

INTRODUCTION TO NEHEMIAH

God Rebuilds What Sin Has Broken

The book of Nehemiah is often described as a book about leadership, rebuilding, perseverance, and overcoming opposition. It certainly teaches all of those things. But if we reduce Nehemiah to a leadership manual or a story about rebuilding a wall, we miss its greater theological message.

Nehemiah is ultimately a book about the faithfulness of God to restore His covenant people.

The walls of Jerusalem were broken, but the greater problem was that the people themselves had been broken by generations of sin, rebellion, judgment, and exile.

The city needed rebuilding.

The worship of God's people needed rebuilding.

Their understanding of Scripture needed rebuilding.

Their commitment to holiness needed rebuilding.

Their families needed rebuilding.

Their identity as God's covenant people needed rebuilding.

And behind all of that restoration stood a faithful God who had not abandoned His promises.

That makes Nehemiah remarkably relevant to the church today.

God still works through ordinary people who are willing to pray, obey, sacrifice, lead, endure opposition, confront sin, and remain faithful to His Word.

Yet Nehemiah also reminds us that human rebuilding is never enough. Walls can be restored while hearts remain unchanged. Religious activity can resume while spiritual compromise continues.

The ultimate need of God's people is something greater than a rebuilt city.

We need a Redeemer.

And in that sense, Nehemiah points us beyond himself toward Jesus Christ, the One who accomplishes the restoration that no governor, priest, teacher, wall, temple, or human reform could ever accomplish.

I. THE HISTORICAL SETTING

From Solomon's Glory to Nehemiah's Burden

To understand Nehemiah, we must understand how Jerusalem came to be in ruins.

Nehemiah does not begin the story. It enters a story that had already been unfolding for centuries.

The United Kingdom

Under David, Jerusalem became the political and spiritual center of Israel.

David conquered Jerusalem and established it as his capital. His son Solomon later built the magnificent temple there.

Under Solomon, Israel experienced extraordinary prosperity and influence. The temple stood at the center of Israel's national worship, and Jerusalem became identified with God's covenant purposes for His people.

But prosperity did not produce lasting faithfulness.

Solomon's later years were marked by spiritual compromise and idolatry.

Following Solomon's death, the kingdom divided.

The Divided Kingdom

The nation became two kingdoms:

Northern Kingdom — Israel

Southern Kingdom — Judah

The northern kingdom increasingly embraced idolatry. God repeatedly sent prophets calling His people to repentance, but they refused.

Eventually, in 722 B.C., the Assyrian Empire conquered the northern kingdom.

Judah survived longer, but the southern kingdom followed much the same spiritual path.

God sent prophet after prophet:

Isaiah.

Jeremiah.

Micah.

Habakkuk.

Zephaniah.

And others.

Their message repeatedly warned God's people that continued rebellion would bring judgment.

But Judah would not listen.

II. THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

Eventually God raised up the Babylonian Empire as His instrument of judgment.

Nebuchadnezzar invaded Judah in a series of campaigns.

The decisive catastrophe occurred in 586 B.C.

Jerusalem was conquered.

The walls were destroyed.

The gates were burned.

The temple Solomon had built was destroyed.

Many of the people were killed.

Others were carried into exile.

The devastation was enormous.

Yet this was not evidence that God had lost control.

It demonstrated precisely the opposite.

God had warned Israel through His prophets that covenant rebellion would bring judgment. The exile therefore demonstrated the seriousness of sin and the faithfulness of God to His own Word.

But judgment was not God's final word.

God had also promised restoration.

III. GOD HAD NOT FORGOTTEN HIS PEOPLE

The exile was discipline, but it was not abandonment.

Jeremiah had prophesied that Babylon's domination would not continue forever.

God would bring His people back.

That restoration unfolded through several significant returns.

First Return — Zerubbabel

Approximately 538 B.C.

The Persian king Cyrus permitted Jewish exiles to return to Jerusalem.

Zerubbabel led the first major group back.

Their primary task centered upon rebuilding the temple.

The events surrounding this period are recorded particularly in the opening chapters of Ezra and are connected historically with the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah.

The temple was eventually completed in 516 B.C.

The temple had been restored.

But Jerusalem was still vulnerable.

Second Return — Ezra

Approximately 458 B.C.

Roughly eighty years after Zerubbabel's return, Ezra led another group to Jerusalem.

Ezra was a priest and scribe whose ministry emphasized the restoration of God's Word among God's people.

Ezra 7:10 provides one of Scripture's great descriptions of biblical ministry:

"Now Ezra had determined in his heart to study the law of the LORD, obey it, and teach its statutes and ordinances in Israel."

— Ezra 7:10, CSB

Notice the order:

Study it.

Obey it.

Teach it.

That remains a foundational pattern for anyone who teaches the Word of God.

Third Return — Nehemiah

Approximately 445 B.C.

About thirteen years after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem, God burdened another Jewish man living hundreds of miles away.

His name was Nehemiah.

Nehemiah would lead the third major return.

His immediate assignment would involve rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

But again, the wall was only the visible project.

God was doing something much deeper.

He was restoring His people.

IV. WHERE NEHEMIAH FITS IN BIBLICAL HISTORY

A simple chronology helps us understand the setting:

Approximate Date Event

722 B.C.	Assyria conquers Northern Kingdom
605 B.C.	First Babylonian deportation
597 B.C.	Additional Babylonian deportation
586 B.C.	Jerusalem and Temple destroyed
538 B.C.	Zerubbabel leads first return
516 B.C.	Second Temple completed
458 B.C.	Ezra arrives in Jerusalem
445 B.C.	Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem

Nehemiah therefore belongs to the post-exilic period of Old Testament history.

Israel is no longer an independent kingdom.

There is no Davidic king sitting on the throne in Jerusalem.

Judah exists under Persian authority.

The temple has been rebuilt, but the city remains vulnerable and humiliated.

And God's people are waiting.

They are waiting for the complete fulfillment of God's promises.

They are waiting for the promised King.

They are waiting ultimately for the Messiah.

V. THE MAN NEHEMIAH

The name Nehemiah comes from the Hebrew Nechemyah and carries the idea:

"Yahweh comforts"

or

"The LORD has comforted."

That name beautifully anticipates the message of the book.

Jerusalem had experienced judgment.

But God had not forgotten Jerusalem.

His people had experienced discipline.

But God had not abandoned His covenant purposes.

God was bringing comfort through restoration.

Interestingly, Nehemiah was not introduced as a prophet, priest, military commander, or professional religious leader.

He was a government official.

At the conclusion of Nehemiah 1 we learn his occupation:

"At the time, I was the king's cupbearer."

— Nehemiah 1:11, CSB

That statement may sound insignificant to modern readers.

It was not.

The cupbearer occupied a trusted position within the royal court.

Because assassination by poisoning was a genuine concern in the ancient world, the person responsible for the king's food and drink had to be exceptionally trustworthy.

