

Nehemiah Chapter 1

Nehemiah was once a part of the book of Ezra. This book covers the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. It is also a time of return to the laws of God. Some believe that most of it is an autobiography of Nehemiah's life.

“Nehemiah” was the governor of Jerusalem who helped rebuild the city wall (1:1; 8:9; 10:1; 12:26, 47). Nehemiah was the personal cupbearer to the Persian king, Artaxerxes I, Longimanus (ruled 464 – 424 B.C.).

About 445 B.C., Nehemiah received permission from Artaxerxes to go to Judah and restore his people's fortunes (verses 5-11; 2:8). He was appointed governor of the province with authority to rebuild the city walls.

Nehemiah and his work crew were harassed by three enemies: Sanballat the Horonite (a Samaritan), Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab (2:10, 19; 6:1-14). Jerusalem's wall was finished in a record 52 days (6:15). Nehemiah's success was assured because he kept praying, “O, God, strengthen my hands” (6:9). He also initiated many social and political reforms among the people (5:1-19; chapter 11). After a brief visit to Persia, he returned to Jerusalem (433 B.C.), and dealt with further matters of religious and social reform. Neh. 1-7; 11-13).

Verses 1:1 – 7:73a: Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem and successfully leads a 52 day “rebuilding of the wall” project (compare 6:15).

Verses 1:1 – 2:20: This section details how Nehemiah became the governor of Judah (compare 5:14; 8:9; 10:1; 12:26).

Nehemiah 1:1 "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” means “The Lord Comforts”. The name “Hachaliah” distinguishes him from other Nehemiahs (3:16; 7:7; Ezra 2:2), but nothing is known about the origin or meaning of the father's name nor about his status. He is mentioned (in 10:1), but only by name to those who made covenant with God. The personal records of this famous royal cupbearer contribute greatly to this book. Unlike Esther and Mordecai, named after Mesopotamian deities Ishtar and Marduk, Nehemiah was given a Hebrew name. Nehemiah became a legendary figure in later Jewish literature. “Chisleu”, or Kislev, was the ninth month (November – December), and the “twentieth year” would have been 445 B.C. (compare 2:1 and the “twentieth year of Artaxerxes”).

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book. The words of Nehemiah indicate that this book gives his experience, told from his perspective, just as Ezra the priest recorded his narrative for posterity.

“Chislev” refers to a time in the reign of Artaxerxes (2:1), who ruled Persia from 464 – 423 B.C. He succeeded Ahasuerus, the husband of Esther, also known as Xerxes. These real-world references root the book in history.

“Twentieth year”: The 20th year (ca. 446 / 445 B.C.) in the reign of Persian king Artaxerxes (ca. 464 – 423 B.C.; compare 2:1).

“Shushan the palace”, or better, “Susa, the citadel”, was the winter resort of the Persian kings. In 478 B.C., Esther became Xerxes’ queen in this palace (Esther 2:8-18), and (in 550 B.C.), Daniel was carried there in a vision (Dan. 8:2).

Verses 2-4: God often stirs people’s hearts before He moves in their circumstances. In the Lord’s hands, Nehemiah’s concern and curiosity “concerning the Jews ... and ... Jerusalem” would soon become a calling, because he knew that a city wall broken down with its gates burned was a sign of not just past defeat but continuing vulnerability.

Nehemiah 1:2 "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."

“Hanani”: Apparently a sibling of Nehemiah, he had gone to Jerusalem in the second return under Ezra’s leadership (ca. 458 B.C.). He may have been a real brother of Nehemiah, although the term may be used in the sense of “kinsman” (7:2), where he appears as a man whom Nehemiah could trust with high office.

“Jews ... Jerusalem”: Nehemiah was deeply concerned about the people and the city, especially during the previous 13 years, since the second return under Ezra (458 B.C.).

Nehemiah was living at the Persian court. Chisleu is the month of December on our calendar. This 20th year is speaking of the 20th year of the reign of Artaxerxes. Hanani, the brother of Nehemiah came to Nehemiah to tell him of his homeland. Israel was a nation of people, but it was also God's family. Nehemiah wanted to know how the people who had gone back to Jerusalem from captivity were doing.

Nehemiah 1:3 "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."

