

Nehemiah: Meet Nehemiah

Nehemiah 1:1-11

By [Dr. Derek Thomas](#)

*The Lord's Day Evening
July 20, 2008*

Please be seated. Now after spending I think it was nineteen weeks in the book of Ezra, we move now into the next book, the book of Nehemiah. It's only "the next book" in our English Bibles. In the Hebrew Bible and in the version of the Scriptures that the Apostles largely read, a Greek translation of the Old Testament, Ezra and Nehemiah were, in fact, one book.

And the story line of course continues, although we jump forward (as I'll explain in a moment or two) thirteen years. From the close of Ezra 10 to the beginning of Nehemiah 1, we've gone ahead. We've seen in the book of Ezra itself how on certain occasions we move forward a little, and now we're moving forward to the year 445 BC, still in the reign of King Artaxerxes, who had been on the throne in the latter chapters of the book of Ezra and will in fact remain on the throne for some time to come.

Before we read the chapter, and because it's going to be important in a few minutes, turn back just for a second to Ezra 4. I don't expect you to remember all the details of it now. We looked at it in some detail at the time, but Ezra did one of those strange things where it suddenly leapt forward in time and then came back in time. It's quoting — and I won't go into all the details, but it was quoting from two letters, one from a previous king named Xerxes, and one from King Artaxerxes who is the king now ruling in the first chapter of Nehemiah. Both of these kings had written very similar letters, and there was a somewhat strange reference in verse 23 of Ezra 4 which is going to become clear, hopefully, tonight. We read in verse 23 of Ezra 4,

"Then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read...."

[Now it wasn't read in the timeframe of Ezra 4; it's actually looking forward to something that happens a little later.]

"...When the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at

Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease.”

Made them cease from what? Made them cease, as the context would make clear, the building of the walls of Jerusalem. Chapter 4 of Ezra is largely concerned with the building of the temple in Jerusalem, something that was completed in 516 BC, but this is an incident that took place somewhere around 450, just a few years before what takes place in the first chapter of Nehemiah. Something happens at the end of Ezra and before the beginning of Nehemiah where the walls of Jerusalem, which had been destroyed in the time of Nebuchadnezzar back in 587 BC. ... they begin to rebuild the walls of the city.

You can understand how King Artaxerxes might have been a little nervous. It was one thing to build a temple; it was another thing to build defensive walls of the city. Who were the Jews defending themselves against? Well, the Persians, perhaps! And you can understand why Artaxerxes has the building of the walls of Jerusalem stop. Well, that has taken place somewhere in the gap between Ezra 10 and Nehemiah 1.

Now let's turn to God's word, and before we read the first chapter of Nehemiah together, let's look to God in prayer. Let's pray.

Our Father in heaven, we once again are thankful to You for the Scriptures. Thank You that it is a word that is able to make us wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus our Lord. Grant Your blessing now as we read the Scriptures. Illuminate our minds. Grant the light of Your Spirit, that we might not only read, but understand that which we read, and profit from it. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now this is God's holy and inerrant word:

“The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev...”

[That's somewhere between the middle of November and the middle of December.]

...It happened in the month of Chislev in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”

As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And I

said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments, let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, to hear the prayer of Your servant that I now pray before You day and night for the people of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against You. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded Your servant Moses. Remember the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the people, but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ They are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand. O Lord, let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who delight to fear Your name, and give success to Your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”

Now I was cupbearer to the king.

Amen. May the Lord add His blessing to that reading of His word.

Now Nehemiah appears here in the first chapter of the book that goes by his name as a man at the top of his profession, but we know nothing of how he got there. We don't know where he was born, we don't know anything about his upbringing, we don't know anything about his teenage years, or how he came to be the cupbearer of King Artaxerxes. We've jumped ahead, as I said, thirteen years from the close of Ezra to the beginning of the book of Nehemiah. It's the year 445 BC.