The position gave Nehemiah unusual access to the king.

And that becomes critically important.

What appeared to be Nehemiah's ordinary occupation was actually part of the providential preparation of God.

Long before Nehemiah knew Jerusalem's walls would become his responsibility, God had positioned him beside one of the most powerful men in the world.

Key Principle

God often prepares His servants before He reveals their assignment.

VI. THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

Nehemiah served during the reign of Artaxerxes I, king of Persia.

The Persian Empire dominated the ancient Near East during this period. Its territory stretched across an enormous geographic area.

Jerusalem was merely one relatively small city within that vast empire.

Humanly speaking, the future of Jerusalem rested in the hands of Persia.

Biblically, however, Persia rested in the hands of God.

This distinction is essential.

One of the major theological themes running through Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, and other portions of Scripture is the sovereignty of God over human rulers.

Kings make decisions.

Empires rise.

Empires fall.

Political circumstances change.

But God's purposes continue.

Proverbs 21:1 declares:

"A king's heart is like channeled water in the LORD's hand: He directs it wherever he chooses."

— Proverbs 21:1, CSB

Nehemiah will eventually stand before Artaxerxes and make an extraordinary request.

But before Nehemiah speaks to the king of Persia, he speaks to the King of heaven.

That order is significant.

VII. THE CENTRAL PROBLEM

At the beginning of Nehemiah, the temple has already been rebuilt.

So what is wrong?

The answer arrives in Nehemiah 1:3:

"The remnant in the province, who survived the exile, are in great trouble and disgrace. Jerusalem's wall has been broken down, and its gates have been burned."

— Nehemiah 1:3, CSB

In the ancient world, walls represented far more than architecture.

Walls provided:

Protection — They defended the population from attack.

Security — They allowed commerce and community life to function.

Identity — A significant city was expected to possess defensible walls.

Order — Gates regulated access and served important civic functions.

Jerusalem had a temple but lacked secure walls.

The people could worship, but the city remained vulnerable.

More importantly, Jerusalem's condition publicly represented the humiliation of God's covenant people.

Nehemiah therefore hears more than a construction report.

He hears of disgrace.

And his heart breaks.

VIII. THE MAJOR THEMES OF NEHEMIAH

Several themes will repeatedly appear throughout our study.

1. The Sovereignty of God

God works behind visible circumstances.

He positions people.

He influences rulers.

He opens doors.

He frustrates enemies.

He accomplishes His purposes.

Nehemiah plans carefully, but his confidence never rests merely in strategy.

2. Prayer

Nehemiah is a man of prayer.

He prays before speaking.

He prays while working.

He prays when threatened.

He prays when angry.

He prays when making decisions.

Some prayers are lengthy.

Others are almost instantaneous.

Nehemiah demonstrates that prayer is not merely preparation for ministry.

Prayer is ministry.

3. Biblical Leadership

Nehemiah provides one of Scripture's clearest portraits of godly leadership.

He demonstrates:

Vision.

Courage.

Planning.

Delegation.

Accountability.

Discernment.

Persistence.

Compassion.

Confrontation.

Integrity.

But his leadership begins somewhere deeper than technique.

It begins with a heart captured by the purposes of God.

4. Opposition

Whenever God's work advances, opposition should not surprise God's people.

Nehemiah will encounter:

Ridicule.

Threats.

Intimidation.

Political pressure.

False accusations.

Internal conflict.

Economic injustice.

Compromise.

Deception.

Even spiritual manipulation.

One of the great lessons of Nehemiah is learning how God's people continue working when opposition comes.

5. The Word of God

The rebuilding of the wall receives much attention, but the spiritual climax of the book occurs when God's Word is publicly read and explained.

Nehemiah 8:8 says:

"They read out of the book of the law of God, translating and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was read."

— Nehemiah 8:8, CSB

Walls could protect Jerusalem.

Only God's Word could transform the people.

6. Repentance and Spiritual Renewal

External rebuilding without internal renewal would ultimately accomplish little.

As the book progresses, God's Word exposes sin.

The people confess.

They worship.

They remember God's faithfulness.

They renew their commitment to obedience.

The physical rebuilding leads toward spiritual reformation.

7. Perseverance

The work will not be easy.

But Nehemiah repeatedly refuses to abandon the assignment God has placed before him.

Perhaps the best-known expression of this determination occurs when his enemies attempt to distract him.

Nehemiah responds:

"I am doing important work and cannot come down."

— Nehemiah 6:3, CSB

There is an important ministry principle here:

Not every invitation deserves our attention.

Sometimes faithfulness requires knowing what we must refuse so that we can continue doing what God has called us to do.

IX. DISPENSATIONAL AND PROPHETIC SIGNIFICANCE

From a dispensational perspective, Nehemiah occupies an important position in the unfolding biblical story.

God's covenant purposes for Israel did not disappear during the exile.

Israel's sin brought genuine judgment, but judgment did not cancel God's promises.

The Jewish people's return to the land demonstrates God's continuing faithfulness to His covenant purposes.

Yet the restoration under Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah was incomplete.

Israel remained under Gentile domination.

The Davidic throne remained unoccupied.

Sin remained.

The nation still awaited its Messiah.

Therefore, the restoration recorded in Nehemiah should not be confused with the complete fulfillment of all God's promises concerning Israel.

Nehemiah records a real historical restoration, but it also leaves the reader looking forward.

God has not finished His redemptive program.

X. CHRIST IN NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah is not Jesus.

We should avoid forcing artificial parallels into every detail of the narrative.

Nevertheless, Nehemiah contributes to the biblical storyline that ultimately leads to Christ.

Nehemiah sees the broken condition of God's people and is moved with compassion.

He leaves the comfort and privilege of the royal court.

He identifies himself with the sins and suffering of his people.

He intercedes for them.

He accepts personal cost.

He confronts enemies.

He leads a work of restoration.

These themes anticipate something far greater.

Jesus Christ did not merely leave a Persian palace.

He left the glory of heaven.

He did not merely rebuild walls damaged by Israel's enemies.

He came to restore sinners ruined by sin.

Nehemiah could repair Jerusalem.

Only Jesus could redeem Jerusalem's people.

Nehemiah could rebuild walls.

Jesus builds His church.

Nehemiah could confront external enemies.

Jesus defeated sin, death, and Satan.

Nehemiah could lead temporary reform.

Jesus gives eternal life.

The ultimate answer to human brokenness is therefore not better leadership or stronger walls.

It is Jesus Christ.

THEOLOGY IN FOCUS

God Disciplines Without Abandoning His Promises

The exile raises an important theological question:

Did Israel's failure cause God's covenant purposes to fail?

Nehemiah answers with a decisive no.

Israel's rebellion brought judgment exactly as God had warned.

But God's discipline did not mean that He had abandoned His promises.

This distinction becomes important throughout Scripture.

God's faithfulness does not mean that sin has no consequences.

Quite the opposite.

