

The Burden of Nehemiah

Nehemiah 1

Nehemiah Troubled: *Nehemiah 1:1-4*

Nehemiah's Curiosity

The book opens with Nehemiah serving the Persian king in the royal palace of Shushan.

Nehemiah is a continuation of the book of Ezra,

with about twelve years elapsing in between both records. In it we find the history of the rebuilding of the walls in Jerusalem. A daunting task accomplished in record time. It is a testimony to God's ability to work through difficult times in order to bring about His will (Romans 8:28). For Nehemiah, it all began one day while he was attending to his tasks as the royal cupbearer. He was the king's personal guard, a position of great trust reserved for qualified and dedicated individuals.¹ The Persian king was Artaxerxes Longimanus. He was co-regent with his father Xerxes for several years then ascended to the throne as sole ruler after his father's untimely assassination. After putting down a revolt and ending hostilities

Persian Kings

Cyrus the Great (559-529 BC)

Cambyses (529-522 BC)

Pseudo Smerdis (522 BC)

Darius Hystaspes (522-486 BC)

Xerxes (486-466 BC)

Artaxerxes Longimanus (466-424 BC)

with Greece, his empire enjoyed a time of peace, which is believed to have been when the account of Nehemiah took place. Nehemiah was the son of Hachiliah, of whom nothing else is known. It appears that he was born and raised in Shushan, the royal city of the Persian kingdom, where he remained instead of returning to Jerusalem. Perhaps his position before the king prevented his departure. Nehemiah would discover that God planned to bless those in Jerusalem through him. The Lord is able to put men and women in situations where they can be useful for His purpose, so be content where God has placed you (Philippians 4:11).

It must be noted that Nehemiah did not aspire to greatness. As will be seen, he was a common man used in an uncommon way. He remained faithful to his responsibilities and the Lord blessed. While working at the palace, Nehemiah was reunited with his brother Hanani, who was familiar with the Jews that lived in Jerusalem. It is possible his brother and others had recently returned from the city. Nehemiah took the opportunity to ask about the Jews and the work that occurred in their beloved land. His position neither changed his heart for his people nor caused him to forget them. Nehemiah, a great and influential man, was concerned for those that most believed to be low and despised. It is evident he cared for God's people. Let's be concerned for others, so we can provide help if we are able (1 John 3:23, 4:7).

Chapter Outline

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A. Nehemiah's Curiosity: *Nehemiah 1:1-2*

B. Nehemiah's Concern: *Nehemiah 1:3-4*

II. Nehemiah Humbled: *Nehemiah 1:5-11*

A. Nehemiah's Reaction: *Nehemiah 1:5-7*

B. Nehemiah's Request: *Nehemiah 1:8-11*

¹ John Butler, "Nehemiah: The Wall Builder," (Iowa: LBC Publications, 1998) p. 14

Nehemiah's Concern

The simple question would change Nehemiah's life. The young cupbearer eagerly awaited an answer but it was not what he expected. To his surprise, only a remnant was found in the land and they suffered great affliction. The city remained in ruins with the walls broken down and the gates destroyed. The people lived in poverty, despair, and danger. On top of this, their enemies mocked their poor condition. God's people found themselves in a pitiful situation. The discouraging and truthful report greatly troubled Nehemiah. This young man, well aware of Israel's former glory, was devastated with the news of its declining state. Maybe he hoped for a good response believing the efforts of the people flourished. Perhaps he knew things were bad but not to the extent of he heard. Whatever the case, he was moved by his brother's account.

Nehemiah sat down and wept. The tears begin to flow as he thought about the hardships God's people suffered. He immediately fell into despair, continuing to mourn for many days. Nehemiah was so distraught he fasted, which displayed his self-denial in mourning (Mark 8:34). The young man's sadness even affected the way he lived. He continued to work but his joy was gone. Overcome with grief, Nehemiah went to the only one that could help in his time of trouble, the LORD. Since our God is able to provide let's take our concerns to Him instead of continuing to carry burdens we cannot bear (Psalm 34:4; 1 Peter 5:6-7).

Returning After Captivity

Zerubbabel (536 BC) – the political and religious aspect of their return. The people returned to their land and rebuilt the temple (Ezra 2).

Ezra (467 BC) – the religious aspect of their return. With the temple rebuilt the law given to Moses was established (Ezra 8).

Nehemiah (454 BC) – the civil aspect of their return. The city and walls were rebuilt (Nehemiah 2).

