

Nehemiah: A Righteous Governor to Jerusalem and Example to All

A Study of the Book of Nehemiah: Nehemiah 1 & 2¹

Nehemiah 1

Introduction of Jerusalem's present struggle. (1:1-3)

Author/Principle Character

Chapter one begins by introducing the author and/or principle character who identifies himself as Nehemiah, the son of Hacaliah. Much of the book is written directly from his account and he is serving as the primary leader through the course of the narrative. Outside the books of Ezra and Nehemiah no further reference is made to Nehemiah, but his importance in the immediate narrative, and consequently in the larger sweep of Israel's history, is quite clear.

Date

After introducing Nehemiah, the Hebrew month of the year, Chislev,² is provided along with the monarchial year of the present king. These dates serve to give a contextual framing of the immediate events that serve as major catalysts for the narrative's initial progress – first in chapter one, when news was brought to Nehemiah, and then in chapter two, when Nehemiah engages the king.

Location

Along with the dating of the initial events the location of the opening of the book was provided. Nehemiah, a Jew in exile, was in Susa the citadel. Susa was the location of the Persian winter palace³ and was located in the province of Elam.⁴

Contextual Foundation

While authorship, principle character, date, and location are important elements to the context of the narrative, they ultimately served to provide a stage for the conversation that set the actions of the book in motion.

Hanani, along with some other men from Judah, came to Nehemiah in Susa. Hanani was identified as Nehemiah's brother, but it is unclear if this was an immediate biological brother, a close relative, or simply a fellow Jew. There is good reason to presume he was either his actual brother or at least a close relative as he was distinguished among the other men of Judah here, and later he was identified in a like manner when there were numerous other Jews in the immediate context.

¹ Prepared by David Crowe for Pray's Mill Baptist Church Adult Sunday School

ALL Scripture Quotations are from the ESV Bible unless the Scripture reference is in a quote from another author – their original translation was kept.

² "In the fourth year of King Darius, the word of the Lord came to Zechariah on the fourth day of the ninth month, which is Chislev." Zechariah 7:1

³ The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Ezra: Gene A. Getz, David C. Cook Publisher, 1985 (Hereafter: Getz), Pg.674

"...in those days when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel..." Esther 1:2

⁴ "And I saw in the vision; and when I saw, I was in Susa the citadel, which is in the province of Elam. And I saw in the vision, and I was at the Ulai canal." Daniel 8:2

Upon making contact with Hanani, Nehemiah inquired about the welfare of their people, the Jews in Judah, and of the beloved city, Jerusalem. Regarding this, the nature of the language that Nehemiah used in describing the Jews in Judah merits further attention as it was a striking way to reference a people as those who had *escaped* and *survived*. This language primarily beckons the question of whether these were Jews that alluded capture – having successfully fled detention and exile – or were they Jews that had survived a period of exile and upon returning had been surviving in what had become a destitute homeland?

When examining other uses of these terms in the Scriptures one plainly sees a strong element of survival – persevering through adversity, but the context always dictates the nature of the surviving and eluding of final threats.

With this in view one must narrow down the examination of context, and a reasonable book to look for further clarity would be Ezra, a contemporary who overlapped with Nehemiah. Ezra 9:8, "...to leave us a *remnant*...." Ezra 9:13, "...given us such a *remnant* as this...." Ezra 9:14, "...no remnant, nor any to *escape*?" Ezra 9:15, "...left a remnant that has *escaped*...." Ezra is referring to the Jewish people in his respective context as a remnant.

Expanding the scope beyond the immediate vocabulary term while also restricting to the immediate book of study one can note two passages from Nehemiah where it is clear that there were a people plainly identified who had returned to Judah from exile/captivity. Nehemiah 7:6, the people who came up out of the captivity. Nehemiah 8:17, those who returned from the captivity.

Now, with these various elements in view it appears that Nehemiah was inquiring about a Jewish remnant who had endured exile/captivity and returned to the land of Judah and the city of Jerusalem.

F. Charles Fensham provides the following commentary regarding the identity of these Jews as it relates to the exile and their present status: "It is more likely that these words refer to the returned exiles. Thus those who had escaped refers to the exiles who had returned and escaped further captivity. Exile was regarded as a great shame for the Jewish people. If they returned to the Holy Land, it was interpreted as an escape from shame. Who were left over from captivity. This refers to the remnant, to those who had returned from captivity. It is thus clear that Nehemiah inquired about his brethren in Judah who were in exile and who had returned."⁵

So, why all this attention to a matter of only mild difference in conclusions regarding who these people were inquired about at this time? Because The LORD has been pleased to maintain a remnant... and this cherished work is worth exploring. Derek Kidner states, "In the question and answer, the word *escaped* is akin to one of Isaiah's favourite expressions, 'the remnant' – that little portion of Israel with whom the future was to lie."⁶ Note again that last portion of the statement, "...that little portion of Israel with whom the future was to lie."⁷

⁵ The New International Commentary of the New Testament: Charles Fensham, WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition (Hereafter: Fensham), Kindle Locations 3515-3520

Note the parenthetical cross references – one passage and two transliterated words were removed for the clarity of this context's usages of the quote as it did not harm to the original statement.

