

Nehemiah 1
October 3, 2021

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: When you see video footage of cities being destroyed by hurricanes, tornadoes, floods, earthquakes, et al, what feelings does the footage evoke in you, and then what thoughts follow?
[Let people engage]

Background: We are beginning our study of the book of Nehemiah, who was a pious Jew. He is serving as a cupbearer in the court of King Artaxerxes, who is the king of Persia. While Nehemiah was serving King Artaxerxes, he learned from his brother Hanani (at least a kinsman) the sad condition of his fellow Jews living in Jerusalem. The Jews living in Jerusalem at this point of history were formerly held in captivity in Babylon. The Jews who had been in Babylonian captivity for 70 years found favor with King Cyrus, a Persian king who conquered the Babylonians in 538 BC. King Cyrus granted permission for the Jews to return to their homeland. But instead of all the Jewish people leaving Babylon all at once, we see two groups of Jews return to their homeland at two different times:

- The first group of approximately 50,000 Jews returned to Jerusalem during the first year of King Cyrus's reign in 538 BC. The temple of Jerusalem is rebuilt by this group of people.
- A second group of approximately 1,500 Jews returned to Jerusalem 80 years later with the help of Ezra around 458 BC. Since it was 80 years later, it is with the permission of King Artaxerxes, who grants the Jewish people an opportunity to return to Jerusalem. Ezra returns to Jerusalem with this second group of Jews to help bring spiritual revival to the people.

Transition: It's 12 years later, 446 BC, since Ezra returned with 1,500 Jews, and the book of Nehemiah picks up the story of the Jewish exiles who returned to their homeland after the Babylonian Captivity in . God is looking for someone to go to the ruined city and restore safety and order. Nehemiah is that chosen person. Let's read Chapter 1 and see how **Nehemiah felt** after her heard a report that his homeland was still in ruins and unprotected because there was no wall! Let's begin.

BOOK:

Nehemiah's Prayer

1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, ² Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

³ They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

⁴ When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. ⁵ Then I said:

“O LORD, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s house, have committed against you. ⁷ We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

⁸ “Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.’

¹⁰ “They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. ¹¹ Oh Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man.”

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

Whenever God wants to get a work done, He lays hold of willing people. The walls of Jerusalem had been ruined; a small remnant had returned; and there was much work that needed to be done. God was looking for someone to go to the ruined city and restore safety and order. Nehemiah was to be that person. Is there a work that God wants to do through you? Are you willing?

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1993). *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the Old Testament (Ne 1)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Whenever God wants to get a work done, He lays hold of willing people. The walls of Jerusalem had been ruined; a small remnant had returned; and there was much work that needed to be done. In 536, Zerubbabel and Joshua had taken about 50,000 Jews back and had (by 516) rebuilt the temple. In 457 there had been a small revival under Ezra, but now it was 445, and God was looking for someone to go to the ruined city and restore safety and order. Nehemiah was to be that person. Notice Nehemiah's activities in these three chapters.

I. Nehemiah Prays for the Work (1)

A. The report (vv. 1–3).

As cupbearer to the king, Nehemiah (a Jew) held a high position in the court. He was close to the king and could share his confidence. But Nehemiah was not forgetful of his own people, for he eagerly asked his brother for news about Jerusalem. Read Pss. 122 and 137:5–6. Oh, that saints today had as much interest in their heavenly Jerusalem! The news was distressing: the remnant was suffering shame, the walls were broken down, and the gates were burned. See Ps. 79:1–4. Instead of being a city of praise and glory, it was a city of shame and reproach.

B. The response (v. 4).

Nehemiah was immediately burdened for his city. The fact that he was more than 700 miles away made no difference; nor did it matter that he was enjoying luxury and prestige in the palace of the king. He did not say, "The city's plight is not my fault!" Immediately his heart was touched, and he wanted to do something to save his city. For four months (from Dec. to April; see 1:1 and 2:1) he wept and prayed. See Dan. 9 and Ezra 9.