We're in a place called Susa — “Susa the capital.” Most of your translations are going to have little footnotes with an alternative reading “the fortified city.” It wasn't the capital of Babylon; it wasn't the capital of the empire, but it was the citadel. It was the winter residence of the Persian kings. It is perhaps one of the most ancient cities in the world, about 150 miles east of the Tigris River, about 250 miles west of Babylon. It's on the edge of the border of Iran, and it's in Iran today. You can go there; there have been some wonderful excavations done about the ancient city of Susa in recent days. (I imagine you won't be going to Iran in the next year or two perhaps, but you can certainly look at pictures of this city.) It had been captured by Cyrus just about the time when the first wave of exiles had come back, and that's almost now a hundred years in the past. It's a huge city, 250 acres; and the citadel, the palace, was itself situated on some mountains overlooking a river — a grand palace with 72 columns, upward of 70-80 feet in height. It was a wonderful place in winter for the Persian kings like Artaxerxes to winter in.

And Nehemiah is a cupbearer. It is a phenomenally important job. The thing that Persian kings feared the most was poisoning. If you wanted to depose a king or get rid of a king, one of the ways of doing it was poison. So you'd hire — or you'd have someone that you trusted — and you'd have to trust this man implicitly. You trusted this man with your life. Wherever the king was, the cupbearer was. Whenever the king ate — and he ate several times a day, the cupbearer was there. He drank wine, and the Persians have a history of winemaking. Nehemiah was chosen as that person — the cupbearer. A Jew — imagine that! One of the people that you conquered, you trust with your life. It says something of great fascination for perhaps another time about how the Jews took to exile. Later, 150 B. or so, there's a revolt of the Jews against Antiochus Epiphanes. Judas Maccabeus...you'll know the music if you don't remember all the history...but Judas Maccabeus arose in revolt against something that Antiochus Epiphanes had done to desecrate the temple — slaughtering pigs, among other things, and offering them to Greek gods. And there was a revolt.

But there is no such revolt in the time of the Persians. Nehemiah is a man of immense integrity. You can't exaggerate the trustworthiness of Nehemiah. The king trusted his life into the hands of Nehemiah. He would drink...he would pour some of the wine into the cup of his hand and he'd drink it. And they'd wait a few seconds, maybe a few minutes, to see whether he dropped on the floor, and if he didn't, the wine was fine. He was a food taster. He was the wine taster. But it says to us an enormous amount about Nehemiah's character.

You want to ask all kinds of questions, as I do. And those of us who love the Bible (and every Christian loves the Bible), we're inquisitive. We want to know as much as we can, and we'd love to ask questions: How did he reach this position? Who are his parents? What were the influences on this man's life, because we also know that he's a godly man and a prayerful man?

But the chapter really isn't about that tonight. Some of that is going to appear later. We're going to see something of Nehemiah's character...strong character...temperamental character at times. We're going to have to deal with an incident later in Nehemiah when he pulls out the hair of a certain individual, he's so angry with him. But tonight we want to see Nehemiah as a man of prayer...a man of prayer. This is one particular feature of Nehemiah — and there are several features of Nehemiah, but there's one feature of Nehemiah that stands out and shines above the others. It's this: he was a man of prayer.

I. The setting for prayer.

Let us see first of all the setting for prayer. One of the brothers (verse 2) ...
“...One of my brothers...” a man named Hanani. He may be a literal brother. Commentators vacillate. He may just be a brother in the sense that he's a fellow

Jew, but he may also...because of something later in chapter 7 where's he's referred to as "my brother," many commentators believe that it's all too likely that this man actually was his brother. And he's come along with others from Jerusalem to Susa.

What does Nehemiah do? He's never been in Jerusalem. He's never seen the city; he's never seen the temple. He probably knew those who had left under the time of Ezra, 13-14 years in the past. He would have known those. He may have been too young to go with them at the time. It may not have been possible because he was the cupbearer to the king even perhaps at that time. Perhaps he's been in this job since he was a teenager.

But what does he do when he meets his brother and his fellow Jews who have come from Jerusalem? He seems to have asked them all kinds of questions: How are they doing? How is so—and-so? But how is the Lord's work prospering? Tell me about "the church" in Jerusalem. Tell me about the people of God. Tell me about the preaching of Ezra. Ezra was a noted preacher before he went to Jerusalem; tell me about his preaching. What's he preaching on? Is it Numbers or Deuteronomy, or Exodus or Genesis? He's preaching on the books of Moses; how is the preaching being received? Are they taking notes? Are they asking good questions? Are they growing? Are they thriving?

