

Nehemiah Principles of Success – The First Step to Everything – Nehemiah 1-2

FBC Nacogdoches – Sunday, August 25, 2019 – A.M. Message

Message Description

— What is the first step toward success (or freedom, or victory, or accomplishment, or peace)? In the story of Nehemiah, we learn how to accomplish great things for the Lord, and in this first message, we will learn the starting point... the first step. Nehemiah's success was not easy. It was not likely. It was a surprise to everyone who witnessed it. But in another sense, it was inevitable because he walked God's path and exercised God's plan. Learn with us how Nehemiah took his first steps down that path.

Introduction

- [Talk about the new discussion and devotion guide insert in the worship guide beginning this week.]
 - [Discussion guide...]
 - [Devotions...]
- Everyone wants to be successful.
 - We want to excel.
 - We want to land in happy places.
- Of course, this looks different to different people.
 - And this will look different in different seasons of life.
 - But no one wants to...
 - Fail
 - Flop
 - Fizzle
 - Flounder
 - To receive any kind of "F"
- And this is God-given desire. We see this throughout Scripture.
 - In **Proverbs**, we find many instructions for how to succeed.
 - **Proverbs 15:22** | *Plans fail when there is no counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.* (CSB)
 - **Proverbs 16:3** | *Commit your actions to the LORD, and your plans will succeed.* (NLT)
 - **Proverbs 20:18** | *Plans succeed through good counsel; don't go to war without wise advice.* (NLT)
 - **Proverbs 2:7** | *He stores up success for the upright; He is a shield for those who live with integrity.* (CSB)
 - In the Old Testament history books, we read of how God gave success to those who walked with him.
 - Uzziah...
 - **2 Chronicles 26:5** | *He sought God throughout the lifetime of Zechariah, the teacher of the fear of God. During the time that he sought the LORD, God gave him success.* (CSB)
 - We also see promises of success for those follow the commands of Scripture.
 - **Deuteronomy 30:9-10** | *The LORD your God will make you prosper abundantly in all the work of your hands, your offspring, the offspring of your livestock, and the produce of your land. Indeed, the LORD will again delight in your prosperity, as he delighted in that of your fathers, when you obey the LORD your God by keeping his commands and statutes that are written in this book of the law and return to him with all your heart and all your soul.* (CSB)
 - **Psalms 1:1-3** | *How happy is the one who does not walk in the advice of the wicked or stand in the pathway with sinners or sit in the company of mockers! Instead, his delight is in the LORD's instruction, and he meditates on it day and night. He is like a tree planted beside flowing streams that bears its fruit in its season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.* (CSB)
 - God says strength and courage are keys to God-ordained success.
 - **Joshua 1:7** | *Above all, be strong and very courageous to observe carefully the whole instruction my servant Moses commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right or the left, so that you will have success wherever you go.* (CSB)
 - The Bible shows us multiple model prayers asking for success.
 - **Nehemiah 1:11** | *Please, Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant and to that of your servants who delight to revere your name. Give your servant success today, and grant him compassion in the presence of this man. At the time, I was the king's cupbearer.* (CSB)
 - **1 Chronicles 4:10** | *Jabez called out to the God of Israel: "If only you would bless me, extend my border, let your hand be with me, and keep me from harm, so that I will not experience pain." And God granted his request.* (CSB)
 - The Apostle Paul talks about excelling in your work...
 - **1 Corinthians 15:58** | *Therefore, my dear brothers and sisters, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the Lord's work, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.* (CSB)