Because God is faithful, He takes His Word seriously—both His warnings and His promises.

The return from exile therefore demonstrates two truths simultaneously:

God is holy enough to judge sin.

And:

God is faithful enough to keep His promises.

That tension runs throughout Nehemiah.

A SIMPLE OUTLINE OF NEHEMIAH

The book can be divided broadly into two major movements:

Part One — Rebuilding the Wall

Nehemiah 1–7

The emphasis is primarily physical and organizational.

Chapters 1–2: The burden and preparation

Chapter 3: The builders organize

Chapters 4–6: Opposition and perseverance

Chapter 7: Jerusalem secured and organized

Part Two — Rebuilding the People

Nehemiah 8–13

The emphasis becomes increasingly spiritual.

Chapter 8: God's Word proclaimed

Chapter 9: God's people confess

Chapter 10: God's people recommit

Chapter 11: God's people repopulate Jerusalem

Chapter 12: God's people worship and dedicate the wall

Chapter 13: God's people require continuing reform

This gives us one of the most important observations in the entire book:

God was not merely rebuilding Jerusalem. God was rebuilding His people.

QUESTIONS BEFORE WE BEGIN

As we enter the book of Nehemiah, several questions should accompany us:

What breaks my heart?

Do the things that grieve God still grieve me?

What do I do when I discover something is broken?

Do I complain about it—or pray about it?

Am I willing to become part of God's answer?

It is much easier to recognize a problem than to accept responsibility for addressing it.

How do I respond to opposition?

Does resistance cause me to abandon God's work?

Am I building something God actually wants built?

Activity is not automatically obedience.

Is God's Word shaping my priorities?

The wall will be rebuilt quickly.

The people will require much longer.

That may be the greatest lesson with which to begin:

God is interested in more than rebuilding what is around us.

He wants to rebuild what is within us.

TRANSITION TO CHAPTER 1

Nehemiah's story does not begin with a hammer.

It does not begin with a construction plan.

It does not begin with a leadership meeting.

It does not even begin in Jerusalem.

It begins hundreds of miles away, in a Persian palace, when one man hears that something belonging to God is broken.

And before Nehemiah ever stands before a king, he will kneel before God.

That is where our study properly begins.

NEHEMIAH 1

Before the Wall Was Rebuilt, a Man Was Broken

Next: Nehemiah 1:1–4 — The Report That Broke Nehemiah's Heart.

I. THE WORDS OF NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah 1:1

“The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah...”

The book begins simply.

There is no dramatic introduction to Nehemiah. We are not given a lengthy genealogy. We are told very little about his family background.

He is simply:

“Nehemiah son of Hacaliah.”

As we noted in the introduction, his Hebrew name, Nechemyah, means something like:

“Yahweh comforts”

or

“The LORD has comforted.”

His name is fitting because Nehemiah will become one of God's instruments of comfort and restoration to a discouraged people.

But there is something else important about the opening words:

“The words of Nehemiah...”

Much of the book is written from Nehemiah's first-person perspective.

We will repeatedly hear him say:

I prayed.

I went.

I said.

I saw.

I gathered.

I confronted.

I remembered.

That gives portions of Nehemiah the character of a personal memoir.

We are not merely reading about the rebuilding of Jerusalem.

We are seeing the work through the eyes of the man God called to lead it.

II. THE TIMING OF NEHEMIAH'S BURDEN

Nehemiah tells us:

“During the month of Chislev in the twentieth year...”

Chislev corresponds roughly to November–December on our calendar.

“The twentieth year” refers to the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes I of Persia, placing these events around 445 B.C.

That date becomes important when we reach Nehemiah 2.

Nehemiah 2:1 begins:

“During the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes...”

Nisan falls roughly in March–April.

Therefore, approximately four months pass between the report Nehemiah receives in chapter 1 and his conversation with Artaxerxes in chapter 2.

That tells us something extremely important about Nehemiah.

Nehemiah did not immediately act upon his emotions.

He prayed.

He waited.

He thought.

He prepared.

He sought God.

For approximately four months, Nehemiah carried this burden before the Lord.

That is an important corrective to a common misunderstanding of faith.

Faith is not always immediate action.

Sometimes faith moves quickly.

Sometimes faith waits.

Sometimes the most spiritual thing a person can do is refuse to run ahead of God.

Ministry Principle

A genuine burden from God should drive us first to prayer, not merely to activity.

Nehemiah will eventually become a man of tremendous action.

But before Nehemiah becomes a builder, he becomes an intercessor.

III. SUSA — AN UNLIKELY PLACE FOR A BURDEN TO BEGIN

Nehemiah says:

“...when I was in the fortress city of Susa.”

Susa was one of the great royal cities of the Persian Empire.

It served as a winter residence for Persian kings and was an important administrative center.

The book of Esther also takes place largely in Susa.

Nehemiah therefore was not living among Jerusalem's ruins.

He was living in one of the great centers of power and privilege in the ancient world.

That creates a striking contrast.

Susa represented:

Comfort.

Power.

Security.

Influence.

Wealth.

Jerusalem represented:

Brokenness.

Disgrace.

Vulnerability.

Hardship.

Nehemiah could easily have said:

“Jerusalem's problems are not my problems.”

After all, he had not caused the walls to fall.

He lived hundreds of miles away.

He had a successful career.

He occupied a respected position.

His life was comfortable.

Yet something inside Nehemiah refused to become comfortable while God's people were living in disgrace.

That raises an important question.

Can I become so comfortable with my blessings that I stop noticing what is broken around me?

Comfort is not sinful.

Prosperity is not automatically sinful.

Success is not sinful.

But comfort becomes spiritually dangerous when it produces indifference.

Nehemiah's heart remained connected to the purposes of God even while his body lived far from Jerusalem.

IV. HANANI ARRIVES FROM JUDAH

Nehemiah 1:2

“Hanani, one of my brothers, arrived with men from Judah...”

Hanani appears again later in Nehemiah.

In Nehemiah 7:2, Nehemiah entrusts significant responsibility to him.

The term “brother” may indicate that Hanani was Nehemiah's literal biological brother, and that is the most natural understanding.

Hanani arrives in Susa accompanied by men from Judah.

Nehemiah now has an opportunity to receive firsthand information concerning Jerusalem.

Notice what Nehemiah does:

“...and I questioned them about Jerusalem and the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile.”

This small statement reveals something about Nehemiah's heart.

He asked.

He wanted to know.

He could have avoided the question.

Sometimes we do not ask because we suspect the answer may require something from us.

Nehemiah was willing to hear the truth.

V. TWO QUESTIONS WERE ON HIS HEART

Nehemiah essentially asks about two things:

1. The People

“...the Jewish remnant...”

2. Jerusalem

“...about Jerusalem...”

This combination becomes central to the entire book.

Nehemiah cares about the city.

But Nehemiah cares about the city because he cares about God's people and God's purposes.

The wall matters.

But the wall is never the ultimate objective.