C. The request (vv. 5–11).

This book shows Nehemiah to be a man of prayer (1:4–11; 2:4; 4:4; 4:9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31). The book starts and ends with prayer! Verse 6 tells us he prayed day and night, so burdened was he for the city. Note that Nehemiah confesses his sins and the sins of his people. He also reminds the Lord of His gracious promises (vv. 8–9) and then offers himself to be God's servant to do something about Jerusalem's plight. "Here am I, Lord, send me!" In v. 11 we see that he has faith to ask God for servants, other Jews who would help him in the task.

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *Be Determined* (pp. 13-23). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

NEHEMIAH 1

Does Anybody Really Care?

The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity.”

George Bernard Shaw put those words into the mouth of the Rev. Anthony Anderson in the second act of his play *The Devil's Disciple*. The statement certainly summarizes what Jesus taught in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37); and it rebukes all those who fold their arms complacently, smile benignly, and say somewhat sarcastically, “Ask me if I care!”

Nehemiah was the kind of person who cared. He cared about the traditions of the past and the needs of the present. He cared about the hopes for the future. He cared about his heritage, his ancestral city, and the glory of his God. He revealed this caring attitude in four different ways.

1. He cared enough to ask (Neh. 1:1–3)

Nehemiah was a layman, cupbearer to the great “Artaxerxes Longimanus,” who ruled Persia from 464 to 423 B.C. He is identified as the son of Hachaliah to distinguish him from other Jews of the same name (Neh. 3:16; Ezra 2:2). Nehemiah means “The Lord has comforted.”

A cupbearer was much more than our modern “butler” (see Gen. 40). It was a position of great responsibility and privilege. At each meal, he tested the king's wine to make sure it wasn't poisoned. A man who stood that close to the king in public had to be handsome, cultured, knowledgeable in court procedures, and able to converse with the king and advise him if asked (see 41:1–13). Because he had access to the king, the cupbearer was a man of great influence, which he could use for good or for evil.

That Nehemiah, a Jew, held such an important position in the palace speaks well of his character and ability (Dan. 1:1–4). For nearly a century, the Jewish remnant had been back in their own land, and Nehemiah could have joined them; but he chose to remain in the palace. It turned out that God had a work for him to do there that he could not have accomplished elsewhere. God put Nehemiah in Susa just as He had put Esther there a generation before, and just as He had put Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon. When God wants to accomplish a work, He always prepares His workers and puts them in the right places at the right time.

The Hebrew month of Chislew runs from mid-November to mid-December on our calendar; and the twentieth year of Artaxerxes was the year 444 B.C. Shushan (or Susa) was the capital city of the Persian Empire and the site of the king's winter palace. No doubt it was just another routine day when Nehemiah met his brother Hanani (see Neh. 7:2), who had just returned from a visit to Jerusalem, but it turned out to be a turning point in Nehemiah's life.

Like large doors, great life-changing events can swing on very small hinges. It was just another day when Moses went out to care for his sheep, but on that day he heard the Lord's call and became a prophet (Ex. 3). It was an ordinary day when David was called home from shepherding his flock; but on that day, he was anointed king (1 Sam. 16). It was an ordinary day when Peter, Andrew, James, and John were mending their nets after a night of failure; but that was the day Jesus called them to become fishers of men (Luke 5:1–11). You never know what God has in store, even in a commonplace conversation with a friend or relative; so keep your heart open to God's providential leading. I attended a birthday party one evening when I was nineteen years old, and a statement made to me there by a friend helped direct my life into the plans God had for me; and I will be forever grateful.

