

## CHAPTER 1

# Prayer of Nehemiah

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*“Prayer does not change God,  
but it changes him who prays.”*

Soren Kierkegaard

This chapter covers Nehemiah’s godly response to the physical, social, political, spiritual, and economic conditions of the people and the temple of God in Jerusalem.

### **I. News of the plight of Jerusalem (1-4)**

*<sup>1</sup> The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah: “In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, <sup>2</sup> Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> 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.” <sup>4</sup> When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven.”*

Although many attempts had been made to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:6-23), the walls remained in ruins without a dynamic visionary leader for over one hundred and fifty years. Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. The brokenness of Jerusalem made her vulnerable to the many enemies around. In every generation God is looking for a courageous and capable leader to stand in the gap for God and his people.

**Verse 1** “The words of”, simply indicate the title of a separate section, although the books of Ezra and Nehemiah appeared as a single work according to Hebrew tradition (Hebrew Bible). Nehemiah’s father is Hacaliah. Hacaliah means “who waits for the Lord”. This name occurs

only here and in 10:1-2. Most scholars think that Nehemiah came from a prominent Jewish family.

“Kislev in the twentieth year” refers to November-December 445 B.C. Nehemiah was in the citadel (fort or castle or palace) of Susa. Susa, also called Shushan, was the major city of Elam, the area of southwestern Iran. It served as a winter place for the kings, like wealthy people go and stay in Musoorie, Utharakhand (in India), during the summer. It was the administrative capital of the Achaemenian king Darius I and his successors from 522 B.C.



Daniel (Dan 8:2) saw himself in a vision at Susa. It was the location where the story of Esther took place. Ezra 4:9-10 refers to the men of Susa who were deported to Samaria.

**Verse 2** “Hanani” is the shortened form of “Hannaniah” (God/Yahweh is gracious). Most scholars believe that he was one of the brothers of Nehemiah (7:2) and assume that he succeeded Nehemiah. Hanani came with other men from Judah (Southern Kingdom, Jerusalem is the capital). “The Jewish remnant” means “Jews who had escaped” (Ezra 4:12). Nehemiah “questioned” means he simply enquired or asked about the condition of his people back home.

Though Nehemiah was in a high position, he always cared about his people. Ministry flows from our genuine care, concern and compassion for people, especially to those who are poor and marginalized. Do you have concern like Nehemiah for people around you?

**Verse 3** They told Nehemiah two things about the condition of Jerusalem:

1. *Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace.*
2. *The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.*

The first problem related to the condition of the people—disorder, disagreement, mistreatment, corruption, poverty, and lack of fear for God among the Jews – a very shameful spiritual condition for God’s people. The second problem was physical – the people were defenseless against their enemies because of the broken walls (2 Kings 25:10).

Is your heart genuinely broken by the spiritual condition of your people—your family, church, community, and nation?

**Verse 4** Nehemiah’s response, when he heard about the condition of Jerusalem and his people, his response was explained in the following words:

*I sat down* (Ezra 9:3; Ps.137:1; Job 2:13) - symbol of humility and brokenness of heart.

*I wept* - symbol of the intensity of the problem and the feeling of pain in his heart.

*I mourned* - an expression of deep sorrow or grief (common in Ezra 10:6). Daniel mourned three weeks for the sin of his people (Dan 10:2).

*I fasted* - an expression of dependency on God, confessing sins and making a new commitment (Esth. 4:16; Dan. 9:3; 10:3; Zech. 7:3-7; 8:19).

*I prayed* - before the God of heaven—expressing the object of his faith and trust. He was praying to the Creator God who was able to help him in this crisis with vision, wisdom and favor.

What kind of genuine response do you have when you hear and see the broken condition of people around you?

## II. Nehemiah’s Prayer (5-11)

<sup>5</sup> Then I said: “Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, <sup>6</sup> 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 family, have committed against you. <sup>7</sup> We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. <sup>8</sup> “Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, <sup>9</sup> 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.’” <sup>10</sup> “They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. <sup>11</sup> 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.” I was cupbearer to the king.

**Verse 5** Nehemiah, as a learned Jew, had a good understanding of the character of the God of Israel. He knew the Jewish history well. He came into the presence of the awesome God with great fear and faith. “Awesome” (*nora*) from the verb “*yare*” (to fear, revere). He is the one to be feared above all gods (Deut. 7:21; Dan. 9:4). “Who keeps his covenant of love” is literally “who keeps covenant and steadfast love.” In other words, Nehemiah acknowledges that his God is a holy God, to be feared above all gods, and who keeps his promises to those who love him and obey his commands.

Do you have a proper understanding of your living God? Do you love and respect him unconditionally? Do you obey his commands daily?

**Verse 6** Nehemiah was pleading with God to listen to his prayer which he was earnestly lifting daily on behalf his sinful people. He acknowledged the sins of his people, including his own sin, admitting that they had committed sin against the holy and faithful God.

“Let your ear be attentive” is an anthropomorphic figure of speech. It simply means “God, please listen to me!”

A genuine sense of the greatness of God shows the gravity of our own sinfulness (Isaiah 6:1-5). Isaiah constantly complained about the sinful condition of his people (Isaiah chapter 1), until he saw the holy God. “I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple...” (v.1). Then he saw how sinful he was! “Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.” (v.5).