“Wall of Jerusalem ... gates”: The opposition had successfully thwarted the Jews’ attempts to reestablish Jerusalem as a distinctively Jewish city capable of withstanding its enemies’ assaults, which could possibly lead to another destruction of the newly rebuilt temple (ca. 516 B.C.; compare Ezra 4:7-23). Most likely this was a recent destruction (and not the one back in 586 B.C.).

The gates had been burned with fire before the captivity. The walls were broken down at that time as well. These were things that had been left undone, since their return to Jerusalem. It seems they had never re-established themselves in their land.

Nehemiah 1:4 "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,"

“Sat down and wept, and mourned certain days”: Although Nehemiah was neither a prophet nor a priest, he had a deep sense of Jerusalem’s significance to God and was greatly distressed that affairs there had not advanced the cause and glory of God.

(See also 2:1), which reveals that Nehemiah spent about 4 months fasting and praying.

Nehemiah had assumed incorrectly, that everything in Jerusalem had been totally repaired. He was not aware that there was still much to be done. Nehemiah was brokenhearted at hearing this. He fasted and prayed to find the will of God in this for himself.

Verses 5-11: One of the greatest building projects in history was so successful because it was started by the prayers of a man of God. This is the first of many prayers this book records (2:4; 4:4-5, 9; 5:19; 13:14, 22, 29, 31), an intercessory prayer in which Nehemiah identifies with the people rather than just pleading to God on their behalf (Ezra 10:1; Dan. 9:20; Psalm 106:6 see also note on 2:17-18).

Nehemiah 1:5 "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:"

“That keepeth covenant and mercy”: After 70 years of captivity in Babylon, God kept His promise to restore His people to the Promised Land. The promise appeared to be failing, and Nehemiah appealed to God’s character and covenant as the basis by which He must intervene and accomplish His pledges to His people. This is a refrain from (Deuteronomy 7:9), and is related to (Exodus 20:6 and 34:6-7). God keeps His “covenant-love” with those who love Him, those in a covenant relationship with Him.

This was almost identical to what Daniel had to say. Nehemiah was a believer in God. He called Him LORD. "Beseech" means pray in this instance. He realized the omnipotence of God. God is all powerful. God keeps covenant with mankind, when they obey His commandments.

Nehemiah 1:6 "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."

“We have sinned against thee”: Nehemiah may have believed that the sins of the returnees (compare Ezra chapters 9 and 10), had prompted God to change His mind and withhold His favor from the Jews.

We see a humble man confessing to the LORD that he had sinned. The weight of the sins of his father and of the Hebrews, seemed to weigh as heavy on his conscience as did his own sins. He confesses for them all. His plea to God was that He had not turned completely away from His people. He was saying, please hear my prayer.

Nehemiah 1:7 "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."

“Commandments ... statutes ... judgments”: Those which are recorded (in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy).

This was speaking of the wide range of sins they committed. They mainly had totally disregarded the wishes of God for their lives, and were living to please themselves. He was aware that the condition attached to being blessed of God, included keeping God's statutes and His commandments.

Verses 8-9: Nehemiah showed God that he knew the conditions God Himself had established for His people through “Moses”. Unfaithfulness would result in scattering; faithfulness would result in gathering. “If” indicates a choice, and choices have consequences. In a healthy prayer life, we should ask God to reveal if any current problems in our lives are the consequences of sinful choices.

“The word ... Moses”: This represents a summary of various Mosaic writings. On “scatter” (verse 8; see Deut. 4:25-28; 28:63-65). On “gather” (see Deut. 4:29-31; 30:1-5).

Nehemiah 1:8 "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”: Not a reminder to God as if He had forgotten, but a plea to activate His Word.

God had warned them in advance through Moses, that to disobey God brought curses, one of which was scattering into foreign countries as captives. They had disregarded the Word of God, and He had done just as He had promised. Their captivity was brought on them by their own transgressions.

Nehemiah 1:9 "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."

Return by repentance, and, as a proof of the genuineness of it, yield obedience to the commands of God, and continue therein.

"Though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven": That is, the uttermost parts of the earth, the most distant regions. So called, because at the extreme parts of the horizon, according to our apprehension, the heavens and earth touch each other. So that what is the uttermost part of the one is supposed to be of the other.

"Yet will I gather them from thence and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there": That is to Jerusalem where the temple was built, and his name was called upon.

The best explanation of this Scripture is another Scripture.