Why would Nehemiah inquire about a struggling remnant of people who lived hundreds of miles away? After all, he was the king's cupbearer, and he was successfully secure in his own life. Certainly, it wasn't his fault that his ancestors had sinned against the Lord and brought judgment to the city of Jerusalem and the kingdom of Judah. A century and a half before, the

Prophet Jeremiah had given this word from the Lord: “For who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem? Or who will bemoan you? Or who will turn aside to ask how you are doing?” (Jer. 15:5, NKJV) *Nehemiah was the man God had chosen to do those very things!*

Some people prefer *not* to know what’s going on, because information might bring obligation. “What you don’t know can’t hurt you,” says the old adage; but is it true? In a letter to a Mrs. Foote, Mark Twain wrote, “All you need in this life is ignorance and confidence; then success is sure.” But what we don’t know *could* hurt us a great deal! There are people in the cemetery who chose not to know the truth. The slogan for the 1987 AIDS publicity campaign was “Don’t die of ignorance”; and that slogan can be applied to many areas of life besides health.

Nehemiah asked about Jerusalem and the Jews living there because he had a caring heart. When we truly care about people, we want the facts, no matter how painful they may be. “Practical politics consists in ignoring facts,” American historian Henry Adams said; but Aldous Huxley said, “Facts do not cease to exist because they are ignored.” Closing our eyes and ears to the truth could be the first step toward tragedy for ourselves as well as for others.

What did Nehemiah learn about Jerusalem and the Jews? Three words summarize the bad news: remnant, ruin, and reproach. Instead of a land inhabited by a great nation, only a remnant of people lived there; and they were in great affliction and struggling to survive. Instead of a magnificent city, Jerusalem was in shambles; and where there had once been great glory, there was now nothing but great reproach.

Of course, Nehemiah had known all his life that the city of his fathers was in ruins, because the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem’s walls, gates, and temple in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 25:1–21). Fifty years later, a group of 50,000 Jews had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city. Since the Gentiles had hindered their work, however, the temple was not completed for twenty years (Ezra 1–6), and the gates and walls never were repaired. Perhaps Nehemiah had hoped that the work on the walls had begun again and that the city was now restored. Without walls and gates, the city was open to ridicule and attack. See Psalms 48, 79, 84, and 87 to see how much loyal Jews loved their city.

Are we like Nehemiah, anxious to know the truth even about the worst situations? Is our interest born of concern or idle curiosity? When we read missionary prayer letters, the news in religious periodicals, or even our church’s ministry reports, do we want the facts, and do the facts burden us? Are we the kind of people who care enough to ask?

2. He cared enough to weep (Neh. 1:4)

What makes people laugh or weep is often an indication of character. People who laugh at others’ mistakes or misfortunes, or who weep over trivial personal disappointments, are lacking either in culture or character, and possibly both. Sometimes weeping is a sign of weakness; but with Nehemiah, it was a sign of strength, as it was with Jeremiah (Jer. 9:1), Paul (Acts 20:19), and the Lord Jesus (Luke 19:41). In fact, Nehemiah was like the Lord Jesus in that he willingly shared the burden that was crushing others. “The reproaches of them that reproached Thee are fallen upon Me” (Ps. 69:9; Rom. 15:3).

When God puts a burden on your heart, don’t try to escape it; for if you do, you may miss the blessing He has planned for you. The Book of Nehemiah begins with “great affliction” (Neh. 1:3), but before it closes, there is great joy (8:12, 17). “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Ps. 30:5). Our tears water the “seeds of providence” that God has planted on our path; and without our tears, those seeds could never grow and produce fruit.

It was customary for the Jews to sit down when they mourned (Ezra 9:1–4; 2:13). Unconsciously, Nehemiah was imitating the grieving Jewish captives who had been exiled in Babylon years before (Ps. 137:1). Like Daniel, Nehemiah probably had a private room where he prayed to God with his face toward Jerusalem (Dan. 6:10; 1 Kings 8:28–30). Fasting was required of the Jews only once a year, on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:29); but Nehemiah spent several days fasting, weeping, and praying. He knew that somebody had to do something to rescue Jerusalem, and he was willing to go.