In Luke 5:8, we see a similar encounter between Peter and Jesus. “When Simon Peter saw this, he fell at Jesus’ knees and said, ‘Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!’”

Do you understand your spiritual condition as you pray and encounter the Holy God? When we repent of our sins and seek God’s face, He reveals our destiny - it is joining with Him to fulfill his eternal purposes through our lives. This will be fulfilling and impactful!

**Verse 7** Nehemiah makes his case with great strength. Indeed, we have acted wickedly toward you and not obeyed the commands, decrees, and laws you gave to Moses.

“Commands” (*miswot*), used 180 times in the O.T., including 43 in Deuteronomy), is the usual word for commandment, as in the Ten Commandments (Exod. 12:24).

“Decrees” (*huqqim*) indicates an order, edict, proclamation, rule or command as the statute of Joshua (Josh. 24:25).

“Laws” (*mispatim*) indicates legal decisions or judgments (See Ezra 3:2; 7:6; Nehemiah 1:8; 8:1; 9:14; 10:29; 13:1)

Do you know your Bible? Do you know the commandments, decrees and laws that you should obey in order to please God? Are you careful to obey them?

**Verses 8-9** Nehemiah reminded God of his promises made to Moses. Promises of disobedience and obedience. If you are unfaithful, God will scatter you among the nations, but if you are faithful to return to God and obey his commands, God promises to gather you from the farthest horizon.

“Remember”, a key word, occurs 7 times in the book (4:14; 5:19; 6:14; 13:14,22,29, 31).

Jews were scattered farther and farther after the Babylonian captivity. In the N.T. period, there were more Jews in the Diaspora than in Palestine (John 7:35; Acts 2:9-11; James 1:1; 1 Peter 1:1).

“I will gather them” is a promise made frequently by God (Deut. 30:1-5; Isa. 11:12; Jer. 23:3; 29:14; 31: 8-10; Ezek. 11: 17; 16:37; 20:34, 41; 36:24; Micah 2:12). This shows the heart of God for his people. He loves them as the “apple of his eyes.” Our God is a loving and compassionate Father, but also a jealous and holy God.

“A dwelling for my Name” simply means God wants to live or dwell among his holy people. This is his desire and promise (Deut. 12:5; Ex. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Num. 6:26).

God does not live in temples and worship places made by human hands, but he lives in the hearts (made by God) of his people. Do you have confidence that this great God, through his Spirit, is dwelling in your heart? If not, why don't you receive this living and loving God Jesus today as your Lord and Savior? He guarantees to come and dwell in your heart. Experience the presence and joy of knowing the living God today.

**Verse 10** Nehemiah reminded God that although the Jews had turned their backs on him, they are his special people, a peculiar possession, and God redeemed them with his awesome strength and mighty hand (Deut. 4:34; 9:29). Here the redemption (*pidyon*) in O.T., means deliverance (rescue) of his people from Egyptian bondage by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, or by great and awesome deeds.



**Verse 11** Nehemiah closed his prayer with a strong appeal and confidence that God must grant success and favor in the presence of the King Artaxerxes. He knew that his success would come from God through his relationship with him.

“Success”, in Nehemiah’s mind, is not success like the world perceives. He wants to stand in the

gap for God to fulfill His mission. He is concerned about the city of David, Jerusalem, and his people. He wants worship to be reinstated in the temple. He wants to remove the disgrace of his people. He wants to be God’s agent or catalyst.

Cupbearer (*masque*) means “one who gives someone something to drink.” It occurs twelve times in the O.T.

From *Expositor’s Commentary* (page 683), varied sources give additional insights about Nehemiah as a royal cupbearer:

1. He would have been well trained in court etiquette (Dan. 1:4-5)
2. He was probably a handsome individual (Dan. 1:4, 13,15)
3. He would certainly know how to select the wines to set before the king
4. He would have to be a convivial companion, willing to lend an ear at all times
5. He would have great influence as one with the closest access to the king, able to determine who was allowed to see his master
6. Above all, Nehemiah had to be one who enjoyed the unreserved confidence of the king.

### III. Seven Elements of Nehemiah’s Prayer

- A. Praise (v.5)
- B. Petition (v.6)
- C. Admission of Sins (v.6-7)
- D. Reminding God of His Promises (v.8-9)
- E. Humility (v.10)
- F. Asking Courageously (v.11)
- G. Expecting Success (v.11)

## Conclusion and Application

When we hear about the broken conditions of people and places around us, we must have genuine agony in our hearts, because this pleases God. Therefore we must follow the example of Nehemiah, first taking the burden into the presence of God, who is able to give us clear vision, direction, courage, and favor from others. God will be with us as we face challenges, and he will eventually grant us victory.



*Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father. And I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. You may ask me for anything in my name, and I will do it (John 14:12-14)*



## Discussion Questions

1. What caused Nehemiah to be so distressed? What brings distress in your life when you see the world around you?
2. What deters us from responding to the distress and reproach of people as Nehemiah did? (Neh. 1:4)
3. What was Nehemiah's immediate response to the burden God gave him? (Neh. 1:1-4) What do you tend to do first when God puts a burden on your heart?
4. Discuss the structure of Nehemiah's prayer. (vv 5-11)
5. What are the leadership characteristics that Nehemiah demonstrates in Chapter 1?
6. What needs are there for family members in your home, the men and women of your local church and community? How can you serve to meet those needs?