- In **2 Corinthians** we read admonitions to excel in everything...
 - **2 Corinthians 8:7** | *Now as you excel in everything—in faith, speech, knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love for us—excel also in this act of grace. (CSB)*
 - **2 Corinthians 9:8** | *And God is able to make every grace overflow to you, so that in every way, always having everything you need, you may excel in every good work. (CSB)*
- The book of **Revelation** continually speaks about those who conquer and overcome.
- And we are taught that everything that we do in life should bring glory to God...
 - **1 Corinthians 10:31** | *So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God. (CSB)*
- So, that raises two questions...
 - **How can I be successful in a way that honors the Lord?**
 - **What does this have to do with Jesus?**
- For the second question, just hang with me for a few minutes...
 - We will end with Jesus, who is the highlight of this account.
- The first question brings us to the book of **Nehemiah**.
 - Nehemiah was in a difficult situation.
 - Something important needed changing.
 - He wanted to be a part of the change.
 - He faced impossible odds.
 - Spoiler alert: In the end, with God’s help, he is successful, wildly successful.
 - I want us to track with Nehemiah over the next several weeks...
 - See the obstacles he faced.
 - See the strategies he used.
 - See the victories he won.
 - The book of **Nehemiah** has been a resource for successful leaders for generations.
 - **Pastors, churches, business leaders, education, governmental leaders...**
 - Let’s see how the Lord can use this book to help us chart the best course in our pursuits and endeavors.
- Setting for **Nehemiah**...
 - **Nehemiah** is at the end of the Old Testament, chronologically.
 - The order of Old Testament books is determined primarily by genre.
 - But the last book to happen in history, the last recorded Old Testament event before the birth of Christ, is what we read here in **Nehemiah**.
 - There are about four hundred years between the end of **Nehemiah** and the beginning of **Matthew**.
 - Period of the Maccabees...
 - **The institution of Hanukah...**
 - If you have a “Roman Catholic Bible” there are some extra books that are not in the “Protestant Bible.”
 - The books are called the apocrypha.
 - These are largely not a big deal.
 - These books are not connected to the primary differences between Catholics and protestants.
 - Two of these books, **1 Maccabees** and **2 Maccabees** tell the story of the four-hundred years between **Nehemiah** and **Matthew**.
 - The exile...
 - When Solomon died, there was a split in the nation’s military ranks.
 - Israel became a divided kingdom: Ten tribes migrated to the north and settled in Samaria; the other two went south and settled in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas.
 - The northern tribes during this period of division and civil war are called *Israel* and the southern group, *Judah*.
 - **Just as the lowest ebb in American history was when we took up arms against each other in our Civil War, so it was with this north-south split in Jewish history.**
 - They reached their darkest hour nationally, not when they were attacked from without but when they were attacked from within, and the walls of their spiritual heritage began to crumble.
 - During this time of division, all hell literally broke loose. Chaotic conditions prevailed.
 - God judged Israel when the Assyrians invaded in 722 B.C.
 - Those ten tribes were finished; the Northern Kingdom ceased to exist.
 - But some of the people from the north fled to the south to escape Assyrian control.
 - The land of Judah remained a Jewish nation for more than three hundred years.

— However, in 586 B.C. Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem (and all Judah) and took the people captive.

— This began what is called "the Babylonian Captivity."

— The biblical account in **2 Chronicles 36:18-19** records the end of Judah's history and the beginning of the Babylonian Captivity.

— The Babylonians burned the house of God, and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its fortified buildings with fire, and destroyed all its valuable articles.

— The Jews who survived the battle were bound together, chained like slaves, and sent to Babylon, a trek of more than eight hundred miles.

— **2 Chronicles 36:20-21a** | *He deported those who escaped from the sword to Babylon, and they became servants to him and his sons until the rise of the Persian kingdom. This fulfilled the word of the LORD through Jeremiah... (CSB)*

— Under Nebuchadnezzar and his wicked son, the Jews lived as they had centuries before in Egypt, as slaves to a foreign power.

— Notice in **2 Chronicles 36:20**, the passage says, "*until the rise of the Persian kingdom.*"

— The Persians, under king Cyrus, eventually defeated the Babylonians.

— Under Cyrus, some Jews began to return to Jerusalem.

— **2 Chronicles 36:22** | *In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken through Jeremiah, the LORD roused the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia to issue a proclamation throughout his entire kingdom and also to put it in writing: (CSB)*

— **2 Chronicles 36:23** | *This is what King Cyrus of Persia says: The LORD, the God of the heavens, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and has appointed me to build him a temple at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up, and may the LORD his God be with him. (CSB)*

— The book of **Ezra** is the story of their return.