3. He cared enough to pray (Neh. 1:5–10)

This prayer is the first of twelve instances of prayer recorded in this book. (See 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 9:5ff; 13:14, 22, 29, 31.) The Book of Nehemiah opens and closes with prayer. It is obvious that Nehemiah was a man of faith who depended wholly on the Lord to help him accomplish the work He had called him to do. The Scottish novelist George MacDonald said, “In whatever man does without God, he must fail miserably, or succeed more miserably.” Nehemiah succeeded because he depended on God. Speaking about the church’s ministry today, the late Alan Redpath said, “There is too much working before men and too little waiting before God.”

This prayer begins with *ascription of praise to God* (1:5). “God of heaven” is the title Cyrus used for the Lord when he announced that the Jews could return to their land (2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–2). The heathen gods were but idols on the earth, but the God of the Jews was Lord in heaven. Ezra often used this divine title (5:11–12; 6:9; 7:12, 21, 23), and it is found four times in Nehemiah (1:4–5; 2:4, 20) and three times in Daniel (2:18–19, 44). Nehemiah began his prayer as we should begin our prayers: “Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be Thy name” (Matt. 6:9).

To what kind of a God do we pray when we lift our prayers to “the God of heaven”? We pray to a “great and awesome God” (Neh. 1:5, NKJV; and see 4:14, 8:6, and 9:32), who is worthy of our praise and worship. If you are experiencing great affliction (v. 3) and are about to undertake a great work (4:19; 6:3), then you need the great power (1:10), great goodness (9:25, 35), and great mercy (v. 31) of a great God. Is the God you worship big enough to handle the challenges that you face?

He is also a God who keeps His Word (1:5). The Lord had made a covenant with His people Israel, promising to bless them richly if they obeyed His Word, but warning that He would chasten them if they disobeyed (Lev. 26; Deut. 27–30). The city of Jerusalem was in ruins, and the nation was feeble because the people had sinned against the Lord. (See Ezra’s prayer of confession in Ezra 9 and the prayer of the nation in Neh. 9.)

The greater part of Nehemiah’s prayer was devoted to *confession of sin* (1:6–9). The God who promised blessing and chastening also promised forgiveness if His people would repent and turn back to Him (Deut. 30; 1 Kings 8:31–53). It was this promise that Nehemiah was claiming as he prayed for himself and the nation. God’s eyes are upon His people and His ears are open to their prayers (1 Kings 8:29; 2 Chron. 7:14). The word *remember* is a key word in this book (Neh. 1:8; 4:14; 5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31).

Note that Nehemiah used the pronoun “we” and not “they,” identifying himself with the sins of a generation he didn’t even know. It would have been easy to look back and blame his ancestors for the reproach of Jerusalem, but Nehemiah looked within and blamed himself! “We have sinned! We have dealt very corruptly!”

A few years ago, when the “media scandals” brought great reproach to the church, I wrote in my book *The Integrity Crisis*:

To begin with, the integrity crisis involves more than a few people who were accused of moral and financial improprieties. *The integrity crisis involves the whole church.* I am not saying that people didn't sin, nor am I preaching "collective guilt," whatever that is. I only want to emphasize that, in the body of Christ, we belong to one another, we affect one another, and we can't escape one another. The press did not create the crisis, the church did; and the church will have to solve it (Nashville: Oliver-Nelson, 1988; p. 18).

When one Jewish soldier, Achan, sinned at Jericho, God said that "the children of Israel committed a trespass" and that "Israel" sinned and transgressed the covenant (Josh. 7:1, 11). Since the sin of one man was the sin of the whole nation, it brought shame and defeat to the whole nation. Once that sin had been dealt with, God could again bless His people with victory.

How do we know that God forgives our sins when we repent and confess to Him? *He has so promised in His Word.* Nehemiah's prayer is saturated with quotations from and allusions to the covenants of God found in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. He certainly knew the Old Testament Law! In Nehemiah 1:8–9, he reminded God of His words found in Deuteronomy 28:63–67 and 30:1–10, just as we remind the Lord of His promise in 1 John 1:9. Nehemiah asked God to forgive His people, regather them to their land, and restore them to His favor and blessing.

