah 1:5-6

O Lord God of heaven. Humility begins by simply understanding there is a God enthroned in the heavens, and the person praying is not him! Nehemiah recognises exactly who God is. This combination of names means that the God of Israel is the only God: <<*But Moses said to God, 'If I come to the Israelites and say to them, "The God of your ancestors has sent me to you", and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?' God said to Moses, 'I am who I am.' He said further, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you."*>> God also said to Moses, 'Thus you shall say to the Israelites, "The Lord, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of

Jacob, has sent me to you”: This is my name for ever, and this my title for all generations>> (Exodus 3:13-15).

The great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments. Steadfast love, Hebrew *hesed*, is the quality of God’s faithfulness to Israel in his covenant with them: *<<It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations>> (Deuteronomy 7:8-9).* Such covenant faithfulness requires Israel’s love in return: *<<Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength>> (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 NIV).* This love also includes faithfulness, and is made evident in keeping God’s law as given to Moses; obedience is the proper response to God’s love, not the precondition of it.

Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray. Humility also understands a complete dependence on God. When Nehemiah desperately asked God to hear the prayer of our servant, it reflected his complete dependence on the Lord. Only God could help, and if God would only hear, Nehemiah knew he would help.

Nehemiah’s prayer begins with a confession recalling all the past sins of Israel, as well as those of Nehemiah himself and of his family. Such confession is generally the right beginning in prayer, but Nehemiah especially acknowledges that Israel’s past sin has led to the present deplorable situation in Jerusalem. Israel has not responded to God’s gracious covenant in the way outlined in v.5. Nehemiah’s prayer also recalls Solomon’s when he dedicated the first temple; refer to 1 Kings 8:28-30. His use of the term servant for himself (your servant) and Israel (your servants) is significant since he is also a servant of King Artaxerxes. Ezra used a form of the same word, Hebrew *‘ebed*, to speak of slavery to Persia: *<<For we are slaves; yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to give us new life to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us a wall in Judea and Jerusalem>> (Ezra 9:9).* Nehemiah’s prayer raises the question of who is the real Lord of Israel.

The apostles use similar language in their acknowledgement of their service to the Lord: *<<Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God>> (Romans 1:1), <<Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given to me by the working of his power>> (Ephesians 3:7), <<Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the*

bishops and deacons>> (Philippians 1:1), <<Epaphras, who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus, greets you. He is always wrestling in his prayers on your behalf, so that you may stand mature and fully assured in everything that God wills>> (Colossians 4:12), <<If you put these instructions before the brothers and sisters, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching that you have followed>> (1 Timothy 4:6), <<And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness>> (2 Timothy 2:24-25a), <<Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and the knowledge of the truth that is in accordance with godliness>> (Titus 1:1), <<James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion: Greetings>> (James 1:1), <<As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil>> (1 Peter 2:16), <<Simeon Peter, a servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who have received a faith as precious as ours through the righteousness of our God and Saviour Jesus Christ>> (2 Peter 1:1), and: <<Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James, To those who are called, who are beloved in God the Father and kept safe for Jesus Christ>> (Jude 1).

It appears that Nehemiah prayed for four months before he did anything. Later, when the work of rebuilding the walls actually begins, it only takes fifty two days to finish the job. However, that fifty-two project had a four month foundation of prayer. Nehemiah took his pain and stress to God in prayer and seemingly, was able to leave it there. Prayer relieves stress. People may be trying to relieve stress through entertainment, but all that does is divert their attention. Entertainment does not give any solutions to stress. Prayer gives strength; when a person waits on the Lord in prayer, he will renew their strength: <<*but those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint*>> (Isaiah 40:31).

⁷ We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses.

Nehemiah 1:7

The commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances. It had been Ezra's mission was to teach God's the statutes, and the ordinances, i.e. the extensive laws of God given to Moses in addition to the Ten Commandments: <<*So now, Israel, give heed to the statutes and ordinances that I am teaching you to observe, so that you may live to enter and occupy the land that the Lord, the God of your ancestors, is giving you*>> (Deuteronomy 4:1), and: <<*Moses*

convened all Israel, and said to them: Hear, O Israel, the statutes and ordinances that I am addressing to you today; you shall learn them and observe them diligently>> (Deuteronomy 5:1), under the general rubric of the Law of the Lord.

⁸ Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; ⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.”

Nehemiah 1:8-9

Remember. Moses also called on God to remember his promises when Israel was suffering his judgement because of sin: <<*Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, how you swore to them by your own self, saying to them, “I will multiply your descendants like the stars of heaven, and all this land that I have promised I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever”*>> (Exodus 32:13), and: <<*Remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; pay no attention to the stubbornness of this people, their wickedness and their sin*>> (Deuteronomy 9:27). Nehemiah now recalls God’s words about the essential choice placed before Israel in the covenant, in which disobedience would lead to scattering, or exile, among the peoples; refer to Leviticus 26:27-33, Deuteronomy 4:25-27 and 28:64 - while obedience would bring blessing, as in Leviticus 26:3-13 and Deuteronomy 28:1-14.