⁶ Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries: Ezra and Nehemiah, Derek Kidner, Intervarsity Press, 2009 (Hereafter: Kidner), Pg.85

⁷ Kidner, Pg.85

There was a future to be had for Israel because The LORD promised as much and he is pleased to maintain that thread of promise through the smallest of groups being preserved. Therefore, it speaks to the heart of Nehemiah that when his people came to him, while he himself was exiled in a foreign land, he wanted to know the news of God's remnant. He wanted to know of the welfare of the people of covenant promise and the city that was uniquely set apart for the worship of the God of heaven and earth. Nehemiah was exemplifying that having a heart for God was to have a heart for his people and delight in his promised truths.

With this in view one should be better prepared to feel the blow that Nehemiah felt when he received an answer to his questions. The remnant and the city were stated to be in great trouble and shame. But would not Nehemiah have expected this news? Was this not the condition since the Babylonians conquered the city – leaving it demolished and then to decay and the physical digression that would inevitably occur over numerous decades of inattentiveness?

Well, there was more to Jerusalem's story than the Babylonians destroying it and taking its people away. Several years before this dialogue recorded here in Nehemiah chapter one there were initial efforts at restoring Jerusalem, but they were put to an aggressive stop by King Artaxerxes on account of rumors that there were rebellious intentions by the Jews.⁸ With this in mind Gene A. Getz states that Nehemiah's strong response to the news was in some measure on account of likely having prior knowledge that restorative work on the walls had begun years before this time as recorded in Ezra 4:12. Therefore this report would have been particularly harsh news – effectively communicating that the said prior progress was wholly undone and the condition of the people and the land was deplorable. However, F. Charles Fensham makes a reasonable argument that to conclude that Jerusalem's walls were damaged or destroyed after the previous cease and desist order by Artaxerxes (recorded in Ezra 4) is an argument from speculation as no such incident of assault or damage was recorded and had it occurred it would have presumably meant enemies of the Jews availed themselves of the order and destroyed the work that had been stopped. Fensham further states that the condition would be looking back to the Babylonian destruction as so much time had passed and yet the city remains in ruins and the rebuilt Temple was in imminent danger as it was effectively defenseless.⁹

Both conclusions have reasonable merit to them, but whichever offense led to the present evaluation the fundamental elements remained the same: the people and the city were in great trouble and shame.

⁸ See **Ezra 4**

⁹ Fensham, Location 3529

Nehemiah's theologically rich/informed prayer of repentance and request for restoration. (1:4-11)

Broken for God's People

Nehemiah had a substantial response to hearing the aforementioned news about the Jews and Jerusalem: He wept and mourned for days, he was fasting and praying.

"When I heard these things I sat down abruptly...." – The NET Bible chose to translate the intent expressed in the action here... to state he sat down can miss the dramatic response of Nehemiah hearing about the Jews and Jerusalem.¹⁰

Weeping and mourning for days... as though a beloved friend or family member had suddenly died. Nehemiah also gave himself to the discipline of fasting in this time of great grief and earnest petition. Fasting not so much as being described as a discipline of the faith so much as it was identified as struggling with God while enduring weighty and consequential burdens – it communicated a clear measure of being broken, undone, wholly dependent on the Lord in prayer.

Nehemiah was responding like a man completely broken over his people... God's people. He wanted to know of their condition and upon hearing it he was undone – not by fear, not by unfavorable circumstances, and not by personal disappointment, but because the covenant people and their land were still suffering under the residual stench of their judgment when they should be in their season of restoration.

Nehemiah's Prayer

Throughout the entirety of history God's people have been a people of prayer. A people of communion, fellowship, confession, adoration, thanksgiving, and petition. One does not walk with God, understand his Scriptures, or seek to live well without being strong in prayer and Nehemiah, though exiled in a foreign land, was no exception to this truth. So, here when Nehemiah has spoken to his utter brokenness before God he was found praying and his readers are afforded a unique examination of the nature and content of his praying.

Nehemiah opened his prayer by beseeching The LORD, the God of heaven. The God of heaven who is sovereign over and cares about the temporal affairs of man and the physical city of Jerusalem.

This is important to keep in mind when engaging a book that is frequently seen as having a central emphasis on building physical walls for an ancient city as The LORD placed no small attention on that which is temporal and restricted by time and the natural order of the creation. The most potent demonstration of this was made plain with Jesus coming to his own and dwelling among them in the flesh and then weeping over Jerusalem... which would in God's time be the eternal city.¹¹

Verse five properly affirmed God as Nehemiah began his prayer - not unlike what Jesus instructed in Matthew 6:9 when he opened his model prayer for the disciples with "Our Father in heaven, hallowed by your name."

¹⁰ Nehemiah 1 NET Note 10

¹¹ Revelation 21:9-27

The following affirmations are made about God in the opening verse of the prayer:

He is the God of heaven (his dwelling place).

He is a great and awesome God.

He keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love and obey him.

It is clear that Nehemiah was relying on the truth that God keeps covenant and steadfast love - this was the means and confidence behind his subsequent actions including driving the people to covenant obedience and a heart for God as The LORD requires that his people love and obey him.

