

# **Nehemiah 01 - Nehemiah Receives News of Jerusalem's Vulnerable Position; Nehemiah Prays, Acknowledges Israel's Sin and God's Covenant**

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## **Nehemiah 1**

### I. Rebuilding of the wall (Neh 1:1—7:73)

#### (1) Nehemiah returns from Susa to Jerusalem (Neh 1:1—2:20)

Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest led the first 50,000 exiles to Judah in 538 BC. They worked on rebuilding the temple until they were stalled by opposition for 16 years. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah preached and encouraged the people, who set their hands to work again. They finished the temple in 515 BC.

After these events, Ezra the priest arrived in Jerusalem with a second group in 458 BC. The people had not returned to idolatry, but the priests, rulers, and common people who settled in Jerusalem had intermarried with the surrounding Gentiles.

Circumstances in Jerusalem remained very discouraging in 445 BC. Although the temple had been rebuilt and worship reinstated, Jerusalem's wall, gates, and city remained in ruins. Neighboring nations constantly harassed and oppressed the disheartened remnant living in and around Jerusalem. Wealthier Jews shackled the poor into debt and slavery

(5:1-2). Commerce encroached upon Sabbath observance and other God-given obligations of God's people (13:15-18). Ezra the priest rallied the people to reestablish God-glorifying civil, social, and religious lives. God also called Nehemiah to specific tasks.

The book bearing Nehemiah's name tells the story of his call and service to both God and his own generation. The events within this book's pages cover approximately 13 years of Nehemiah's leadership, from 444-432 BC, before he returned to Persia as promised. Nehemiah likely made several journeys between Persian capitals and Jerusalem during his governorship and beyond.

(A) Nehemiah's concern for Jerusalem's vulnerable condition (1:1-11)

(a) Hanani's report to Nehemiah concerning wall less Jerusalem (1:1-3)

**1** The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened **in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year**, while I was in **Susa the capitol**,

**1** The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol,

**1** In this document, I, Hacaliah's son Nehemiah, recount what occurred during the twentieth year of Artaxerxes. Background In the month of Chislev, while I was in Shushan at the palace,

**1** The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace, Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah: This distinguishes him from others of the same name (Ezra 2:2; Neh 3:16), though nothing further is known of his father, nor do we know his tribe.

- Nehemiah was part of the Jewish community that was still dispersed outside the land after the exiles began returning to Israel

- "...in the month Chislev" - December

- "...twentieth year" - Artaxerxes' father left the throne on Dec 17, 465 BC; Artaxerxes came to the throne in 464 BC. 20 years from 464 BC = 444 BC.

- "...Susa the capitol" - located in present-day southwest Iran; it was the primary city used by Persian rulers as their winter residence

— In 478 BC, Esther became Xerxes' queen in this palace (Esther 2:8-18); and in 550 BC, Daniel was carried there in a vision (Cf. Dan 8:2)

**2** that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them about the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.

**2** that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped *and* had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.

2 Hanani, one of my brothers, arrived with some men from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had escaped, about those who had survived the Babylonian captivity, and about Jerusalem.

2 That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.

- One day, Nehemiah received a report from several men who had come from Judah. One of them was his own brother, Hanani.

— Nehemiah's questions for them displayed his deep concern for his people and the land of Judah. He wants to know their current condition and the condition of Jerusalem. His inquiry shows a deep sense of responsibility for the welfare of those who survived.

3 And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and disgrace, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire."

3 They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire."

3 They told me, "The survivors of the captivity there in the province are living in great distress and shame. Furthermore, the Jerusalem wall remains broken down and its gates have been burned by fire."

3 And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.

- The answer to Nehemiah's questions instantly depressed him. Jerusalem's walls, once a symbol of strength and honor, are in ruin. Besides the fact that the city was exposed and vulnerable to enemies, this would've also been both an emotional burden and a disgrace for the people living there.

— It had been 142 years since Nebuchadnezzar destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC, and the city was still covered in devastation

— The people had begun 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.