If you return to me. Nehemiah quoted a conditional promise. The condition was returning to God, and keeping his commandments. He really could not know if the nation was keeping the commandments, but he knew that he was keeping them, and because he had identified himself with the nation in their sin the nation could also identify itself with Nehemiah in his godly fulfilment of these conditions. In Nehemiah’s perspective, however, the threatened exile did indeed happen; so he now appeals to God’s old promise that even then, if Israel repented, he would restore them to the land and prosperity; refer to Leviticus 26:40-42, Deuteronomy 4:29-31 and 30:1-6. The restoration has happened in one sense, for many of God’s people have returned from exile, but it remains incomplete because the land is not yet secure.

The place at which I have chosen to establish my name. Again, the reference is to the old promise to bring Israel into its land: <<*But you shall seek the place that the Lord your God will choose out of all your tribes as his habitation to put his name there*>> (Deuteronomy 12:5a). The place in question was primarily the city where the Lord’s sanctuary would be, which was finally Jerusalem: <<*He built altars in the house of the Lord, of which the Lord had said, ‘In Jerusalem*

I will put my name'>> (2 Kings 21:4). The dwelling of the name meant the Lord's claiming of the place as his own, in contrast to the claims of other gods or rulers.

¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand.

Nehemiah 1:10

Whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. The reference, both here and in Deuteronomy 4:34, is to:

1. The deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt.
2. The miraculous signs in the afflictions of Egypt.
3. The defeat of Egypt in the Red Sea; refer to Exodus Chapters 7-15.

^{11a} O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!'

Nehemiah 1:11a

Revering your name is a statement that implies believers should live in reverential fear of God: <<*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge; fools despise wisdom and instruction*>> (Proverbs 1:7). To fear God's name is essentially the same as fearing God himself, since the name of God here represents God's character and all that he is: <<*You shall fear the Lord your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear*>> (Deuteronomy 10:20). Jesus teaches: <<*But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell. Yes, I tell you, fear him!*>> (Luke 12:5).

The reason that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of both knowledge and wisdom is that the moral life begins with reverence and humility before the maker and redeemer. The idea of a quest for knowledge sets biblical wisdom in the broad context of the ancient Near Eastern quest for truth, and Proverbs 1:7 also validates such a quest as legitimate and good. Thus it affirms a kind of creational revelation, the idea that one can find moral and theological truth through observing the world. At the same time, it distinguishes the biblical pursuit of knowledge and wisdom from those of the surrounding cultures, for it asserts that submission to the Lord is foundational to the attainment of real understanding: <<*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; all those who practise it have a good understanding. His praise endures for ever*>> (Psalm 111:10), and: <<*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight*>> (Proverbs 9:10). By using the

covenant name the Lord in preference to the more generic God, these verses make the point that truth is found through Israel's God.

Grant him mercy in the sight of this man, i.e. King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah concluded by asking God to bless him when he would soon speak to the king of Persia about the matter. Nehemiah was going to do something about the sorry state of Jerusalem's walls and people, and he knew that, without God's intervention, he can do nothing. Nehemiah knew that God can move powerful people to act in ways that accord with his own plans, and in favour of his people, for example: <<*With joy they celebrated the festival of unleavened bread for seven days; for the Lord had made them joyful, and had turned the heart of the king of Assyria to them, so that he aided them in the work on the house of God, the God of Israel*>> (Ezra 6:22). However, he may also have known that King Artaxerxes has already decreed that work on rebuilding Jerusalem should stop. Therefore, Nehemiah's petition may put him in danger or at least he might have reaped the displeasure of the king.

Give success to your servant today. This is a prayer of a man of action, not a sideline critic. Nehemiah does not pray "God, make it all better" or "God, get someone else moving on this problem." Instead, his prayer is "God, use me to make it better."

Charles Spurgeon comments, "Laying the matter to heart, he did not begin to speak with other people about what they would do, nor did he draw up a wonderful scheme about what might be done if so many thousand people joined in the enterprise; but it occurred to him that he would do something himself."

^{11b} At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.

Nehemiah 1:11b

I was cupbearer to the king. The position of cupbearer to the king was a high office and involved regular access to the king, not just serving his drinks but also testing food and drink for poison. Joseph encountered a man in a similar position to Pharaoh in Egypt: <<*Some time after this, the cupbearer of the king of Egypt and his baker offended their lord the king of Egypt*>> (Genesis 40:1).