Christians should be like that. God's people should be like that. When you hear about a city, some city in Europe, some city on the Adriatic coast, some city in North Africa, you ask about the church. You ask about the people of God. You ask about the Lord's work. It's like William Carey, when he was a cobbler and a part-time teacher, and he'd been reading Captain Cook's travel dialogues about far off exotic places, and he bought a map and put it on the wall behind him. And on that map he'd write all kinds of statistics and figures about the church, about the people of God, about those who needed to hear the gospel. That's the kind of man Nehemiah was.

And what has he heard? Bad news. Things are not going well. The walls of the city are still razed to the ground. There's evidence of them having been burnt. It's not a reference, I think, to Nebuchadnezzar in 587, 120-140 years in the past. There'd be no surprise on Nehemiah's part if that's what he was saying. No, this is something that emerges from that fourth chapter of Ezra. This is something that happened in between Ezra and Nehemiah. The work had begun, but it's stopped. Artaxerxes has stopped this work. And Nehemiah is burdened. His heart is heavy. He's concerned about the kingdom. He's concerned about the cause of God. He can do nothing about it. He's the cupbearer — he can't take a week off. He can't, say, put on Facebook and say 'I'm going to be away for a couple of weeks.' The king ate every day, and every day Nehemiah would be there doing the king's bidding, looking the part, playing the role. So what does he do?

II. The response of prayer.

And we see, secondly, the response of prayer. We see it in verses 4ff. From the date in verse 1 to the date in the first verse of chapter 2, which is the month of Nisan (which is mid-March to mid-April), it could be as short as three months and it could be as long as five months. For five months, he's praying. We have the form in Scripture of the prayers. He writes in his memoirs as he keeps his diary, and he reflects on what it was he'd been praying over this extended period of time. He gives us a form, a certain structure of the prayer.

Initially his response is to sit down. But, you understand, there comes a time when you have to stand up and pray. He had to pray when he was doing his work. He had to pray when he got up in the morning. He had to pray when he was before the king. It was all that he could do, and yet it was everything that he could do. It wasn't "all that he could do" in the sense of this was the last resort. It was the first thing that he did. It was the instinct of his heart; it was the disposition of his redeemed nature to pour out his soul to Almighty God.

You see several things here. You see his patience — the patience of prayer, the stickability of prayer. For five months — between three and five months — he's praying. And in the prayer he's saying "day and night" (you see the reference in verse 6). Over and over and over, he's praying. He's praying. Perhaps he's beginning to think...maybe his brothers had said something like "You would be a good man to come to Jerusalem." ["I can't come! I'm the cupbearer, how could I possibly come? If I'm going to come, then something extraordinary must happen. Circumstances must change. Artaxerxes must die — something must happen. I must be released."] He daren't mention any of that in the king's presence, so he's praying...not knowing, not understanding what his role in the future would be. Whatever his desires may be, he has no idea at this stage how God is going to use him, and if God is only going to use him as a vehicle of prayer. But he continues praying, day and night for three months, four months, perhaps five months.

God's timetable is perfect. He's never early and He's never late. When things happen, they happen right on schedule. God's guidance is not like air travel: planes are late; you think you're going, you taxi, you sit there in the airplane...you're waiting to take off for a couple of hours. It's not like that. God's timing is absolutely perfect. He's never early and He's never late. And here is Nehemiah: he's disciplined, patient in prayer.

Don't give up. Don't give up praying. That burden, that soul that you're praying for - don't give up until God gives you a revelation that you're to give up. Don't do it. And the only revelation that you will ever have is when that person dies. Keep on praying. Don't stop.

III. The structure of prayer.

But there's a third thing I want us to see. Not only the circumstances of this prayer, not only the response of prayer, but the form or the structure of prayer.

Now we could park here for an hour. There are so many connections between what Ligon was saying this morning in Psalm 95 in a corporate setting and what Nehemiah is doing here in a personal setting. And you might think that because in a corporate setting you have form and structure, and the prayer has a certain shape to it, that when it comes to my personal devotional life — all bets are off. And it's not like that. Nehemiah's prayer — and maybe he didn't pray exactly these words every single day, but over the long term this was the general shape of his praying, and it has shape. It has form. It has structure.

Now are you struggling with prayer? Hands up, those who are not struggling with prayer! I could humble you in a second, just talking about prayer. I can humble myself in second, in a heartbeat, just talking about prayer.