This humble prayer closed with *an expression of confidence (Neh. 1:10–11)*. To begin with, he had confidence in the power of God. When the Bible speaks of the eyes, ears, and hands of the Lord, it is using only human language to describe divine activity. God is spirit, and therefore does not have a body such as humans have; but He is able to see His people's needs, hear their prayers, and work on their behalf with His mighty hand. Nehemiah knew that he was too weak to rebuild Jerusalem, but he had faith that God would work on his behalf.

He also had confidence in God's faithfulness. "Now these are Thy servants and Thy people" (v. 10). In bringing Babylon to destroy Jerusalem and take the people captive, God chastened the Jews sorely; but He did not forsake them! They were still His people and His servants. He had redeemed them from Egypt by His great power (Ex. 14:13–31) and had also set them free from bondage in Babylon. Would He not, in His faithfulness, help them rebuild the city?

Unlike Elijah, who thought he was the only faithful Jew left (1 Kings 19:10), Nehemiah had confidence that God would raise up other people to help him in his work. He was sure that many other Jews were also praying and that they would rally to the cause once they heard that God was at work. Great leaders are not only believing people who obey the Lord and courageously move ahead, but they also challenge others to go with them. You can't be a true leader unless you have followers, and Nehemiah was able to enlist others to help him do the work.

Finally, Nehemiah was confident that God would work in the heart of Artaxerxes and secure for the project the official support that it needed (Neh. 1:10). Nehemiah couldn't simply quit his job and move to Jerusalem. He was an appointee of the king, and he needed the king's permission for everything he did. Furthermore, he needed the king's provision and protection so he could travel to Jerusalem and remain away from his post until the work was completed. Without official authority to govern, an official guard for the journey, and the right to use materials from the king's forest, the entire project was destined to fail. Eastern monarchs were absolute despots, and it was not easy to approach them or convince them. But "the king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; He directs it like a watercourse wherever He pleases" (Prov. 21:2, NIV).

Too often, we plan our projects and then ask God to bless them; but Nehemiah didn't make that mistake. He sat down and wept (Neh. 1:4), knelt down and prayed, and then stood up and worked because he knew he had the blessing of the Lord on what he was doing.

4. He cared enough to volunteer (Neh. 1:11)

It has well been said that prayer is not getting man's will done in heaven but getting God's will done on earth. However, for God's will to be done on earth, He needs people to be available for Him to use. God does "exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works *in us* (Eph. 3:20, NKJV, italics mine). If God is going to answer prayer, He must start by working in the one doing the praying! He works in us and through us to help us see our prayers answered.

While Nehemiah was praying, his burden for Jerusalem became greater and his vision of what needed to be done became clearer. Real prayer keeps your heart and your head in balance so your burden doesn't make you impatient to run ahead of the Lord and ruin everything. As we pray, God tells us *what* to do, *when* to do it, and *how* to do it; and all are important to the accomplishing of the will of God. Some Christian workers are like Lord Ronald in one of Stephen Leacock's short stories who "flung himself upon his horse and rode madly off in all directions."

Nehemiah planned to volunteer to go to Jerusalem to supervise the rebuilding of the walls. He didn't pray for God to send somebody else, nor did he argue that he was ill-equipped for such a difficult task. He simply said, "Here am I—send me!" He knew that he would have to approach the king and request a leave of absence. Eastern kings' word meant life or death. What would happen to Nehemiah's plans if he approached Artaxerxes on the wrong day, when the king was ill or displeased with something or someone in the palace? No matter how you look at it, Nehemiah was facing a test of faith; but he knew that his God was a great God and would see him through.

The king's cupbearer would have to sacrifice the comfort and security of the palace for the rigors and dangers of life in a ruined city. Luxury would be replaced by ruins, and prestige by ridicule and slander. Instead of sharing the king's bounties, Nehemiah would personally pay for the upkeep of scores of people who would eat at his table. He would leave behind the ease of the palace and take up the toils of encouraging a beaten people and finishing an almost impossible task. And with the help of God, *he did it!* In fifty-two days, the walls were rebuilt, the gates were restored, and the people were rejoicing! And it all started with a man who cared.