This is important for churches and ministries.

Buildings matter.

Budgets matter.

Programs matter.

Organization matters.

Facilities matter.

But they matter only insofar as they serve the purposes of God among people.

Ministry Principle

God's work is ultimately about people, not projects.

Nehemiah will rebuild a wall.

But God is rebuilding a people.

VI. THE REMNANT

Nehemiah specifically asks about:

“...the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile.”

The idea of a remnant runs throughout Scripture.

The Hebrew concept involves those who remain after judgment or catastrophe.

Israel had experienced severe divine discipline.

Jerusalem had fallen.

The temple had been destroyed.

Many had died.

Others had been carried into captivity.

Yet God had preserved a people.

This is consistent with a repeated biblical pattern:

Judgment does not eliminate God's purposes.

God preserves.

God remembers.

God restores.

God remains faithful.

The remnant theme becomes especially important in the prophetic books.

Isaiah writes:

“On that day the remnant of Israel and the survivors of the house of Jacob will no longer depend on the one who struck them, but they will faithfully depend on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel.”

— Isaiah 10:20, CSB

The existence of the remnant testified to God's faithfulness.

Israel had been disciplined.

But Israel had not been destroyed.

THEOLOGY IN FOCUS

The Biblical Doctrine of the Remnant

Throughout biblical history, God repeatedly preserves a faithful remnant.

We see this pattern with:

Noah and his family during the flood.

Israel during periods of apostasy.

Elijah's generation, when God preserved seven thousand who had not bowed to Baal.

The Jewish people through exile and restoration.

Paul later uses the same concept in Romans 11.

“In the same way, then, there is also at the present time a remnant chosen by grace.”

— Romans 11:5, CSB

From a dispensational perspective, the remnant theme also reinforces an important truth:

God has not abandoned His purposes for Israel.

Israel's unbelief does not invalidate God's promises.

Paul asks directly:

“I ask, then, has God rejected his people? Absolutely not!”

— Romans 11:1, CSB

Nehemiah's generation provides an Old Testament demonstration of this principle.

Judgment came.

Exile came.

Discipline came.

But God's covenant purposes continued.

VII. THE REPORT

Nehemiah 1:3

The answer Nehemiah receives is devastating.

“The remnant in the province, who survived the exile, are in great trouble and disgrace.”

Two descriptions stand out.

“Great trouble”

The people were experiencing distress and difficulty.

They were vulnerable.

Their situation was unstable.

But Hanani adds another word.

“Disgrace”

This is more than inconvenience.

Jerusalem's condition brought reproach and humiliation.

The city associated with the name of Israel's God remained visibly broken.

The temple had been rebuilt, but Jerusalem still bore the scars of judgment.

The surrounding peoples could look at Jerusalem and see:

Broken walls.

Burned gates.

A vulnerable population.

A humiliated people.

This affected Nehemiah deeply because Jerusalem was not simply another ancient city.

It was uniquely associated with God's redemptive purposes.

VIII. THE WALLS WERE BROKEN

Hanani continues:

“Jerusalem's wall has been broken down, and its gates have been burned.”

Ancient city walls were enormously important.

A city without walls was vulnerable to:

Military attack.

Raids.

Theft.

Political intimidation.

Economic disruption.

Social instability.

Walls represented security.

Gates were equally important.

City gates were not simply doors in a wall.

They were places of:

Commerce.

Legal proceedings.

Public announcements.

Civic administration.

Community interaction.

Burned gates therefore represented far more than damaged architecture.

Jerusalem was exposed.

The people were vulnerable.

The city remained disgraced.

IX. WHY DID THIS REPORT AFFECT NEHEMIAH SO DEEPLY?

Nehemiah probably already knew that Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem.

That had happened roughly 140 years earlier.

So why does this report produce such an intense reaction?

The likely issue is not simply that Nehemiah learned for the first time that Jerusalem had once been destroyed.

Rather, he learns that despite the return from exile and the rebuilding of the temple, Jerusalem remains in a condition of severe vulnerability and disgrace.

Whatever hopes existed for greater restoration had not been realized.

The situation remained desperate.

And Nehemiah could no longer treat it as someone else's problem.

X. NEHEMIAH'S RESPONSE

Nehemiah 1:4

This may be the most revealing verse in the opening section.

“When I heard these words, I sat down and wept.”

Notice what Scripture does not say.

Nehemiah did not immediately:

Form a committee.

Write a strategic plan.

Raise money.

Recruit workers.

Contact the king.

Travel to Jerusalem.

He sat down.

And he wept.

Before God used Nehemiah's hands to rebuild a wall, God allowed Nehemiah's heart to be broken over its condition.

That is one of the foundational principles of the entire book.

God often begins His work in the heart of the worker before He begins the work through the worker.

XI. "I SAT DOWN"

The expression is simple but powerful.

Nehemiah's response was not superficial.

The news stopped him.

There are moments when the weight of something is so significant that normal activity simply stops.

Nehemiah did not shrug.

He did not say:

"That's unfortunate."

He did not offer a quick religious response:

"I'll keep Jerusalem in my prayers."

He sat down.

The burden became personal.

XII. "AND WEPT"

Biblical strength does not require emotional hardness.

Nehemiah was a strong leader.

Later he will confront enemies.

He will challenge nobles.

He will organize thousands of workers.

He will withstand threats.

He will confront corruption.

He will demonstrate enormous courage.

Yet the first thing Scripture shows us about his leadership is that he wept.

Strong men can weep.

Strong leaders can grieve.

Spiritual maturity does not mean becoming emotionally indifferent.

Jesus Himself wept.

Jeremiah wept.

Paul wrote with tears.

Nehemiah wept.

The question is not whether something makes us emotional.

The deeper question is:

Do the things that break God's heart still have the ability to break mine?

XIII. "I MOURNED FOR A NUMBER OF DAYS"

Nehemiah continues:

"I mourned for a number of days..."

This was not a brief emotional reaction.

The burden remained.

This is often one difference between a passing concern and a genuine spiritual burden.

We can become emotionally moved for a moment.

A sermon touches us.

A testimony affects us.

A tragedy disturbs us.

A ministry need becomes visible.

But several days later we have forgotten.

Nehemiah could not forget.

The condition of Jerusalem stayed with him.

Application

Sometimes the burden that will not leave us may be the very place where God intends to use us.

That does not mean every concern automatically constitutes a divine calling.

But it does mean we should pay attention to the things God repeatedly places upon our hearts.

XIV. NEHEMIAH FASTED

"...fasting..."

Fasting in Scripture is frequently associated with:

Grief.

Repentance.

Seeking God's direction.

Urgent prayer.

Spiritual dependence.

Fasting does not manipulate God.

It does not force God to answer.

Rather, fasting can express the seriousness with which a person is seeking God.

Nehemiah's burden had become so significant that even normal physical appetites became secondary.

The physical condition of Jerusalem produced a spiritual hunger in Nehemiah.