Regarding Nehemiah's appeal to God's covenant faithfulness, John MacArthur states, "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 pledge to His people."¹²

Continuing in verse six one observes that the prayer progresses from affirmation to petition - Nehemiah uses anthropomorphic language (as is common in like contexts) to express his desire for The LORD, who is spirit, to hear his prayer:

Ear, attentive.

Eyes, open.

Nehemiah identified himself as The LORD's servant, one who does the will of his master, and he identified Israel as a whole as The LORD's servants.

Nehemiah expressed that his petition had been made day and night - he had remained constant in his crying out to God.

Nehemiah was serving in an intercessory capacity as he was not exclusively or particularly petitioning for himself, but for the people of Israel. Further, in praying for Israel Nehemiah also assumes a clear measure of responsibility/ownership of their sin.

A clear primary element to Nehemiah's prayer was confession of sin (Israel as a nation and even his own father's house). Night and day there was confession and brokenness before God - Nehemiah seeking forgiveness for Israel's great sins of rebellion that brought about their just judgment and also Israel's continued appetite and succumbing to sin and various forms of rebelliousness in the present.

Continuing in his prayer Nehemiah was precise in his confession of sin: Israel as a corporate people and the individuals therein had acted very corruptly against God.

He then goes to unpack what that means:

They had not kept The LORD's commandments.

They had not kept The LORD's statutes.

They had not kept The LORD's rules commanded through Moses.

¹² The MacArthur Study Bible, NKJV. Word Bibles, 1997. (Hereafter: MacArthur), Pg.659

In verses eight and nine Nehemiah went on to address the consequences of these offenses as expressed in the Torah, particularly as articulated throughout Deuteronomy. Nehemiah affirmed the judgment that Israel was assured of from The LORD if they were to be unfaithful - they would be scattered among the peoples, which was exactly what they were presently enduring.

Nehemiah then goes on from affirming culpability and its consequences to addressing the kindness of repentance and restoration. Though judgment would certainly accompany infidelity there was still a place for restoration as this too was assured in the proper context.

Restoration:

Israel: Hearts returning to The LORD.

Israel: In returning, The LORD's commandments are kept and done.

The LORD: Physical returning of the restored Israelites who have been scattered abroad to the land of promise where he has, "...chosen, to make my name dwell there." A restoration that will reach out to the "uttermost parts of heaven" and see the Jews who love The LORD and are walking in covenant obedience restored to the land of promise.

Nehemiah was longing for the restoration of the Israelites and therefore the returning to their land.

Sidebar: The Place God Has Chosen for His Name to Dwell

Note that Israel is where The LORD has chosen to have his name dwell and Jerusalem in particular is identified with the unique presence of God. As Solomon affirmed, "Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you...." 1 Kings 8:27 - yet Israel on a large scale and Jerusalem in particular is where he has chosen to be uniquely identified or associated with in his creation. The land of Israel (land of covenant promise) was directly tied/associated with Israel's obedience.

Further, this presents a clear distinction between Israel, who is tied by covenant to the land of promise, and the Church, that is constituted by a plethora of nations and who was dispatched from Israel to the uttermost parts of the world - obedience for Israel meant *returning* and obedience for the Church means *going*.

In these elements of the prayer it was made especially plain that Nehemiah's life was Scripture saturated – seen through the themes and language of the Scriptures saturating his petition. He was not simply groping for what he thought would be ideal for his people, but expressing God's truth back to him regarding what was true and best.

To this point Mervin Breneman observes, "Most of this prayer is based on Deuteronomy, many phrases of which are practically the same."¹³ Supporting this statement he goes on to reference the following passages from Deuteronomy that have a clear presence in this recorded prayer: Deuteronomy 4:27; 6:1; 7:9,21; 9:29; 10:17; 12:5; 21:15; 28:64; 30:1-4.¹⁴

¹³ The New American Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther; Mervin Breneman; Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993 (Hereafter: Breneman), Pg.173

¹⁴ Breneman, Pg.173

In verse ten Nehemiah again identified the Jews as both God's servants and God's people.¹⁵ He then goes on to identify Israel as the people that The LORD magnificently redeemed. This appears to have been an overt reference to the foundational relationship that was poignantly established at the Exodus when Israel was delivered and for the first time formally identified as a nation and not just a family clan.

Whereas 1:7-9 had language reminiscent of the blessings and curses of the Law under the Mosaic Covenant, here the language was reminiscent of The LORD's deliverance of Israel at the Exodus when he uniquely demonstrated his great power in the redeeming and calling out of his people from bondage to the land of promise. Fensham draws out that Nehemiah is likely making an overt parallel with the Exodus and the petitioned (and anticipated) restoration of Israel to their land.¹⁶

Praying for Opportunity

It is plain that Nehemiah had been praying for some time before this recorded prayer, but it appears that this is either a second prayer or a definitive break from one element of prayer to the next - the first being a sweeping prayer of faith, repentance, and petition on the larger scale and then the second being a precise petition for a very precise context (your servant, today, and this man).

Nehemiah appears to begin this next prayer or section much like he did in 1:6, asking The Lord for an attentive ear:

To Nehemiah's prayer (The Lord's servant).

To the Jews' prayer (The Lord's servants).