Abraham cared and rescued Lot from Sodom (Gen. 18–19). Moses cared and delivered the Israelites from Egypt. David cared and brought the nation and the kingdom back to the Lord. Esther cared and risked her life to save her nation from genocide. Paul cared and took the Gospel throughout the Roman Empire. Jesus cared and died on the cross for a lost world.

God is still looking for people who care, people like Nehemiah, who cared enough to ask for the facts, weep over the needs, pray for God's help, and then volunteer to get the job done.

"Here am I, Lord—send me!"

Getz, G. A. (1985). Nahum. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 674-675) Wheaton, IL: Victor Books

1. THE REPORT FROM JERUSALEM (1:1–3)

1:1–3. While serving at the Persian winter palace in **Susa** (cf. Es. 1:2; Dan. 8:1; also see the map "The Persian Empire," in the *Introduction* to Ezra), **Nehemiah** one day received a report from several **men** who had come **from Judah**. One of them was his own brother, **Hanani**; later

Nehemiah appointed him to a high position in Jerusalem (7:2). This report came **in the month of Kislev**, that is, November–December (see the chart “Calendar in Israel,” near Ex. 12:1) **in the 20th year** of Artaxerxes the king (cf. Neh. 2:1). Artaxerxes, Persia’s sixth king, began reigning in 464 B.C., so this year was 444.

The report instantly depressed Nehemiah. It pertained to his people and their land. The Jews in Judah (a **province** of Persia) were greatly troubled and disgraced, and Jerusalem’s **wall was broken down and its gates had been burned**. (Six gates were later repaired, 3:1, 3, 6, 13–15.) This left the city defenseless against enemy attacks. The people had been rebuilding the walls (Ezra 4:12) but were stopped by Artaxerxes who was pressured by some Samaritans and Rehum, the commanding officer, who may have been a Persian responsible to Artaxerxes (Ezra 4:17–23).

Because of Nehemiah’s position in the king’s court, he must have been aware of Rehum’s initial letter and Artaxerxes’ subsequent response. However, he had probably not received word as to the results of the letter, though no doubt he feared for his brothers in **Jerusalem**. It is with this prior knowledge that he received the disappointing report from Jerusalem with a sense of deep regret and despair.

2. THE RESPONSE OF NEHEMIAH (1:4)

1:4. On receiving this dismal report, Nehemiah **sat down and wept** (cf. Ezra 10:1). For a number of **days**, he **mourned ... fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven** (cf. Neh. 1:5; 2:4, 20; see comments on Ezra 1:2). His praying was continual (“day and night,” Neh. 1:6). Fasting, though not a requirement of the Law except on the annual Day of Atonement, often evidenced one’s distraught condition (cf. 2 Sam. 12:16; 1 Kings 21:27; Ezra 8:23).

3. THE CONTENTS OF THE CUPBEARER’S PRAYER (1:5–11)

a. *Nehemiah’s acknowledgment of God’s greatness (1:5)*

1:5. Nehemiah faced a situation he knew he could not solve by himself. But he also knew that with God all things are possible (cf. Jer. 32:17). Nehemiah began his prayer by acknowledging that fact: **O LORD, God of heaven** (cf. Neh. 1:4), **the great and awesome God** (cf. 4:14; 9:32). “LORD” (Yahweh) speaks of His covenant relationship to Israel, “God of heaven” refers to His sovereignty, and the words “great and awesome” are mindful of His power and majesty. Surely such a God could answer Nehemiah’s prayer. As the “LORD” He **keeps His covenant of love** (*hesed*, “loyal love”) **with those who love ... and obey Him**.

b. *Nehemiah’s confession of Israel’s sins (1:6–7)*

1:6–7. In this **prayer** of confession of **the sins of the people of Israel**, Nehemiah included himself. As the Prophet Daniel had prayed almost 100 years before (Dan. 9:4–6) and as Ezra had prayed (Ezra 9:6–15), Nehemiah acknowledged that he shared the responsibility for Israel’s disobedience to God’s laws. He said **I confess** and three times he said **we**.