He needed to hear from God.

XV. NEHEMIAH PRAYED

Finally:

“...and praying before the God of the heavens.”

Here we arrive at the heart of Nehemiah's response.

He prayed.

The problem was enormous.

Jerusalem was hundreds of miles away.

Nehemiah did not command an army.

He did not possess royal authority.

He could not simply leave his responsibilities.

He could not order the reconstruction of Jerusalem.

From a human perspective, Nehemiah had limited power.

So he went to the One who possessed unlimited power.

XVI. “THE GOD OF THE HEAVENS”

Nehemiah describes the Lord as:

“the God of the heavens.”

This title is especially meaningful within the Persian setting.

Artaxerxes might rule Persia.

But Artaxerxes did not rule heaven.

Persia might control Jerusalem politically.

But Persia did not control God's purposes.

Nehemiah lived in the court of one of the world's most powerful kings.

Yet Nehemiah knew there was a greater throne.

Before he approached the throne of Artaxerxes, he approached the throne of God.

Key Principle

The believer's greatest resource is never his access to powerful people. It is his access to Almighty God.

XVII. THE ORDER MATTERS

Look again at Nehemiah's response:

He heard.

He sat down.

He wept.

He mourned.

He fasted.

He prayed.

Only later will he act.

That sequence teaches us something essential about spiritual leadership.

We often reverse the order.

We hear about a problem.

Then immediately:

We speak.

We organize.

We react.

We post.

We complain.

We formulate a solution.

Nehemiah teaches us another way.

Hear carefully.

Feel deeply.

Pray seriously.

Then act faithfully.

LEADERSHIP IN FOCUS

Burden Before Vision

Leadership books often begin with vision.

Nehemiah begins somewhere earlier.

Burden.

Before Nehemiah develops a plan for Jerusalem, he develops a concern for Jerusalem.

That distinction matters.

A person can possess organizational ability without possessing spiritual concern.

A person can build something impressive without building something God actually desires.

Biblical leadership asks a deeper question:

What has God placed upon my heart because it matters to Him?

Nehemiah's vision for Jerusalem will eventually become very specific.

But vision grows from burden.

And burden drives him toward prayer.

We could summarize the progression:

Information → Burden → Prayer → Vision → Action

Skipping the early stages can produce activity without spiritual direction.

PASTORAL APPLICATION

What Breaks Your Heart?

Nehemiah 1:1–4 forces us to ask an uncomfortable question:

What bothers me enough to pray about it?

We notice many problems.

We can identify what is wrong with:

Our country.

Our culture.

Our churches.

Our communities.

Our families.

Our schools.

Our neighborhoods.

Other Christians.

But there is a tremendous difference between criticism and burden.

Criticism says:

“Someone ought to do something.”

Burden says:

“Lord, what would You have me do?”

Nehemiah could have criticized the people living in Jerusalem.

Instead, he identified with them.

That becomes even clearer when we examine his prayer.

He will not pray:

“Lord, forgive those sinful people.”

He will pray:

“Both I and my father's family have sinned.”

That is the heart of a godly leader.

A WORD TO THE CHURCH

There is also an important lesson here for the local church.

It is easy for Christians to become comfortable inside the walls of the church while people outside those walls remain spiritually broken.

We can enjoy:

Our worship.

Our fellowship.

Our friendships.

Our Bible studies.

Our traditions.

Our programs.

And never seriously ask:

Who around us still needs Christ?

A church can become comfortable in Susa while its community is spiritually in Jerusalem.

Nehemiah reminds us that God's blessings are not merely privileges to enjoy.

They are resources to steward for His purposes.

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. Why do you think Nehemiah asked about Jerusalem?

What does his question reveal about his priorities?

2. What is the difference between seeing a problem and carrying a burden?

Can you think of something you have complained about but rarely prayed about?

3. Why was Nehemiah's first response prayer rather than immediate action?

What does this teach us about decision-making?

4. Can comfort make us spiritually indifferent?

What are some ways this can happen in the life of an individual Christian or a church?

5. What currently breaks your heart spiritually?

Your family?

Your church?

Your community?

Someone who does not know Christ?

6. Consider this question carefully:

Am I asking God to fix something that He may be calling me to help address?

TEACHER'S EMPHASIS

When teaching this opening section, resist the temptation to move too quickly to the rebuilding of the wall.

The wall is not yet the point.

The broken man comes before the rebuilt wall.

Emphasize the progression:

God showed Nehemiah the problem before He showed Nehemiah the plan.

Nehemiah did not yet know exactly what God would require of him.

He simply knew something was wrong.

And he was willing to carry that burden before God.

This creates an excellent teaching question:

“What if the reason God allowed Nehemiah to hear about the problem was because God intended Nehemiah to become part of the solution?”

That question prepares the class for everything that follows.

THE CENTRAL TRUTH OF NEHEMIAH 1:1–4

If we reduce this section to one principle, it is this:

Before God rebuilt the wall through Nehemiah, He broke Nehemiah's heart over the wall.

The first evidence of Nehemiah's leadership was not his ability to organize.

It was his willingness to care.

And his burden drove him not first toward Jerusalem—
but toward God.

TRANSITION TO NEHEMIAH 1:5–11

Nehemiah has heard the report.

He has sat down.

He has wept.

He has mourned.

He has fasted.

Now Scripture allows us to listen as Nehemiah begins to pray.

And what follows is one of the great prayers of the Old Testament.

It teaches us how a man of God responds when confronted by a problem far larger than himself.

Nehemiah begins neither with the size of Jerusalem's problem nor the strength of Jerusalem's enemies.

He begins with the character of God.

NEXT SECTION

Nehemiah 1:5–11 — The Prayer of a Brokenhearted Servant

Here we will examine Nehemiah's prayer in detail: adoration, confession, God's covenant promises, intercession, and petition, including the important theological significance of Nehemiah identifying himself with the sins of his people.

NEHEMIAH 1:5–11

The Prayer of a Brokenhearted Servant

Nehemiah has received devastating news.

Jerusalem's walls are broken.

Its gates have been burned.

The people are living in trouble and disgrace.

Nehemiah has wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed.

Now Scripture allows us to hear what Nehemiah prayed.

This prayer is important because it reveals Nehemiah's theology before it reveals his strategy.

Before Nehemiah ever develops a plan, he reminds himself of who God is.

THE SCRIPTURE

Nehemiah 1:5–11, CSB

5 I said, “LORD, God of the heavens, the great and awe-inspiring God who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands,

6 let your eyes be open and your ears be attentive to hear your servant's prayer that I now pray to you day and night for your servants, the Israelites. I confess the sins we have committed against you. Both I and my father's family have sinned.

7 We have acted corruptly toward you and have not kept the commands, statutes, and ordinances you gave your servant Moses.

8 Please remember what you commanded your servant Moses: “If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples.

9 But if you return to me and carefully observe my commands, even though your exiles were banished to the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I chose to have my name dwell.”

