

Heart & Prayer

Nehemiah 1



Background of Nehemiah

- ❑ In 586 BC, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. Many of the Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon. They were exiled from the “promised land.”¹
- ❑ In 539 BC, Cyrus the Great (king of Persia) conquered Babylon. He issued a decree allowing the Jews to return to the land, and he encouraged rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem (*Ezra 1:1-4*). Under the leadership of Zerubbabel, the first group of Jews returned. Rebuilding of the temple began in 536 BC and was eventually completed in 516 BC (*Ezra 3:8-6:15*).²
- ❑ In 458 BC, Ezra led a second group of Jews back to Jerusalem (*Ezra 7-8*). Ezra was a faithful teacher of the Law of Moses, and he instructed the Jews on how to live according to the Law.
- ❑ Nehemiah was another leader during the period of the Jews’ return and reestablishment in the land. The book of Nehemiah records events that happened between 445 and 432 BC.

Concern of Prayer

- ❑ Read Nehemiah 1:1-4.³ After Hanani (one of Nehemiah’s brothers) came to Susa from Judah, Nehemiah asked about the situation in Jerusalem.

1. What was the situation in Jerusalem? (*1:2-3*)

The Jews who had returned to Judah were in “great trouble and disgrace.” The wall of Jerusalem was broken down, and its gates had been burned with fire.

2. How did Nehemiah respond? Why do you think he responded in this way? (*1:4*)



3. In this troubled world, there are many things to be concerned about! As Christians, how might our concerns be similar to Nehemiah’s concerns?⁴

Content of Prayer

- ❑ Nehemiah’s deep concern motivated his prayer. Read Nehemiah 1:5-11.

¹ The exile (and scattering) of Israelites began when the Assyrians invaded the northern kingdom of Israel in 740 BC. The Assyrians were defeated by the Babylonians (with help from the Medes) in 612 BC. The Babylonians invaded the southern kingdom of Israel (Judah) in 598 BC, and began deporting Jews to Babylon.

² As a result of Samaritan opposition, temple construction was stopped between 530 and 520 BC (*Ezra 4*).

³ ‘month of Kislev’ – November/December; ‘twentieth year’ – of the reign of king Artaxerxes I; ‘citadel’ – fortress city; ‘Susa’ – winter lodging place for Persian kings; ‘remnant’ – portion, those Jewish exiles who had returned.

⁴ Nehemiah was concerned about God’s people and God’s purpose for His people. Nehemiah’s concerns reflected the concerns of God. How do our concerns line up with God’s concerns? How do our concerns line up with His kingdom, His righteousness, His will, His plan and purposes in this world?

4. What elements of prayer (adoration/praise, confession, thanksgiving, supplication/asking) do you see in Nehemiah's prayer?⁵ List them (with verse references).

5. Is the order of these prayer elements important? If so, why?

6. What does Nehemiah emphasize in his prayer? (1:5, 8-10) Why can he pray with confidence?⁶



- ❑ In verses 6-7, Nehemiah confesses “the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father’s family, have committed against you.” Confession of sin is an important part of prayer, for sin is an obstacle in our communication and fellowship with God. Nehemiah’s confession goes beyond personal sin to corporate sin (“we Israelites”), which is a lesson for us.
 - ❑ In verse 11, Nehemiah asked that God would give him “success today by granting him favor in the presence of *this man* (that is, King Artaxerxes).” Thus Nehemiah not only prayed for the situation in Jerusalem, he was willing to become actively involved in resolving the situation.⁷ In other words, Nehemiah was willing to become part of the answer to his prayers.
 - ❑ Nehemiah was a great leader because he knew that true success depended on the ultimate Leader – “the God of heaven, the great and awesome God” who is faithful and loving (1:5).
7. How is Nehemiah’s prayer an example for us? What practical things can we do to pray like Nehemiah prayed?

Reflection/Application

- Cultivate a heart for God. To truly have a heart for God is to know Him. Do you want to know “the great and awesome God, the God who is faithful and loving?” Jesus is the way into a relationship with this God. Will you trust in him? Brothers and sisters, cultivating a heart for God involves making His concerns your concerns. Ask yourself, what are my primary concerns? Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness.
- Pray biblically informed and directed. Read the Bible, seeking to know God’s will and God’s revealed plan and promises. One way to do that is to pray with an open Bible.
- Pray with a servant’s heart. Be willing to be part of the answer to your prayers. Be willing for God to change your life through your prayers.

⁵ ‘ACTS’ is a helpful acronym to remember important elements of prayer – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication. As Jesus modeled, adoration/praise (at least in heart) should come before asking (Matthew 6:9-13).

⁶ Much of what Nehemiah says in his prayer is based on the Scriptures that record God’s promises to His people. Nehemiah ‘reminds’ God that He promised restoration of His people to the land if they returned to Him (1:9).

⁷ Nehemiah was ‘cupbearer to the king’ (1:11), a high and trustworthy position. However, it could still be dangerous to ask king Artaxerxes to overturn his previous decree to stop rebuilding in Jerusalem (Ezra 4:21). Nehemiah did not charge forward, but waited for God to make an opportunity. He needed to approach the king at the ‘right time.’