

## Nehemiah 1

**What was the twentieth year (v. 1)?** The twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes (2:1).

**In what city was Nehemiah living (v. 1)?** Shushan/Susa, the capital city of the Persians which they captured when they conquered the Babylonians. It was 800 miles east of Jerusalem.

**Where in the city did he live?** He lived in the citadel, which was the winter palace of the king.

**What does that tell you about Nehemiah?** Right away, we know Nehemiah was someone important, living in the palace of the king. It's not like he was commuting to work on a donkey every day.

**What was the exile of v. 2?** The Babylonian exile. The Jewish people had been in captivity in Babylon for the last seventy years (as was prophesied by Jeremiah 25:11) and now the faithful remnant was returning from exile.

**What do you think the Jewish nation and the Jewish people looked like/felt like (v. 3)?** They were in a desperate state....a state of national disgrace and discouragement. All that was left of the great Jewish nation was a rag-tag remnant from the southern kingdom of Judah. There was no evidence of nationalistic pride. They were in desperate need of leadership.

**What was the message the Jewish men brought (v. 3)?** The walls of the city of Jerusalem were in rubble with all the gates burned down. They painted a pathetic picture of this once-proud stronghold.

The walls of the city had lain in ruins for around 140 years since Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, breached them, entered Jerusalem, burned the temple, carried most of the remaining Jews off to Babylon, and knocked the walls down (Jeremiah 52:1-14).<sup>1</sup>

**What was the big deal about the walls being broken down?** In the ancient world, a city without walls was a city completely open and vulnerable to its enemies.....with no defense, no protection at all. If there was anything of value in an unwallled city, it could be stolen away easily because there was no defense to stop it. Those living in an unwallled city lived in constant stress and tension; they never knew when they might be attacked and brutalized. Every man lived in constant fear for his wife and children.

**How did Nehemiah respond to the bad news (v. 4)?** He wept, mourned, fasted and prayed. Nehemiah faced a problem he knew he could not solve by himself. But he also knew that with God all things are possible. He had a heart for Israel but most likely never had been there.

**For how long did Nehemiah mourn, fast and pray?** Approximately four months. Then he prayed the prayer starting in v. 5 which serves as a great model prayer for us. Prayer is where planning starts.

**What observations do you have about the elements of Nehemiah's prayer (v. 5-6a)?** Nehemiah began his prayer humbly acknowledging who God is and His absolute faithfulness and covenant love for His people, the nation of Israel. By humbly and desperately asking God to hear the prayer of "Your servant," he recognized exactly who God is and understood his complete dependence on God.

**Who was Nehemiah praying for?** *Your servants, the people of Israel.*

**Whose sin did Nehemiah confess (vv. 6b-7)?** The sins of the nation of Israel including his and his family. They had disobeyed the Mosaic Law. Nehemiah made no excuses. He acknowledged that he shared the responsibility for Israel's disobedience to God's laws. He said "I confess" and three times he said "we."

**Why did Nehemiah feel it was necessary to confess the sins of Israel?** To reestablish the broken relationship and trust between God and Israel. He was specific in confession...no general sweeping terms. He acknowledged that the Jews had been guilty of sinning against God (Ezra 9:6-7). And he knew that God still loved the nation of Israel.

**What was Nehemiah's point in vv. 8-10?** He was recalling the promise of God and calling upon God to honor his promise. This, no doubt, is one secret to great power in prayer: to *plead the promises of God*. Nehemiah reminded God of His promise to restore His people to their land if they repented. He also noted that these were the people Yahweh had redeemed from Egyptian slavery for a special purpose. Praying for God's revealed promises ensures praying for God's will.

**What was Nehemiah asking for (v. 11)?** He was pleading to God for favor in the eyes of the king as he prepared to approach the king. This is a prayer of a man of action, not a sideline critic. Nehemiah does not pray "God, make it all better/take care of it" or "God, get someone *else* moving on this problem." Instead, his prayer is "God, *use me* to make it better."

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), so now, the king was the only one who could reverse that order. That is why Nehemiah prayed specifically for favor in the sight of the king. A favorable relationship with the king could open the door for his petition.<sup>2</sup>

**What was Nehemiah's job?** He was the king's cupbearer; a cabinet-level position under Artaxerxes.

**What does a cupbearer do?** As the king's cupbearer, Nehemiah was responsible for tasting the wine before serving it to the king to make sure it was not poisoned. Nehemiah therefore had frequent access to the king.<sup>3</sup> This was a position second only in authority to the king. It was a position of utmost trust and familiarity.....a potentially very influential job.

**What is God doing here?** Right away, we see the sovereignty of God in action -- God has Nehemiah strategically and perfectly positioned for the job He's going to call him to do.

**When God prepares your heart for his work and you launch off into it, what's one of the first things you can expect?** The beginning of spiritual warfare (Ephesians 6:12). Leaders must prepare themselves for difficult work because it won't be easy. Expect opposition when you are engaged in God's work. For whenever the people of God say, 'Let us arise and build,' Satan says, 'Let me arise and oppose.'

Application / Lessons learned: God does mighty things through ordinary people who are available to be used, e.g., the Apostles, David, Abraham, etc. **Is there any reason we cannot expect God to do the same through us? How would you define/describe "mighty things" in our lives today?**

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Thomas L. Constable, Notes on Nehemiah, 2023 Edition (published by <http://planobiblechapel.org/soniclight/>), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Gene A. Getz, "Nehemiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*: J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 675.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.