10 They are your servants and your people. You redeemed them by your great power and strong hand.

11 Please, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to that of your servants who delight to revere your name. Give your servant success today, and grant him compassion in the presence of this man.

At the time, I was the king's cupbearer.

I. THE STRUCTURE OF NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

Nehemiah's prayer provides an excellent biblical pattern for prayer.

It can be divided into several movements:

1. Adoration — Who God Is

Verse 5

2. Intercession — Hear Your Servant

Verse 6a

3. Confession — We Have Sinned

Verses 6b–7

4. Appeal to God's Word — Remember Your Promise

Verses 8–9

5. Appeal to God's Redemption — These Are Your People

Verse 10

6. Petition — Give Your Servant Success

Verse 11

Notice something immediately.

Nehemiah's prayer is not primarily:

“God, fix Jerusalem.”

Instead, his prayer is saturated with the character, Word, promises, and purposes of God.

That is one reason this prayer deserves careful study.

II. NEHEMIAH BEGINS WITH GOD

Nehemiah 1:5

“LORD, God of the heavens, the great and awe-inspiring God...”

Nehemiah begins where biblical prayer should begin.

With God.

His circumstances are enormous.

But he deliberately turns his attention from the size of the problem to the greatness of God.

That changes the perspective of prayer.

Prayer is not informing God about circumstances He does not know.

Prayer is bringing our circumstances into the presence of the God who already knows them and is sovereign over them.

Nehemiah's first concern is therefore not:

How big is Jerusalem's problem?

It is:

How great is Jerusalem's God?

III. “LORD”

Nehemiah addresses God as:

“LORD...”

The CSB's capitalization indicates the Hebrew covenant name YHWH—often rendered Yahweh.

This is significant.

Nehemiah is not appealing to an unknown deity.

He is approaching the God who revealed Himself to Israel.

The God of:

Abraham.

Isaac.

Jacob.

Moses.

David.

The God who entered into covenant relationship with His people.

The God who made promises.

The God who keeps promises.

Nehemiah's confidence is rooted not in his own worthiness but in the character of the God to whom he prays.

IV. "GOD OF THE HEAVENS"

Again Nehemiah calls Him:

"God of the heavens."

This title is especially powerful in the context of the Persian Empire.

Nehemiah serves Artaxerxes.

Artaxerxes possesses tremendous earthly authority.

But Nehemiah knows that Artaxerxes is not sovereign.

God is.

The king sits on a Persian throne.

God rules from heaven.

Nehemiah will eventually need something from Artaxerxes.

But before asking the earthly king, he petitions the heavenly King.

Key Principle

The believer should never be more impressed with earthly power than with divine sovereignty.

V. "THE GREAT AND AWE-INSPIRING GOD"

Nehemiah continues:

"...the great and awe-inspiring God..."

The Hebrew terminology emphasizes God's greatness and the reverence His presence deserves.

Nehemiah possesses a high view of God.

That will become essential because Nehemiah is about to face:

A powerful king.

Hostile enemies.

Political opposition.

Military threats.

Internal division.

Economic injustice.

False accusations.

Religious intimidation.

But if God is truly great and awe-inspiring, none of those things deserves greater fear than God Himself.

This principle will become extremely important later.

Spiritual Principle

A proper fear of God reduces an improper fear of people.

When God becomes small in our thinking, circumstances become enormous.

When God occupies His proper place in our thinking, circumstances are seen in their proper perspective.

VI. THE GOD WHO KEEPS COVENANT

Nehemiah continues:

“...who keeps his gracious covenant with those who love him and keep his commands.”

This language reflects earlier Old Testament revelation, particularly passages such as Deuteronomy 7:9.

Nehemiah knows Israel's history.

He understands why Jerusalem is broken.

Israel had violated God's covenant.

The exile had not happened accidentally.

It was covenant judgment.

But Nehemiah also understands something equally important:

Israel's unfaithfulness did not make God unfaithful.

God remains the covenant-keeping God.

WORD STUDY

Hesed — God's Covenant Love

Behind the idea translated “gracious covenant” stands one of the richest concepts in the Old Testament: God's covenant loyalty and steadfast love.

The Hebrew word hesed can communicate ideas such as:

Steadfast love.

Faithfulness.

Mercy.

Loyalty.

Covenant devotion.

No single English word captures its full richness.

The idea is not merely that God feels affection toward His people.

It emphasizes God's faithful commitment to act consistently with His character and covenant promises.

Israel had been unfaithful.

God had not.

That becomes the foundation of Nehemiah's prayer.

THEOLOGY IN FOCUS

Covenant Faithfulness

Nehemiah does not ask God to ignore Israel's sin.

He does not claim that Israel deserved restoration.

Instead, he appeals to God's covenant faithfulness.

This distinction is critical.

Grace does not mean that sin is insignificant.

The ruins of Jerusalem proved otherwise.

The walls were broken precisely because rebellion against God has consequences.

But judgment had not erased God's covenant purposes.

God had promised both:

Discipline for disobedience

and

Restoration following repentance.

Nehemiah believes both.

Biblical faith does not choose the promises we like and ignore the warnings we dislike.

It trusts everything God has said.

VII. “LET YOUR EYES BE OPEN”

Nehemiah 1:6

Nehemiah prays:

“Let your eyes be open and your ears be attentive to hear your servant's prayer...”

Nehemiah is using anthropomorphic language—describing God in human terms to communicate a spiritual reality.

He is not suggesting God had literally closed His eyes or stopped hearing.

Rather, Nehemiah is pleading:

“Lord, give Your attention to my request.”

There is humility in this language.

Nehemiah does not approach God casually or presumptuously.

He pleads for God to hear.

VIII. “DAY AND NIGHT”

Nehemiah says:

“...that I now pray to you day and night...”

This was not a quick prayer offered immediately after Hanani's report.

Nehemiah carried this burden continually.

We noted earlier that roughly four months pass before Nehemiah approaches Artaxerxes.

His burden became part of his daily spiritual life.

There is a lesson here about persistent prayer.

Some prayers are answered quickly.

Others are carried before God repeatedly.

Jesus later teaches persistence in prayer.

Paul commands believers:

“Pray constantly.”

— 1 Thessalonians 5:17, CSB

Persistence does not mean God is reluctant and must be worn down.

Persistent prayer demonstrates dependence.

Nehemiah knew:

If God did not move, Jerusalem would not be restored.

IX. THE PRAYER TAKES AN UNEXPECTED TURN

We might expect Nehemiah to say:

“Lord, look at what Babylon did.”

Or:

“Lord, look at what Jerusalem's enemies are doing.”

Instead, Nehemiah says:

“I confess the sins we have committed against you.”

That is striking.

The problem Nehemiah sees is not merely political.

It is spiritual.

Jerusalem's broken walls were the visible consequences of a much deeper problem:

Israel's rebellion against God.