It is not clear if others were praying in concert or conjunction with Nehemiah specifically or if he was using the sweeping language that frequently accompanies intercessory prayer.

Note that whether there were others praying in immediate concert with Nehemiah or not, he plainly identified the believing/faithful Jews as those who delight to fear God's name.

Regarding this matter, the presence of fear has been introduced once to present in the book and it was to describe The LORD, "...the great and awesome/fearsome God...." (1:5) Those who know The LORD know to fear him.

Nehemiah's petition was precise in its application and was expressed from two different vantage points:

Petition for success in his precise effort to persuade the king.

Petition for mercy in the sight of the king.

Concluding the prayer Nehemiah framed the context in which he had just prayed - he was the cupbearer to the king himself. Stating this, it is plain that he desired to leverage his position in a manner than would afford him to do good for The LORD's people and the beloved city that his heart had been broken for too.

¹⁵ Servants is referenced eight times in this prayer: Nehemiah: Three times (1:6,1:11,1:11); Moses: Two times (1:7,1:8); Israel as a People: Three times (1:6,1:10,1:11).

¹⁶ Fensham, Location 3614

Sidebar on Indivisible Elements in Nehemiah's Prayer:

You cannot separate Nehemiah's prayer from the Scriptures and you cannot separate Israel's welfare from the land. You will not pray like Nehemiah without knowing the Scriptures and you will not understand Israel without understanding its connection to the land.

Reflection and Application

When The LORD revealed himself to Moses and declared his name to him he identified himself as the covenant keeping God of Israel. Later we see just how prone the nation was toward idolatry and rebellion, but The LORD remained steadfast... and he continued his pattern of preserving a remnant even amidst dark days. These were dark days for Israel, and having a heart for God and his people, Nehemiah inquired about the remnant who had returned to the land. What does this communicate about God, his covenants, and his servant Nehemiah?

Nehemiah had a physical reaction that demonstrated great distress over the condition of the Lord's people and Jerusalem. What provokes your heart with a like intensity and does it compel you to prayer?

Another example of this is Jesus being moved with compassion (the language communicates inward movement) when he sees the crowds – as though they were wandering sheep with no shepherd and he instructs his disciples to pray... pray earnestly that workers would be sent.

Fundamentally, is there a sensitivity toward the things of God and does it compel you to prayer?

If not then earnestly seek someone out to disciple you as you pursue maturity in this area (write down a plan of action who will you ask for help to grow here).

The Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy) form the foundations of the Old Testament Scriptures, which in turn are the only means by which you can properly understand the New Testament Scriptures. Therefore, it is not only naive, but irresponsible as a student of the Scriptures not to have a respectful appreciation and knowledge of these foundational elements, particularly Deuteronomy, if you are going to understand the sweep of Redemptive History. Do you have a healthy understanding of the Torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy)? If not, will you commit to a disciplined effort to work on this moving forward? If you are looking for help here, your Sunday School Teacher will be provided a guide to assist you on this and you can also see any of the Pastors. If you are doing well here, how and where do you see this coming through the prayer of Nehemiah?

“Nehemiah realized that God had fulfilled much of Deut 30:1-10; but he was convinced that God’s promise included more than the situation in which the Jerusalem community found itself at that moment. Thus, Nehemiah’s prayer shows a profound understanding and faith in what God had promised in his Word. Nehemiah challenges us to prayer based on an understanding of God’s purpose and will as found in his Word.”¹⁷

Reflect on this quote and write a response.

Speaking to Nehemiah’s prayer I stated: Throughout the entirety of history God’s people have been a people of prayer. A people of communion, fellowship, confession, adoration, thanksgiving, and petition. One does not walk with God, understand his Scriptures, or seek to live well without being strong in prayer, and Nehemiah, though exiled in a foreign land, was no exception to this truth.

As someone who lives in the most affluent country in the world and that has generous freedom of religion protections, do you find yourself to be the exception to the statement that God’s people pray?

¹⁷ Breneman, Pg.173

What are you going to do about this problem?

If you are faithful in prayer, how might you strengthen another in this area?

Nehemiah's confessed sin on behalf of Israel. When is it proper to make a confession of sin larger than your own personal sin?

With the supercharged political climate that we presently live in, do you find that you are trying to strategically "get the right person" in office more than you are praying for the people serving, the people running, and for the Lord to work in the hearts of men? What does Nehemiah teach us about praying regarding these matters?

Nehemiah 2

Nehemiah petitions the king and secures his authorization and help to go rebuild Jerusalem. (2:1-8)

For Such A Time As This

Nehemiah continued providing precise details of the timeframe and context. Here he has again provided the Hebrew month of the year, Nisan,¹⁸ along with the monarchial year of the present king – this time it was precisely referenced as the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes.¹⁹ These details reveal that it had been four months²⁰ since the time that Hanani brought him the devastating news of the Jews and Jerusalem after which he was fasting and praying day and night.

¹⁸ "In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus...." Esther 3:7

¹⁹ The elapsed time covered the Jewish new year, but this did not impact the accounting of the Persian monarchial reign (the two calendars were not in complete tandem with one another).

