

## EZRA-NEHEMIAH, part 9

by Dr. Ralph Davis

### Prayer in the Palace (Nehemiah 1)

#### I. Background – Nehemiah 1:1-4

*The Author:* Nehemiah introduces himself and his times in Nehemiah 1:1-3. We are snooping in his diary.

*The Time:* The date of the “20<sup>th</sup> year” (Neh. 1:1) refers to the 20<sup>th</sup> year of Artaxerxes I, or ca. 445 B.C. Comparing Ezra 7:7, we note that this was 13 years after Ezra’s coming. Therefore, it is clear that in Ezra-Nehemiah we are not meant to have a complete report but a selective one, highlighting episodes and events that matter in the work of Yahweh and the survival of his people. The month of Chislev is November-December.

*The Place:* Susa was in what is now SW Iran, in the alluvial plain 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf. It served as a winter palace for the Persian kings.

*The Empire:* There is certain background information we need to keep in mind about Artaxerxes I and his reign:<sup>1</sup>

1. His father Xerxes was assassinated in his bedchamber in 465 B.C. by Artabanus, a powerful courier.
2. There was a revolt by his brother Hystaspes in Bactria (far to the NE) at the beginning of Artaxerxes’ reign.
3. In 460 B.C. there was a revolt in Egypt, supported by the Athenians, which took 5 years to put down. For this reason Artaxerxes I may have been only too glad to send Ezra to Palestine to ensure a loyal buffer state in Judah.
4. In ca. 448 B.C. Megabyzus, satrap of Trans-Euphrates, rebelled. Megabyzus had put down the revolt in Egypt led by one Inarus; Megabyzus promised to spare Inarus’ life but the latter was impaled at the instigation of Artaxerxes’ mother. This ticked off Megabyzus; hence his revolt (he was later reconciled to Artaxerxes). If the events of Ezra 4:7-23 took place during this time in Artaxerxes’ reign, one can understand his paranoia about fortifying Jerusalem.
5. By 445 B.C. these revolts had ended. Perhaps that explains why there was no objection to Nehemiah’s rebuilding Jerusalem’s walls at this time.

*The News and the Circumstances:* It is likely that the news in Nehemiah 1:3 reflects the Ezra 4:6-23 situation rather than the more distant one of 587 B.C.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Yamauchi, *EBC*, 4:570-71; and Fensham, *NICOT*, 149-50.

<sup>2</sup> Kidner, 78.

Verse 4 indicates that Nehemiah's grief and distress were a continuing affair, that his fasts and prayers went on for some time. The prayer of verses 5-11, then, is a *sample* of what his prayers were like during this time. Regarding this prayer observe...

## II. He Knows the God to whom He Prays – Nehemiah 1:5-6a

**A. He is the awe-full God (Neh. 1:5a):** "God of heaven, the great and fearful God."

**B. He is the faith-full God (Neh. 1:5b):** "Keeping covenant and *hesed* with those who love him." As Yamauchi says, *hesed* is that quality that honors a covenant through thick and thin.

Put these first two sub-points together and note how they complement one another: God is both scary and dependable.

**C. He is the approachable God, 6a):** "Let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant." He can be spoken to!

Note where prayer begins: with the knowledge of the nature of the covenant God. The character of God is the necessary basis for prayer. *Theology* is the proper foundation for *devotion*.

I once had a friend who knew he would be having some encounters with one of his superiors and that these encounters might not be of the most pleasant variety. It happened that his superior had published an autobiographical account. So my friend laid hands on that autobiographical piece and read it through. He wanted to become as thoroughly acquainted with the man's character as he could as a preparation for having to deal with him. Knowing someone's character well assists us in knowing how to approach that one. I do not mean to impute the latently hostile overtones of my example to the practice of prayer — but the principle is on target. Knowing what kind of God we have is the essential preface to all prayer.

## III. He Knows the Sin in which He Shares – Nehemiah 1:6b-7

Here is not a "they-them" accusation, but an identification with his people: "the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned"; "I and my father's house have sinned."

The offenses (Neh. 1:7) are committed in violation of revelation received through Moses. Compare John Bunyan's Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*: he knew about the burden on his back by reading this book.