Nehemiah understands that before he can talk about rebuilding what is broken, he must acknowledge why it became broken.

X. “WE HAVE SINNED”

Notice Nehemiah's pronouns.

He does not pray:

They sinned.

He prays:

“I confess the sins we have committed against you.”

Then he becomes even more personal:

“Both I and my father's family have sinned.”

This is extraordinary leadership.

Nehemiah identifies himself with his people.

He does not stand above them in self-righteous judgment.

He stands among them in confession.

LEADERSHIP IN FOCUS

“They” Leaders Versus “We” Leaders

There are two ways to talk about the failures of a group.

One is:

“Look at what they have done.”

The other is:

“We need God's mercy.”

Nehemiah chooses the second.

Biblical leadership does not mean refusing to identify sin clearly.

Nehemiah will later confront sin very directly.

But godly leaders do not imagine themselves morally superior to everyone they lead.

Nehemiah understands:

I need the same grace they need.

That humility becomes foundational to his leadership.

XI. TRUE CONFESSION IS SPECIFIC

Nehemiah 1:7

Nehemiah continues:

“We have acted corruptly toward you...”

He does not minimize the sin.

He calls it what it is.

Then he becomes more specific:

“...and have not kept the commands, statutes, and ordinances you gave your servant Moses.”

Israel's problem was not ignorance.

God had spoken.

The people had disobeyed.

That distinction is crucial.

Sin is ultimately not merely:

Poor judgment.

Bad habits.

Unhealthy choices.

Cultural dysfunction.

Human weakness.

Sin is rebellion against God.

David expresses the same theological reality in Psalm 51:

“Against you—you alone—I have sinned and done this evil in your sight.”
— Psalm 51:4, CSB

Other people may certainly be harmed by our sin.

But ultimately every sin is committed against God.

XII. NEHEMIAH'S VIEW OF SCRIPTURE

Notice how Nehemiah describes God's commands:

“...the commands, statutes, and ordinances you gave your servant Moses.”

Nehemiah believes that what Moses recorded originated with God.

That is an important biblical doctrine.

Scripture is not merely human religious reflection.

God spoke through human authors.

Nehemiah therefore treats the Mosaic Law as the authoritative Word of God.

Israel's guilt existed because Israel had violated what God had said.

XIII. “PLEASE REMEMBER”

Nehemiah 1:8

Nehemiah now prays:

“Please remember what you commanded your servant Moses...”

Does God forget?

No.

Nehemiah is not reminding God of information that has escaped His memory.

“Remember” in this context means something closer to:

Act according to what You have promised.

Nehemiah is praying the Word of God back to God.

This is one of the strongest characteristics of his prayer.

He knows what God has said.

And his prayer is built upon it.

XIV. NEHEMIAH KNEW DEUTERONOMY

The language of verses 8–9 draws especially from passages such as Deuteronomy 28–30.

God had warned Israel that persistent rebellion would result in scattering among the nations.

Nehemiah acknowledges:

That happened.

But God also promised that repentance and return would be followed by restoration.

Nehemiah therefore essentially prays:

“Lord, what You warned us about happened exactly as You said. Now I am appealing to what You promised about restoration.”

This is remarkable faith.

Nehemiah's faith rests upon God's Word.

Not feelings.

Not optimism.

Not wishful thinking.

God has spoken.

Therefore Nehemiah prays.

XV. THE WARNING

Nehemiah 1:8

Nehemiah recalls God's words:

“If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples.”

This had been fulfilled.

Israel's exile was not evidence that God's Word had failed.

Ironically, the exile demonstrated that God's Word was true.

God had warned His people repeatedly.

They refused to listen.

Judgment came.

That teaches an uncomfortable but essential truth:

God's warnings are as trustworthy as God's promises.

We often emphasize biblical promises.

We should.

But Scripture also contains warnings.

A mature faith takes both seriously.

XVI. THE PROMISE

Nehemiah 1:9

Then comes the gracious contrast:

“But if you return to me...”

This is the language of repentance.

Biblical repentance involves more than feeling sorry.

It means turning.

Returning.

Reorienting ourselves toward God.

God's people had turned away.

God calls them to return.

XVII. “EVEN TO THE FARTHEST HORIZON”

God's promise continues:

“...even though your exiles were banished to the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there...”

Distance is no obstacle to God.

The people could be scattered across the ancient world.

God could gather them.

The Persian Empire might control vast territories.

God's reach extended farther.

Theological Principle

No circumstance can place God's people beyond God's sovereign reach.

XVIII. “THE PLACE WHERE I CHOSE TO HAVE MY NAME DWELL”

God had uniquely chosen Jerusalem in connection with His covenant purposes.

The city itself possessed no magical power.

Its significance came from God's sovereign choice.

The temple in Jerusalem represented God's dwelling among His covenant people.

Therefore, Jerusalem's condition mattered deeply to Nehemiah.

This was not mere patriotism.

It was theological.

He cared about Jerusalem because Jerusalem was connected to the revealed purposes of God.

XIX. NEHEMIAH APPEALS TO REDEMPTION

Nehemiah 1:10

Nehemiah says:

“They are your servants and your people.”

Notice his argument.

He does not say:

“Lord, these people deserve help.”

Instead:

“They are Yours.”

Then:

“You redeemed them by your great power and strong hand.”

Nehemiah reaches back to Israel's great act of Old Testament redemption:

The Exodus.

God had brought His people out of Egypt.

He had demonstrated His power.

He had redeemed them.

Nehemiah essentially asks:

“God, will You abandon the people You redeemed?”

His confidence rests in God's previous saving action.

CHRISTOLOGICAL CONNECTION

Redemption Accomplished by a Greater Deliverer

The Exodus becomes one of the great biblical pictures of redemption.

Israel was enslaved.

God delivered them.

In the New Testament, redemption reaches its ultimate fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Peter writes:

“For you know that you were redeemed from your empty way of life inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ...”

— 1 Peter 1:18–19, CSB

Nehemiah could look backward and say:

“You redeemed Israel from Egypt.”

The Christian can look backward to Calvary and say:

“You redeemed me through Christ.”

Our confidence in prayer similarly rests not upon our worthiness but upon God's grace.

XX. THE REQUEST FINALLY COMES

Nehemiah 1:11

Only after:

Adoration.

Confession.

Scripture.

Covenant.

Redemption.

does Nehemiah finally present his specific request.

“Please, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant...”

Then:

“Give your servant success today...”

The Hebrew idea behind “success” can carry the sense of causing something to prosper or succeed.

But we must understand what Nehemiah means.

He is not praying:

“Make me wealthy.”

He is not asking:

“Advance my career.”

He wants success in accomplishing God's purposes.

Biblical prosperity must always be understood in relation to the will and purposes of God.

XXI. “GRANT HIM COMPASSION”

Nehemiah continues:

“...and grant him compassion in the presence of this man.”

Who is:

“this man”?

The king of Persia.

Artaxerxes.