²⁰ Getz, Pg.675

Nehemiah here set the stage for his long prayerfully prepared engagement of the king. He framed it with the important detail that he had not to this time had a disposition of sadness before the king, who would have been in consistently close proximity to him when Nehemiah was actively serving. It is clear that Nehemiah was setting up the situation in which he would be plainly grieved before the king on this occasion.

The king observes this uncharacteristic expression of grief by Nehemiah, and he inquired of him as to why he had such a disposition – one that could be expected to accompany illness, but Nehemiah was clearly not ill; his heart was grieved.

A detail that Nehemiah did not provide was whether this was a shrewd display of a sincere emotion that he had to present concealed or if he was finally overcome and had already prayerfully prepared himself for just such a moment. Either way, it provided an open door for Nehemiah to express his heart's burden, come what may.

It is important to note that Nehemiah did not just cavalierly respond to the king, he was afraid in this moment, very afraid. The articulation of this fear is significant.... "very much afraid" may be expressed as *extremely afraid* or *all but terrified*.

What Nehemiah does not state, but what is plainly present here, is that he was also amazingly courageous in this moment.

Sidebar: Courageous Jews and Persian Kings

What can be observed here is that Nehemiah was following in the footsteps of another brave Jew who loved her people enough to defy royal protocol and give her people a needed voice before the Persian king as this was very similar to the preparations and boldness demonstrated by Esther. Note the following similarities: Upon hearing of the terrible news for the Jews she was "greatly distressed." (Esther 4:4)

The decree for the destruction of the Jews was issued from Susa. (Esther 4:8)

The practice of capital punishment outside of a sovereign pardon (with the extending of the scepter) for one approaching the king uninvited was addressed - significant grounds for fearful concern. (4:11)

The LORD's ultimate keeping of his people was plainly spoken to and the examination that God's providence has put God's people in places of unique consequence at just the right moments. (4:14)

Preparations for engagement with man included fasting before God and a confidence in action. (4:16)

While there were good reasons for Nehemiah to be afraid in this context (an official demonstrating a poor or sad disposition before the king could lead to his dismissal or even death),²¹ his pronounced fear was likely on account of the matter that he would now bring before the king – the welfare of Jerusalem and his desire to see it restored. This would already be a risky proposition, but it was King Artaxerxes himself who, on account of some malicious/bad intel, had ordered a halt to Jerusalem's restoration years before this time.

²¹ Getz, Pg.675

The malicious/bad intel to the king:

“To Artaxerxes the king: Your servants, the men of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired. Now because we eat the salt of the palace and it is not fitting for us to witness the king’s dishonor, therefore we send and inform the king, in order that search may be made in the book of the records of your fathers. You will find in the book of the records and learn that this city is a rebellious city, hurtful to kings and provinces, and that sedition was stirred up in it from of old. That was why this city was laid waste. We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River.”

Ezra 4:11-16

The king’s response to the malicious/bad intel:

“The king sent an answer: ‘To Rehum the commander and Shimshai the scribe and the rest of their associates who live in Samaria and in the rest of the province Beyond the River, greeting. And now the letter that you sent to us has been plainly read before me. And I made a decree, and search has been made, and it has been found that this city from of old has risen against kings, and that rebellion and sedition have been made in it. And mighty kings have been over Jerusalem, who ruled over the whole province Beyond the River, to whom tribute, custom, and toll were paid. Therefore make a decree that these men be made to cease, and that this city be not rebuilt, until a decree is made by me. And take care not to be slack in this matter. Why should damage grow to the hurt of the king?’ Then, 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.” Ezra 4:17-23

Verse three continues with Nehemiah pressing through fear and providing a respectful engagement of the king before he explained the reason for his profound grief. Nehemiah states that the city of his father’s tombs lies desolate and its gates have been consumed with fire.

In answering the king, Nehemiah addressed respect and shame for Jerusalem – a respect for the city of his people’s ancestors/heritage (place of his father’s graves) and shame over its condition of being in such terrible demise.²² However, Nehemiah was also shrewd so as to not directly mention Jerusalem by name, while its identity would have been known, it was likely an intentional choice to leave its direct naming out of the conversation at this time on account of the king’s prior cease and desist order.²³

The king made a second inquiry of Nehemiah – asking what he would request. It appears that Nehemiah’s statement was functionally taken as a request that needed further clarification or unpacking.

²² Breneman, Pg.175

²³ Breneman, Pg.173

Note the set up to this moment:

Nehemiah receives a grievous update regarding the Jews and Jerusalem. (1:2-3)

Nehemiah wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed. (1:4-10)

Nehemiah specifically prayed for a successful engagement with the king. (1:11)

Nehemiah plainly states that he was the king's cupbearer. (1:11)

Nehemiah fulfills his responsibility to bring wine to the king directly. (2:1)

Nehemiah had an uncharacteristically sad disposition. (2:1)

The king rightfully perceives Nehemiah's profound grief and inquires. (2:2)

Nehemiah expresses the reason for his grief: the destitute state of Jerusalem. (2:3)

The king inquires what Nehemiah would request in view of these matters. (2:4)

Nehemiah prays to God before answering the king. (2:4)

Nehemiah's response to the king's question was not an immediate answer, but rather it was to pray to the God of heaven - *the sovereign of all kings*.