Nehemiah Humbled: *Nehemiah 1:5-11*

Nehemiah's Reaction

Discouraged, Nehemiah approached God with great respect. He addressed Him as the God of Heaven, distinguishing Him from the false gods that abounded in Persia (Ephesians 4:6; 1 Timothy 2:5). To be God of Heaven is to be God over all (Psalm 57:5, 108:5). Nehemiah's great reverence for the Lord is seen in his choice of words, in particular when he referred to God as terrible. This was not implying God was evil but that He was frightening. Why is that? It is because God can accomplish anything He desires. Nothing is able to hinder His work or prevent His purpose. On top of this, the LORD knows all things and will rightly give unto each what is deserved. Since God is able to pronounce and carry out judgment He should be greatly feared and respected (Proverbs 25:14).

With a repentant heart Nehemiah persistently prayed day and night. He confessed the sins of the nation and included himself in the petition. He understood his sinful condition before the Lord. When we refuse to accept our sin, we choose to continue without the Lord's fellowship (1 John 1:7-9). Israel failed to keep God's commandments, the moral precepts that governed their lives. They also broke His statutes, the rites and ceremonies of their religion. Finally, they did not keep His judgments, the precepts concerning one another. Instead of blaming God for the problem, Nehemiah accepted the guilt. Realizing the troubles were deserved he hoped God would be merciful (Psalm 41:4, 86:3). We are

reminded that sin is an affront against God that needs to be addressed if one wants to be blessed (Psalm 32:5; Proverbs 28:13).

*"It is useless to ask God to help us to repair the wastes if we do not cast out the sins which have made them."
Alexander MacLaren*

Nehemiah's Request

Though he was born and raised in a foreign land, Nehemiah knew God's Word (Psalm 1:1-3, 37:30-31). This led him to recognize that God had scattered the Israelites because of sin. He also knew that God would bless them if they returned unto Him. This meant they had to look to God rather than idols and keep His commandments instead of living in the flesh. Obedience is the true test of affection (John 14:15). If they truly desired God it would be seen in their conduct (James 2:18). In turn, God would gather them and bring them back to Jerusalem (Deuteronomy 30:1-5). This is what Nehemiah counted on. He simply took God at His word and hoped He would be merciful unto them again. In prayer it is good to plead God's promises. When this is done faith is place in God and He is exalted instead of men (Hebrews 11:6).

At the end of his prayer we find a personal plea. In true humility, Nehemiah placed the problems of the nation above his personal desires. He sincerely asked the Lord to help him with the king. World leaders are at God's mercy and can be moved any way He chooses (Proverbs 21:1). Artaxerxes might have been a powerful king before men but he was nothing but a sinful man before God (Romans 3:10). Nehemiah greatly wanted to be part of God's work but understood his limitations. He would be unable to help in any way if the king prohibited him, so he asked God to work on his behalf. Nehemiah did not sit back and hope for the best but prayed to the Lord, continued in his work, and patiently waited on Him. He was willing to go if God chose him to. Are you willing to go wherever God leads? That is the true test of submission.

Questions for Consideration

How did Nehemiah come to know the condition of Jerusalem?

According to this report what was the condition of Jerusalem?

How was Nehemiah affected by the news of Jerusalem's condition?

What causes you to mourn?

Are you concerned with God's work and His people?

What did Nehemiah do about his troubled heart?

How did Nehemiah approach God?

In Nehemiah's prayer, who received the blame for the problems in Jerusalem?

Was it possible for the Jews to be recipients of God's blessings again and if so how?

What did Nehemiah base his request upon?

Points to Ponder

Can God bless?

Being in Shushan, Nehemiah may have wondered how he could be used. He soon found that the Lord was able to work through his position in the government to bless the people of Israel. Because Nehemiah was where God wanted him he was used for God's glory.

Do you care?

Nehemiah was saddened with the news of Jerusalem's situation. He immediately fell into despair because God's city was dishonored and His people were discouraged. His mourning was a result of his great regard for God. It should cause concern when God is disrespected.

How should we seek God's help?

Nehemiah went with an open mind and life, seeking God's will while confessing his sin. He hoped His ears would hear his serious plea and His eyes would look upon his honest and humble heart. Nehemiah went with humility and was blessed.

Do you believe God's Word?

Because Nehemiah knew God's Word, it affected how he lived and prayed. Since he believed God would keep His word, he desired the things of the Lord. Basically, his faith in God's Word increased his desire to seek His ways. Those that truly believe God's Word also live by it.

What's your excuse?

Nehemiah could have offered up a number of excuses for why he could not go to Jerusalem: his location, his lack of experience, etc. Instead he was willing to go if called. Often the problem in churches is not doctrine or teaching but the willingness of people to be used.