One of the most powerful men alive.

Yet Nehemiah refers to him simply as:

“this man.”

That is not disrespect.

It reflects perspective.

Artaxerxes may be king.

But before God, Artaxerxes is simply a man.

Nehemiah understands that God can move the heart of the king.

Again, Proverbs 21:1 comes to mind:

“A king's heart is like channeled water in the LORD's hand: He directs it wherever he chooses.”

Nehemiah does not begin by manipulating the king.

He begins by asking God to work in the king's heart.

XXII. THEN COMES THE SURPRISE

The chapter concludes:

“At the time, I was the king's cupbearer.”

Until this moment, the reader has not been told Nehemiah's occupation.

Suddenly everything changes.

The man praying for access to the king already has access to the king.

This is providence.

Long before Nehemiah knew about Jerusalem's crisis, God had placed him exactly where he needed to be.

Nehemiah may have thought he was simply serving as a cupbearer.

God knew differently.

THEOLOGY IN FOCUS

Providence — God Was Already Working

Providence refers to God's sovereign preservation and governance of His creation as He accomplishes His purposes.

Notice what God had already done before Nehemiah prayed.

God had allowed Nehemiah to become cupbearer.

God had positioned him in Susa.

God had placed him near Artaxerxes.

God brought Hanani to him.

God allowed him to hear Jerusalem's condition.

God stirred his heart.

Nehemiah's prayer did not cause God to begin working.

God was already working before Nehemiah recognized the assignment.

That should encourage us.

Sometimes when God places a burden upon our hearts, He has already been arranging circumstances we cannot yet see.

A CRITICAL LEADERSHIP LESSON

Pray and Prepare

Nehemiah prayed.

But prayer did not make planning unnecessary.

As chapter 2 unfolds, we will discover that Nehemiah had clearly been thinking carefully during these months.

When Artaxerxes asks questions, Nehemiah will have answers.

How long will you be gone?

He has thought about it.

What will you need?

He knows.

What letters are necessary?

He knows.

What materials will be required?

He knows.

Nehemiah teaches us an important balance:

Prayer is not a substitute for preparation.

And:

Preparation is not a substitute for prayer.

The godly leader does both.

Pray as though everything depends upon God.

Prepare faithfully for the responsibility God has given you.

PRAYER IN FOCUS

A Pattern We Can Use

Nehemiah's prayer gives us a useful model.

When confronted by a difficult situation:

1. Begin with God's character.

“Great and awe-inspiring God...”

2. Submit yourself to God.

“Your servant...”

3. Confess sin honestly.

“We have sinned.”

4. Anchor your prayer in Scripture.

“Remember what You commanded...”

5. Remember God's past faithfulness.

“You redeemed them...”

6. Make your request specifically.

“Give your servant success...”

7. Trust God with the people involved.

“Grant him compassion...”

This is far different from merely giving God a list of requests.

Biblical prayer is deeply God-centered.

PERSONAL APPLICATION

Before You Ask God to Change the Situation

Nehemiah's prayer forces us to consider several questions.

When something is broken, is my first instinct to:

Complain?

Blame?

React?

Control?

Or pray?

And when I pray, do I begin merely by asking God to change everyone else?

Nehemiah's prayer begins with:

God, You are great.

Then:

God, we have sinned.

Only later:

God, please change the circumstances.

Sometimes we want God to change our situation without allowing Him to change us.

Nehemiah's prayer refuses that shortcut.

A WORD TO THE CHURCH

There is a significant lesson here for any church seeking renewal, growth, outreach, or revitalization.

We can easily begin with:

Programs.

Advertising.

Facilities.

Events.

Strategies.

Committees.

Budgets.

Those things may have legitimate value.

But Nehemiah reminds us:

Spiritual rebuilding begins on our knees.

Before asking:

“How can we reach more people?”

We should ask:

“Lord, is there anything in us that needs repentance?”

Before asking:

“What new program should we begin?”

Ask:

“What has God already told us to do in His Word?”

Before asking:

“How can we make this successful?”

Ask:

“What would faithfulness look like?”

The church does not need God to bless our plans nearly as much as we need to align ourselves with His purposes.

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. What does Nehemiah mention about God before making his request?

What does this teach us about prayer?

2. Why does Nehemiah say “we have sinned” rather than “they have sinned”?

What does this reveal about godly leadership?

3. What role does Scripture play in Nehemiah's prayer?

How can God's Word shape our own prayers?

4. Why is the statement “I was the king's cupbearer” so important?

What does it reveal about God's providence?

5. Is there something you are asking God to change in someone else that God may first want to address in you?

6. Where can you look backward and recognize that God was preparing circumstances before you understood what He was doing?

7. Which comes more naturally to you—prayer or planning?

How does Nehemiah demonstrate the necessity of both?

CHAPTER 1 — THE BIG PICTURE

Nehemiah 1 presents a progression we should not miss.

Nehemiah hears the problem.

Information

↓

Nehemiah feels the burden.

Compassion

↓

Nehemiah seeks God.

Prayer

↓

Nehemiah confesses sin.

Repentance

↓

Nehemiah remembers Scripture.

Truth

↓

Nehemiah asks God to act.

Petition

↓

Nehemiah prepares to become involved.

Obedience

This gives us a powerful summary of the chapter:

Nehemiah did not merely pray for God to send someone.

He prayed while becoming willing for God to send him.

CHAPTER 1 SUMMARY

Before God Rebuilds the Wall

Nehemiah begins with broken walls.

But chapter 1 contains no construction.

Not one stone is moved.

Not one gate is repaired.

Not one worker is recruited.

Nehemiah never even leaves Susa.

And yet some of the most important work in the entire book has already begun.

A man has been burdened.

A man has humbled himself.

A man has confessed sin.

A man has opened God's Word.

A man has begun praying.

A man has made himself available.

The wall will eventually be rebuilt in only fifty-two days.

But God spends months preparing the man who will lead the rebuilding.

That teaches us something we should carry throughout this study:

God is often more interested in preparing the worker than we are in completing the work.

Nehemiah thinks he is praying about a broken wall.

God is preparing a governor.

KEY TRUTH TO REMEMBER

Before Nehemiah stood before the king, he knelt before God.

And before Nehemiah asked:

“What can I do?”

he understood:

“Only God can do this.”

That is not weakness.

That is the beginning of biblical leadership.

TRANSITION TO CHAPTER 2

For months, Nehemiah has prayed.

But prayer eventually leads to action.

One ordinary day, Nehemiah walks into the presence of Artaxerxes to perform the same responsibility he has performed many times before.

But this day will be different.

The king will look at his cupbearer and notice something.

Nehemiah is sad.

That may sound insignificant.

It isn't.

In the court of an ancient Persian king, the next few moments could change Nehemiah's life.

And perhaps end it.

Nehemiah has prayed for an opportunity.

Now God gives him one.

The question becomes:

What will Nehemiah do when the door he has been praying for finally opens?