What a blessing! What an extraordinary blessing that God gives us in the Bible little models! Now there are 150 of them in the book of Psalms, don't ever forget that. But every now and then you're given these models, these templates of prayer. This is one of the great prayers of the Bible. Are you struggling with prayer? Let me suggest you get a new card and you write out — don't use your laptop, don't type this, write it out the old fashioned way — and stick it in your Bible and use it for the next week, the next two weeks, the next month as a kind of prompt, as a kind of guide, as a kind of cheat-sheet for prayer. Look at the structure. Learn from the structure.

Ask, how is Nehemiah shaping this prayer? How does it begin? With adoration:

“O Lord God of heaven.”

[That's a favorite designation of Nehemiah's, by the way.]

“O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments....”

It begins with God! How does the prayer end? With God:

“...With those who delight to fear Your name.”

What a beautiful and “un-twenty-first-century” statement that is. What are the people of God like? They are those who delight to fear God's name. “Delight” and “fear” in the same sentence, in the same phrase! I love that.

It's all about God. When the disciples ask Jesus, "Lord, teach us how to pray." We're struggling with prayer. Help us. How are we supposed to pray? Now, He could have said, 'Go and read Nehemiah 1.' What did He say?

"Pray like this. Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

That's how you pray; you begin with God.

We've had a transformation in our prayer meeting over the last couple of months. If you haven't been to the prayer meeting in the last couple of months, come and witness. There's been some extraordinary praying. I'm almost frightened to talk about it, lest the spirit go away, but God has been good to us. We've had men and women praying absolutely beautiful prayers from the heart with form and structure, and not just the "organ recital" (you know, the kidneys and the heart and the liver); not just praying for people who are sick, but worshipping God, extolling God, revering God, hallowing God's name; basking for a few minutes in the presence of Almighty God.

Then it moves to confession. It moves from adoration to confession of sin. Verse 7: "We've acted very corruptly."

And notice what Nehemiah does. It's not just Israel that have sinned, but he himself has sinned. There's "Israel" and then there's "we" and then there's "I." He puts himself right with them. He takes collective responsibility for the sins of God's people. The reason why they're in the mess that they're in now, the reason why there's trouble in Jerusalem is because they've sinned. And he's confessing sin as Jesus taught His disciples:

"Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."

And there's repentance. There's talk here about repentance, about just as sin is the cause of the trouble, so the way back to blessing is to repent of that sin, to turn from that sin and to cleave unto the Lord. There's this open confession of sin.

But then, there's a request, and the request is summarized in verse 11: "Have mercy."

"O Lord, let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who delight to fear Your name, and give success to Your servant today, and grant Him mercy in the sight of this man."

In the sight of Artaxerxes, who has stopped the rebuilding work in Jerusalem. And Nehemiah understands, do you see, that he's in an extraordinary position of influence with the king. He's with him every day. And I'm not sure if Nehemiah

fully understood how God was going to answer this, because it's breathtaking — and we'll look at it next week. It's a heart-stopping moment when Nehemiah actually has to address the king, and his life is probably in danger. 'Have mercy. Have mercy. Remember Your word. Remember Your promises to Your people.' Do you notice how many times he says they are "Your people"? 'You have redeemed them by Your great power, by Your strong hand. Do this for Your sake.'

You know, if this was a prayer the other side of John the Baptist, it might say something like this: "Do this for Jesus' sake. Do this for the sake of what Jesus did for us on the cross. Do this for the sake of His blood, for the sake of His honor, for the sake of His integrity."

But all that is going to come, and now he's waiting.

"I waited patiently for the Lord, and He inclined unto me and heard my prayer." He's waiting. Waiting in prayer, waiting before the presence of God.

My dear friend, is that where you are tonight in your own personal life? You are waiting before God in prayer with a burden on your heart. Well, take courage from Nehemiah. What an extraordinary, encouraging thing it is to see God having mercy, stepping in, remembering His word, coming to the aid of His people, answering Nehemiah's prayer. But be careful what you pray for. Be careful what you pray for, because God was going to use Nehemiah to answer the very prayer that he was praying.

Let's look to God in prayer.

Father, we thank You as we just begin to scratch the surface of this extraordinary, marvelous prayer of Nehemiah. Teach us in these coming weeks and months to grow to be more like Nehemiah and to be more like Jesus. Father, we ask that You'd hide Your word within our hearts for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand. Receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

[Congregational hymn: *O for a Closer Walk with God*]

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