(b) Nehemiah reacts to Hanani's report (1:4-11)

(i) Grief (1:4)

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

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

4 When I heard this, I sat down and cried, mourning for a number of days while I fasted and prayed in the presence of the God of Heaven.

4 And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven,

- God's people must always be people of prayer, but bad news heightens urgency

- Nehemiah's heart for the well-being of his people and Jerusalem caused his heart to break with this news. He immediately responded by turning to earnest prayer and fasting, demonstrating a deep sorrow for the plight of his people, but also a reliance on God's intervention.

— Nehemiah had never been to Jerusalem, never saw the city before it was destroyed in 586 BC, never saw the temple, never saw the wall...yet he wept and mourned for days. He was still sad about the situation four months later when he went to see the king (Cf. 2:1).

(ii) Prayer (1:5-11)

*Here the genius of Nehemiah's leadership is displayed. He resists the normal temptation to pick up the conductor's baton and orchestrate the wall's reparation himself. Instead, he goes to his knees, beseeching the One whose place it is to conduct all the affairs of men and meld their efforts into one harmonious plan. [Swindoll]*

*Nehemiah was a man who fought on his knees. [Swindoll, The Swindoll Study Bible]*

(a) Worship: God is a covenant keeper (1:5)

5 I said, "Please, LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps the covenant and **faithfulness** for those who love Him and keep His commandments:

5 I said, "I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments,

5 I said, "Please, LORD, God of Heaven, the great and fearsome God who keeps the covenant, showing gracious love to those who love you and keep your commands,

5 And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments:  
- Nehemiah knew that human schemes could not fix this situation hundreds of miles away, so he immediately went to prayer. He addressed God with reverence, recognizing Him as both almighty and compassionate.  
- "...faithfulness" - *hesed*, God's covenant lovingkindness displayed to His people. By invoking God's covenant-keeping character, he shows confident that the Lord would be faithful to His promises  
— The covenant between God and Israel was a sacred bond that assured protection and guidance for those who walked in obedience  
— The essential biblical truth here is that God's faithfulness does not wane, even when His people stray

(b) Confession of sin (1:6-7)

6 let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open, to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, **day and night**, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have committed against You; **I and my father's house have sinned.**

6 let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned.

6 please turn your attention to observe carefully and listen to the prayer of your servant today that I am presenting to you day and night on behalf of your servants, the Israelis. "I confess the sins that we Israelis have committed against you. Both I and my father's house have sinned.

6 Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned.

- "...day and night" - Nehemiah's persistence in prayer, day and night, shows that intercession is not only asking God to fix external problems for other people, it is also about honest self-evaluation

- "...I and my father's house have sinned" - 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 9:3-5) and as Ezra had prayed (Ezra 9:6-15), Nehemiah acknowledged that he shared the responsibility for Israel's disobedience to God's laws

7 We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

7 We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

7 We have abandoned you by not keeping your commands, your ceremonies, and your judgments that you proscribed to your servant Moses.

7 We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses.

- Nehemiah places responsibility for the troubles of the returnees squarely on Israel's disregard for God's laws, dating all the way back to Moses' receipt of the commandments at Sinai

— The language of disobedience here reminds us that separation from God's ways leads to breakdown, both spiritually and societally. Nehemiah's confession points to the fact that restoration can only come by returning to the very commandments they once neglected.

(c) Reminder of God's promises of restoration (1:8-10)

8 **Remember**, please, the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, *'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples;*

8 Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, *'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples;*

8 Please remember what you spoke in commanding your servant Moses. You said, *'If you rebel, I will scatter you among the nations*

8 Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, *If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations:*

- "Remember" - a key word in Nehemiah (Cf. 4:14; 5:19; 6:14; 134:14,22,29,31)

- Nehemiah replays God's promise of curses for disobedience from passages like Deut 28:64, where the Lord declared that persistent unfaithfulness would result in exile. This is exactly what Israel (Judah) had been experiencing, and continued to experience even after they were freed by Cyrus.