2 Chronicles 7:14 "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land."

God would forgive them, if they were truly seeking forgiveness for their sins. God had saved this remnant of His people to start with again. God would gather them like a hen gathers her chicks. God loved them.

Verses 10-11: After confessing the sins of Israel and referring to the alternative of curse and blessing, Nehemiah reminds the Lord that these people with their sins and their inclination to depart from God are His "servants and ... people". Nehemiah's prayer was specific: "grant him mercy in the sight of this man" (the king). Artaxerxes had made an earlier decision to stop the work (Ezra 4:21). The answer to Nehemiah's prayer is recorded (in chapter 2). The "cupbearer" had direct access to the king and was an important and influential person. The same word was used for the "butler" (in Genesis 40). His basic duty was to choose and taste the wine to ensure that it was not poisoned, and then to present it to the king. In many cases the cupbearer was second only to the king in authority and influence.

Nehemiah 1:10 "Now these [are] thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand."

"Redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand": His allusion to the Exodus redemption recalled the faithful and strong hand of God which had brought Israel out of bondage once before and grounded his confidence in God's power as the basis of his appeal for a second deliverance that will be as successful as the first.

It is as if Nehemiah was reminding God that these are the same people He had promised to forgive.

2 Chronicles 7:15 "Now mine eyes shall be open, and mine ears attent unto the prayer [that is made] in this place."

God promised Solomon that anyone looking toward the temple and praying would be heard of Him. God had redeemed them from captivity, now He must help them even more keep their relationship with Him. They were back in their land, but not in fellowship with the LORD as they needed to be. God would bless them, but they needed someone to help them stay in fellowship with God. It seems they were quick to drift away, if there was not someone with a strong hand to keep them from it.

Nehemiah 1:11 "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."

“Who desire to fear thy name”: Nehemiah alluded to the fact that Israel was the place which God had chosen for His name to dwell (1:9); the people desired to fear His name and, thus, were praying for God’s intervention.

“In the sight of this man”: The reference to King Artaxerxes anticipated the discussion (in 2:1).

“The king’s cupbearer”: As an escort of the monarch at meals, the cupbearer had a unique advantage to petition the king. Not only did the king owe him his life, since the cupbearer tasted all the king’s beverages for possible poison, thus putting his own life at risk, but he also became a close confidant. God sovereignly used this relationship between a Gentile and Jew to deliver His people, such as He did with Joseph, Daniel, Esther and Mordecai.

Nehemiah expected to see God answer prayer in his role as the “king’s cupbearer”. Cupbearers were trusted servants who made sure that the king’s drinks were not poisoned. They also had the responsibility of bringing the king joy, not sadness.

It appears that Nehemiah had made himself useful to the king and had acquired the distinction of the king's cupbearer. It would be easy for him to be satisfied with what he had, and forget about Judah and Jerusalem. If Nehemiah was to go to Jerusalem, God would have to make it alright with Artaxerxes. Nehemiah had it in his heart to go to Jerusalem, and help with the work in rebuilding the walls and the gates. He felt he could be an asset in leading them back into good relations with God.

Nehemiah Chapter 1 Questions

1. What does the book of Nehemiah cover?
2. It is also a time of returning to the _____ of God.
3. Some believe it to be an _____ of Nehemiah's life.
4. Who was the father of Nehemiah?

5. The month of Chisleu is similar to what month on our calendar?
6. The twentieth year of the reign of _____ is mentioned here.
7. Who was Hanani?
8. What did Nehemiah inquire of him about?
9. Where was Nehemiah living at the time?
10. Israel was a nation of people, but it was also _____ .
11. What report did Hanani give Nehemiah?
12. What effect did this have on Nehemiah?
13. What did he do about this, besides pray?
14. What did Nehemiah call God in verse 5?
15. What does "beseech" mean?
16. When does God keep covenant with mankind?
17. In verse 6, we see an _____ man confessing.
18. What was the confession?
19. Who was he confessing for?
20. What had God said He would do to them, if they transgressed His law?
21. What was the fulfillment of that?
22. What would God do, if they repented?
23. Why had God saved this remnant of His people?
24. What was Nehemiah reminding God of in verse 10?
25. What was missing, since they had gone back to their homeland?
26. Whose prayers was Nehemiah asking God to be attentive to?