What was prayed at this time is unknown: favor, mercy, clarity of speech, words to state or requests to make, etc. It is simply not known, but regardless of content, the absolute dependence and greater fear and confidence were plainly demonstrated to be in God and not man.

Gene A. Getz perceptively notes a critical detail to one who would seek to mimic the spontaneous confident cry to God in but the moment between a conversation's question and a reasonable reply, "This short prayer – whatever its unvoiced words – was built on his praying for four months."²⁴

Petition to Restore Jerusalem

Nehemiah presented no small request to the king, rather he made an extremely significant request to rebuild Jerusalem. Nehemiah asked that if it would please the king – soliciting his proactive endorsement not just an indifferent allowance.

Nehemiah appears to be drawing from the goodwill capital that he has secured with the king as a trusted servant in an important role as he requested to be relieved from his high standing position and freed to take on a momentous work in his people's land, and more precisely Jerusalem, which is under the present rule of the king.

Nehemiah consistently frames Jerusalem's context as the place of his fathers' graves - a place deserving dignity, which it has had stripped away from it well before the Persians were in power. Further, Nehemiah was not ambiguous regarding his intentions - it was not to visit, it was not to clean it up some, but it was to rebuild/restore the city proper.

Following Nehemiah's request, the king asked him another question in which he appeared to implicitly accept the proposition and began exploring precise details of how long this would require Nehemiah to be absent.

It was expected (at least initially) that Nehemiah would be returning to Susa, and Nehemiah was prepared with an answer (likely not twelve years – it is presumed that he returned for an extension as Governor of Judah for this longer term).

²⁴ Getz, Pg.676

Nehemiah provided the detail that the queen was present and seated by the king at this time. It is not wholly clear why he provided this detail, but it is possible that the presence of the queen at the king's side may be indicative of a private engagement,²⁵ which would have been a more advantageous or shrewd time to engage such a subject with the king.

It appears that, as Nehemiah had hopefully stated, he did find favor in the King's sight when provided the inquired times. Nehemiah was at this time being officially sent out by the king to restore the beloved city of Jerusalem, a most magnificent providence rooted in affection, tears, and prayer.

After receiving approval, Nehemiah again frames his response in which he will address the details of his request with the respectful refrain that expresses the king's willful ownership of the answered request, "If it pleases the king..."

Nehemiah clearly had a shrewd wisdom to him - understanding the dynamics of negotiating across the territories of the kingdom and securing necessary provisions. Further, it is clear that Nehemiah understood that while it was the king who was making this effort successful, it was truthfully God's doing – the king being a tool in God's hand. The journey from Susa to Jerusalem would have taken approximately three to four months,²⁶ and the documents would provide necessary authorization and a degree of safe travel through various providences which could otherwise prove quite dangerous.²⁷

A letter was specifically requested for Asaph who was the keeper of the king's forest so that lumber could be lawfully secured. It is plain that plans were already being established and thought through for the proposal to the king – he anticipated that he would need lumber for: beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, beams for the wall of the city, and beams for Nehemiah's house. Implicit in Nehemiah's request for timber was also his initial plans for rebuilding.²⁸ This would be further refined following his scouting expedition after arriving on scene.

Note that while it is not completely clear what the fortress for the Temple would entail there does appear to be a measure of priority on securing the Temple area along with the city as a whole. Also included is the pragmatic necessity of his own place of residence.

Nehemiah was granted his requests from the king (letters for safe passage and lumber). Nehemiah articulates that his requests were granted not simply because: "it pleased the king and he found favor in his sight," but because "it pleased the king and he found favor in his sight" for this precise reason, "...for the good hand of my God was upon me." (2:8)

Nehemiah found *good fortune* because of *God's good kindness*. This was clearly *God's* work by *his* good pleasure and not just Nehemiah having a vision for ministry and large goals that he would love to see accomplished - this was *God* laying a foundation of providence, uniquely working in the hearts of his people, and uniquely working in the hearts of other men.

²⁵ Getz, Pg.676

²⁶ MacArthur, Pg.661

²⁷ MacArthur, Pg.661

²⁸ Fensham, Location 3744

The Good Hand of God Upon Him

Ezra 7:9, “For on the first day of the first month he began to go up from Babylonia, and on the first day of the fifth month he came to Jerusalem, for the good hand of his God was on him.”

Ezra 8:18, “And by the good hand of our God on us, they brought us a man of discretion, of the sons of Mahli the son of Levi, son of Israel, namely Sherebiah with his sons and kinsmen....”

Ezra provides historical peer context to Nehemiah and the usage of this like statement appears to be expressing favorable blessing by God.

Nehemiah begins the initial and diplomatic steps to the rebuilding effort - also opposition is introduced. (2:9-10)

Safe Passage to Judah

Nehemiah began making his way to Jerusalem, and passing through the provinces beyond the River he provided the documentation supplied by the king. Nehemiah also recorded that the king supplied *more* than was requested for safe travel and expression of clear authority - sending army officers and horsemen too.

Introduction of Opposition

With the overt progress also came the explicit opposition to the work. Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite are explicitly named and appear to be the representative presence of larger opposition.