— Nehemiah's prayer reminds us of a divine cause and effect shows that God's discipline of His people is not an arbitrary punishment, but a fulfillment of covenant terms. This was designed to show Israel the seriousness of sin and the lengths that God's mercy and grace go to bring His people back to holiness.

— Although the current situation was dire, and Nehemiah was almost powerless to do anything about it in the near-term, remembering God's past promises was a framework to seeking a renewed relationship with Him.

9 but *if* you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in **the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them** from there and bring them to **the place where I have chosen to have My name dwell.**'

9 but *if* you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.'

9 but if you return to me, keeping my commands and doing them, even if your exiled people are in the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place where I have chosen to establish my Name.'

9 But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.

- After recognizing what got Israel in this mess to begin with, Nehemiah remembers the hope that is integral to God's covenant: even if the exile resulted from sin (which it did), restoration is assured if they return to God.

- "...the most remote part of the heavens" - in a poetic sense, this refers to the farthest possible distance; it demonstrates that Nehemiah didn't believe anything was beyond God's reach or power to restore.

- "...I will gather them" - the promise to gather His people points to spiritual fulfillment in Christ, when God would gather scattered hearts (Cf. John 10:16)

- "...the place where I have chosen to have My name dwell" - Jerusalem (Deut 12:5)

- This verse demonstrates God's readiness to restore those who repent. It gives us a picture of mercy's role in divine judgment.

10 They are Your **servants** and Your people whom You **redeemed** by Your great power and by Your strong hand.

10 They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.

10 These are your servants as well as your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

10 Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand.

- "...servants" - calling Israel God's "servants" shows their duty to fulfill His purposes

- "...redeemed" - recalls the Exodus, the defining event in the history of Israel, when God freed them from slavery, revealed His might, and established them as His covenant people

- Nehemiah understood that Israel's identity did not rest on their performance, but on God's gracious involvement in their history
- The only hope for Israel's renewal is an on-going relationship with the God who actively redeems and restores them

(d) Request for success before Artaxerxes (1:11)

11 Please, Lord, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and **please make Your servant successful today and grant him mercy before this man.**" Now I was the **cupbearer to the king.**

11 O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man." Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

11 "And now, Lord, I ask you to listen to the prayer of your servant—and to the prayers of your servants who delight in revering your Name. I ask you, please prosper your servant today by granting him to receive favor from this man." Now I was the king's senior security advisor.

11 O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.

- "...please make Your servant successful today and grant him mercy before this man" - humanly speaking, the only person who could make it possible for Nehemiah to help the Jews in Jerusalem was the king he served, Artaxerxes

— Years earlier, Artaxerxes had issued a decree to stop the construction work in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:21), and he was the only one who could reverse that order

— This is why Nehemiah prayed specifically for God to make him successful today by granting him favor (lit., "mercy") in the presence of this man (king Artaxerxes, Cf. 2:1). A favorable reaction from the king could open the door for Nehemiah to help his struggling people.

— "this man" - Nehemiah understood the vast difference between the king of the earth (Artaxerxes) and the Lord. In the eyes of the world, Artaxerxes was an important person, a man with tremendous influence, who could decide on life or death. In Nehemiah's eyes, Artaxerxes was just a man like any other man. Nehemiah knew that the Lord of history makes the decisions, not Artaxerxes (Cf. Prov 21:1).

- "...cupbearer to the king" - the closest person, besides the queen, to the king. He was a confidant and a counselor, who had considerable influence by way of informal counsel and

discussion.

— A cupbearer was likely well-trained in the court of etiquette (Cf. Dan 1:4-5), was usually good-looking (Cf. Dan 1:4,13,15), he knew how to select wines for the king (a sommelier), he was a good listener, and he wielded tremendous influence due to his access to the king. He was also someone who had the unreserved confidence of the king.

*It is interesting to set Nehemiah's moving prayer side by side with the Lord's Prayer. It begins with the exaltation of God, it proceeds to confession, and only then passes in significant order to human need. [E.M. Blaiklock]*