You may need to take a detour to Ezekiel 36:31. This sense of sin, this confessing of it in prayer, is not merely some polite concession we make (e.g. because as our culture, or alas even the church, says, "Nobody's perfect"). Rather, it should be part of an intense loathing of ourselves that is the fruit of the Spirit's work in us. If your psychoanalyst disagrees, he/she is wrong.

### III. He Knows the Promise on which He Pleads – Nehemiah 1:8-9

These verses link up especially with Deuteronomy 30:1-10, particularly verses 3-5.<sup>3</sup> The language of Nehemiah 1:9 (“if your banished ones are at the end of the heavens, from there I will gather them...”) links up with the promise of help and restoration from judgment in Deuteronomy 30:3-5. Nehemiah 1:8 refers to this as the *dabar* (word, promise) “which you commanded Moses your servant.” In Nehemiah 1:7 this clause just quoted describes the commandments, statutes, and ordinances that had not been kept. But in Nehemiah 1:8-9 *dabar* refers to the promise, not to the law. Both are “what you commanded Moses your servant.” Do you see how this text shows us the full function of the word of God? It is both accusing (Neh. 1:7) and amazing (Neh. 1:8-9); it both condemns and consoles!

What is important to see here is that prayer is based on promises. Prayer takes hold of God’s promises, turns them into petitions, and sends them back to God. Nehemiah has every reason then to expect God’s favorable reply.

### IV. He Knows the History to which He Can Appeal – Nehemiah 1:10

Here Nehemiah pleads on the basis of the identity Israel has because of redemption. When Nehemiah uses the verb “redeemed,” he is likely referring to redemption from Egypt and the resulting covenant, not to “redemption” from Babylon after the exile. Note the way Solomon makes an appeal like this in 1 Kings 8:51. As Kidner points out, Moses also made a similar appeal after Israel had worshiped the golden calf (Deut. 9:26,29). Whether Moses or Solomon or Nehemiah, the upshot is the same: it’s as if the one praying says, “Look at what you have made them. Look at what you have done for them. Do you mean all of that to go for nothing?”

### V. He Knows the Crisis in which He Stands – Nehemiah 1:11

Here we are back to the “hearing” concern of Nehemiah 1:6. Prayer here is in reference to the contemporary need, namely the grave crisis of the people of Judah (cf. Neh. 1:3), as well as to the suspense over what the king’s reaction might be.

Here note matters of:

#### A. Time

Nehemiah is preparing to broach the matter to the king. He does this in the month of Nisan (2:1). This shows that his action was not precipitous but cautious; this had been a matter of extended prayer. He had prayed about this for four months (cf. 2:1 and 1:1).<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See also Deut. 4:25-31 and the basis for hope in Solomon’s prayer recorded in 1 Kings 8:46-53 and 2 Chron. 6:36-39; on Deut. 30, you will find it useful to look at Chris Wright, *Deuteronomy*, New International Biblical Commentary, pp. 289-90.

<sup>4</sup> Williamson, WBC, 178.

## B. Community

Note that Nehemiah refers not merely to his own prayer but to the “prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name.” Nehemiah did not stand alone in prayer; there was a *fellowship* of intercession.

## C. Perspective

The text brings us up to the edge of when Nehemiah will broach the subject with the king. But see how he refers to the king: “Before this man” (Neh. 1:11b). Why, he is Artaxerxes II! But he is “this man” nevertheless, nothing more (compare David’s remark in 1 Sam. 17:26).

## D. Providence

“I was the king’s cupbearer” – this remark explains how it is that Nehemiah will have access to the king. This was a position of great responsibility and influence. Kings longed for reliable court attendants because of the prevalent intrigues at court.

Xenophon reports that when cupbearers would offer the cup to the king, they would first draw some of it of with a ladle, pour it into their left hand, and swallow it down, so that, if the cupbearer had put poison in it, he would get his everlasting! Having such close access to the king meant that cupbearers could wield great influence and could control who got to see the king.<sup>5</sup>

When Nehemiah makes his cupbearer remark, is he not recognizing that Yahweh’s providence has been at work long before this moment? He was high up in the civil service with access to the king, and, therefore, was in a favorable position to seek good for the people of Judah (much like Mordecai’s view of Esther’s position in Esther 4:14b).

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<sup>5</sup> Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 259