Regarding these men, extrabiblical resources appear to affirm that Sanballat and Tobiah were politically powerful men in the area. Sanballat being identified as the Governor of Samaria and Tobiah being identified with a powerful family in the area whose enduring influence continued to prove destructive several years later and into the intertestamental period.²⁹

What was particularly distressing about the nature of the opposition was the stated reason for it being present, namely that they were greatly displeased because someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel. Regarding this matter, it is important to note that the welfare of the people of Israel was immediately bound up in the welfare of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah surveyed the nature and scope of the work God had put in his heart for Jerusalem. (2:11-16)

Upon arriving at Jerusalem, Nehemiah took a three day reprieve before he executed a discreet scouting/assessment mission. On his evaluation mission he was only accompanied by a few men and he did not fully disclose the scope of his intentions for this work. Three references to this evaluation occurring at night are made (2:12,13,15). This was a mission under the cover of darkness and silence – Nehemiah intended to reveal his plan when it would best serve the mission.

²⁹ Kidner, Pgs. 88-89

The contextual foundation for the work was plainly established – God put this work for the restoration of Jerusalem into his heart. "And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem." (2:12)

The description of going from one precise location to another would no doubt have been immediately reminisced in the minds and hearts of the Jews... each description drawing a very precise picture and place to mind. This was after all... the beloved city. (2:13-15)

It appears that Nehemiah only went around the southernmost portion of the city at this time. Apparently, the rubble restricted continued safe passage without turning around (2:14).

Nehemiah was inspecting the walls and gates and the following locations were identified: Valley Gate, Dragon Spring, Dung Gate, Fountain Gate, King's Pool, and The Valley.

He was no longer operating off of someone else's evaluation and report.

He had observed and affirmed that Jerusalem's walls lie in ruins.

He had observed and affirmed that Jerusalem's gates are burned.

It is noteworthy here that before the king Nehemiah did not directly mention an overt concern for the people and while on his scouting mission he speaks to what God was putting in his heart for Jerusalem (not overt reference to the people). This was because the fate of the people were bundled up with the fate of Jerusalem – the two were intrinsically bound together as one would not care more for the city than the people of the city.

Nehemiah clearly loved his people, as was made abundantly clear in his initial inquiry into their welfare at the opening of the book.

Nehemiah provides the foundational charge for the work and demonstrates his resolve to answer slanderous opposition. (2:17-20)

Leading God's People

After Nehemiah's scouting mission, he disclosed his mission to the people - rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem to bring the city, and therefore their reproach/derision/shame, to a conclusion.

Nehemiah's report matched what initially provoked his grief in the initial verses of the book.

Nehemiah has already demonstrated his leadership in his heart for the people and the land, in his robust prayer life, in his engagement of the king, in his shrewd planning, and in his discreet preparatory missions. However, here he also demonstrated it as he too owned the problem of Jerusalem and further identifies the problem as a Jewish problem... "You see *the trouble we are in*, how *Jerusalem lies in ruins* with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that *we may no longer suffer derision*." (2:17)

In his directive to rebuild the walls Nehemiah was providing the city stability, safety, and a structure in which its other elements could thrive. This was not a symbolic act, but a foundational necessity for the restoration of the city.

Further, in addition to leading the people in Jerusalem's necessary restoration and removing Israel's shame, Nehemiah stated that this desire was rooted in God and that God had been the means of his present and expected future success in these matters.

Nehemiah articulated that this work would be successful first and foremost because the hand of God was on Nehemiah for good. Second to this, and effectively only an affirmation of it, was that the king was persuaded to approve and provide necessary assistance. Nevertheless, it is proper to remember that even in view of the larger sovereignty and favor of God - the words of the natural man ruling over Persia were still consequential and reasonably so.

The people responded to Nehemiah in confidence and faith - they were prepared to engage the very hard work of rebuilding. The people prepared themselves for the work: they strengthened their hands for the good work!

“Above and beyond his sound tactics, however, was the conviction that basically the project was not his. It was from God and ‘for Jerusalem’ (12) – not from Nehemiah nor for his prestige.”³⁰

Rebuking Opposition

As has been previously observed in verse eleven, Sanballat and Tobiah aggressively expressed their disdain for this work - also mentioned here is Geshem the Arab. Here the disdain was plainly on the faces of these men - they "jeered" at and "despised" the Jews. Their physical expression spilled out in their words too - questioning and accusing Nehemiah and the Jews.

Rebuilding a city's walls and restoring a city under the sovereignty of another world power could appear to be threatening rebellion, but the king provided authorization and a measure of overt support too (Nehemiah's freedom to go, letters for travel, and troops to escort). The effort was not one of rebellion. However, this line of argument/slander was very severe and would be deployed again later when it was plain that the Jews' success was imminent (Nehemiah 6:6).

Whereas Sanballat and Tobiah were noted to be formidable foes in their own rite, it is believed that Geshem may have been even more powerful according to extrabiblical sources and deductions. Also, Sanballat and Tobiah had authority and influence to the north and east of Judah, and Geshem is believed to have authority and influence in the areas of Moab and Edom, which were east and south of Judah. Therefore, if these historical deductions are accurate, as the evidence appears to support, then Judah was effectively surrounded by overt opposition.³¹ This further punctuates what continues throughout the book – the choice to fear God or man, a choice that Nehemiah consistently demonstrates with excellence – fearing God.