He placed himself and Israel in a submissive attitude under the Lord by calling himself God’s **servant** (cf. Neh. 1:10–11) and by calling them His **servants** (cf. vv. 10–11; also note **Your servant Moses**, vv. 7–8).

c. *Nehemiah’s request for God’s help (1:8–11)*

1:8–11. Nehemiah reminded God—to lead Him to act, not to recall for Him something forgotten—that He had told **Moses** that if the nation Israel was **unfaithful**, He would disperse them from their homeland (Lev. 26:27–28, 33; Deut. 28:64), **but** that if they obeyed Him then those who were exiled would be regathered to Jerusalem (Deut. 30:1–5). On Jerusalem as a place where God would cause His **name** to dwell, see comments on Deuteronomy 12:5; 2 Chronicles 6:6. Since the Jews belonged to God (**Your servants and Your people**; cf. Deut. 9:29) and He had **redeemed** them, it was reasonable that God should respond to Nehemiah’s **prayer** on their behalf, keeping His “covenant of love” (Neh. 1:5). Speaking for fellow Jews who revered God’s **name** (i.e., honored His revealed character), Nehemiah asked that He hear their **prayer** (v. 11; cf. v. 6).

Humanly speaking only one person could make it possible for Nehemiah to help the Jews in Jerusalem—the king he served. Years earlier, Artaxerxes had issued a decree to stop the construction work in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:21; see comments on Neh. 1:1–3), and he was the only one who could reverse that order. That is why Nehemiah prayed specifically, **Give Your servant** (cf. v. 6) **success today by granting him favor** (lit., “compassion”) **in the presence of this man**. Nehemiah was referring of course to King Artaxerxes (cf. 2:1). A favorable relationship with the king could open the door for his petition.

As the king’s **cupbearer**, Nehemiah was responsible for tasting the wine before serving it to the king to be sure it was not poisoned. Nehemiah therefore had frequent access **to the king**.

Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (p. 697). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

1:11 Some have misunderstood the importance of what Nehemiah divulged at the end of this verse, thinking that the cupbearer was a lowly position. To the contrary, the cupbearer in the Persian court served in a position of honor and influence, second only to the crown prince in relation to the king. Nehemiah’s relationship to the king actually explains why he received such a positive response to his request and the subsequent authority he exercised in the province of Judah.

Mathews, K. A. (1998). *The Historical Books*. In D. S. Dockery (Ed.), *Holman Concise Bible Commentary* (p. 184). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

REBUILDING THE WALLS (1:1–11)

The book opens with Nehemiah’s memoirs, which tell the governor’s role in refortifying Jerusalem. He reported the opposition he encountered from the Samaritans and showed how God had enabled him to succeed. At God’s prompting, Nehemiah took steps to repopulate the city by reviewing those who had first returned.

Nehemiah’s Prayer (1:1–11). Nehemiah received a delegation of Jews led by Hanani in modern southwestern Iran, the winter palace of the Persian kings (Esth. 1:2, 5; Dan. 8:2). The visit was made in the month of Kislev (Nov.–Dec.) in the twentieth year (445 B.C.) of Artaxerxes I (464–424 B.C.; Neh. 1:1–3). When Nehemiah heard Jerusalem was unprotected, he sought God’s help through fasting and prayer. His appeal was based on God’s covenant with Israel as given in Deuteronomy. There the Lord threatened the unfaithful but also promised to assist the repentant

(see Deut. 9:29; 28:14; 30:1–4). As the king’s cupbearer, Nehemiah ended his petition by anticipating an audience with Artaxerxes (“this man,” 1:11). Nehemiah’s burden for Jerusalem required his personal involvement. The “cupbearer” was a personal butler who functioned as the king’s wine taster.

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Ne 1:1–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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