Nehemiah responds to the opposition and roots his defense in a confidence in God; not himself, the people, or the king. Further, Nehemiah's confidence included the anticipation not just of survival, but of prospering.

In his rebuke Nehemiah communicates that the Jews were God's servants and he plainly distinguishes the opposition from the Jews. He makes it plain that this was *their* home and heritage - *not* the oppositions' in any capacity. In accordance with this, note that in the

³⁰ Kidner, Pg. 89

³¹ Kidner, Pg.91

rebuke of these three men who, "have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem," Nehemiah was communicating that this would now be a Jewish city again - demonstrating a measure of distinction from other cities and territories.

"Even to his enemies Nehemiah produces as his trump card not his mandate from the king but his authority from God. There is, too, a fine ring of pride in his citizenship, however down-at-heel Jerusalem at this moment might appear. In the three words, *portion... right... memorial*, he dismisses the past, present, and future of these unenviable outsiders."³²

Principles of Leadership

Nehemiah is frequently recognized as an exemplary model of leadership and reasonably so in that he accomplished a magnificent task in functionally restoring the city of Jerusalem. However, the emphasis of this study has been to speak to that which provided him resurrection distinction – that which matters in terms of eternity. What is meant by this is that if there is no resurrection, was Nehemiah's story simply one of a master project-manager who happened to do a work useful for the larger sweep of God's plan? With this in view, I will highlight some exemplary leadership principles that Nehemiah provided, but I provide this with the qualification that among great leaders Nehemiah was distinct not for accomplishments, but for being *mighty in the Scriptures and prayer* and thereby also being a righteous leader who pleased God with his heart and the fruit of his hands.

Gene A. Getz sites Donald K. Campbell's work, which provides twenty-one characteristics necessary for effective leaderships.³³

- 1) He established a reasonable and attainable goal.
- 2) He had a sense of mission.
- 3) He was willing to get involved.
- 4) He arranged his priorities in order to accomplish his goal.
- 5) He patiently waited for God's timing.
- 6) He showed respect to his superior.
- 7) He prayed at crucial times.
- 8) He made his request with tact and graciousness.
- 9) He was well prepared and thought of his needs in advance.
- 10) He went through proper channels.
- 11) He took time (three days) to rest, pray, and plan.
- 12) He investigated the situation first hand.
- 13) He informed others only after he knew the size of the problem.
- 14) He identified himself as one with the people.
- 15) He set before them a reasonable and attainable goal.
- 16) He assured them God was in the project.
- 17) He displayed self-confidence in facing obstacles.
- 18) He displayed God's confidence in facing obstacles.
- 19) He did not argue with opponents.
- 20) He was not discouraged by opposition.
- 21) He courageously used the authority of his position.

³² Kidner, Pg.91

³³ Getz, Pg.678 (original source cited as Donald K. Campbell's work Nehemiah: Man in Charge, pg.23)

Mervin Breneman provides four leadership incentives Nehemiah masterfully employed:³⁴

- 1) He identified with the people; he spoke of “the trouble we are in.”
- 2) He stressed the seriousness of the situation. A leader must be realistic and honestly assess the facts. People will have confidence in such a leader.
- 3) Nehemiah was committed to taking definitive action.
- 4) He used his personal testimony of God’s grace to assure them of God’s favor on the project (v. 18).

A Christian leader must encourage trust in God by leading in faith as well as in action.

Reflection and Application

What grief do you carry? Is it for things that grieve the Lord? Are you hurting and sad for the struggles of the church and the weight and pain of sin by those reveling in it as well as those who are simply impacted because this is a fallen world? The profundity of Nehemiah’s burden drove him to months of constant prayer and brokenness. What do the burdens you carry drive you to by way of action?

Complaining? Indifference? Doubt? Or.... Confident trust amidst brokenness and grief? Joy when the only clear elements of the path ahead is more pain for you or those you love?

Are you bold in the things of the Lord? How does this show up in daily life? If you are not bold in the things of the Lord, what can you do to address this deficiency?

³⁴ Breneman, Pg.182 – section quoted in entirety – format mild adjusted for this Study Guide

Gene A. Getz perceptively notes a critical detail to one who would seek to mimic the spontaneous confident cry to God in but the moment between a conversation's question and a reasonable reply, "This short prayer – whatever its unvoiced words – was built on his praying for four months."³⁵ You are not made in a moment; the moment reflects what you are made of... and such is most certainly true in prayer. A faint and fleeing two word prayer of "Oh God..." may be one person all but taking the name of the Lord in vain and another person's rich petition to the God whom they are constantly crying out to... their two words communicating a life in prayer packed into a fleeting moment. What is your response?

Opposition will be a consistent element of the book and it will manifest itself consistently in the choice to fear man or fear God. What has been your pattern, and how might you engage this matter in prayer and daily conduct?

What are some principles of leadership that have already come up that you can aim to mature in or apply in your life? How can you make sure that its application maintains a resurrection emphasis – that you are looking toward eternity and not just "success" today?

³⁵ Getz, Pg.676