— First some returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel to rebuild the temple.

— Then some returned under the leadership of Ezra to implement some spiritual reforms.

— But the city was still in terrible condition.

— The people suffered.

— The people were in grave danger.

— Now (a dozen years after Ezra's departure), back to Nehemiah who was living in Susa at the time (**modern day Iran**) ...

— Read **Nehemiah 1:1 - 2:6**

— **1:1**

— Chislew = November/December

— Susa was the king of Persia's winter residence.

— Near modern day Shush in Iran.

— This is a long way from Jerusalem.

— **Today you would have to start in Iran and travel across Iraq, into Saudi Arabia, across Jordan, into Israel and down to Jerusalem.**

— **1:2**

— We see here that Nehemiah had a heart for Jerusalem.

— Having concern, passion for something is the first step to making a difference.

— **1:3**

— Great sadness over Jerusalem...

— **1:6b-7**

— Nehemiah admits that the Jews were to blame for their situation.

— **1:8-9**

— Nehemiah reminds God of his promises to gather his people again one day...

— **1:11**

— Nehemiah prays for success.

— A cupbearer...

— A cupbearer was much more than our modern "butler."

— A position of great responsibility and privilege.

— At each meal, he tested the king's wine to make sure it wasn't poisoned.

- A man who stood that close to the king in public had to be handsome, cultured, knowledgeable in court procedures, and able to converse with the king and advise him if asked.
- Because he had access to the king, the cupbearer was a man of great influence, which he could use for good or for evil.

— **2:1**

- Nisan = March/April
- So, Nehemiah had been praying for four months or so.
 - We will see evidence of this as the account continues.
 - Often people use prayer as an excuse for inaction.
 - Not Nehemiah.
 - Nehemiah prayed through every detail of the project as will be seen in subsequent verses.
- Artaxerxes is the current ruler of Persia.

— **2:3**

- Notice how Nehemiah approached and respected the person in authority.
 - Nehemiah didn't yell, demand, show impatience...
 - Nehemiah trusted God to work through those in authority.
 - God had worked through the godless Cyrus to give the order for the Jews to return.
 - Nehemiah believed God would work through the Artaxerxes.
 - Nehemiah's trust in God was on display.
 - We tip our hand about how much we trust the Lord when we react to adverse situations or adverse situations involving worldly authorities.
 - When you see someone in a panic against authority, you see someone struggling to really trust the Lord.

— **2:6**

- Nehemiah gets a great start.
 - He has the blessing of the king.
 - He has the hand of the Lord.

- How did Nehemiah get such a good start?
 - He knew four things that you and I need to know.

How Success Begins: The Principles

I. You are where you are for a reason.

- Nehemiah must have been frustrated by his position...
 - He wanted to be in Jerusalem helping his people.
 - Two other groups had already been sent to Jerusalem.
 - One led by Zerubbabel and then one by Ezra.
- On closer inspection, we can see that God had worked out a masterful plan to put Nehemiah in the right place.
 - Nehemiah was on the king's wait staff.
 - There he demonstrated his integrity and trustworthiness.
 - He was noticed by Persian officials and gradually promoted to be the cupbearer of the king.
 - As cupbearer, he had a special relationship with the king.
 - Artaxerxes' own father had been murdered by a trusted servant.

— **Lesson: You are where you are for a reason!**

- You are in this church at this time for a reason!
- You are here today for a reason!
- You have the job, friends, family you have for a reason!

- Too often we waste our circumstances.
- Two ways we waste our circumstances...

A. We gripe and complain about our circumstances.

- *I have too many obstacles, limitations, problems...*
- We fail to see that God chose our circumstances and has a way to use them!

B. We wait for a future opportunity.

- *When I...*
 - *Get older...*
 - *Retire...*
 - *Get a job...*
 - *Have children...*
 - *Don't have children...*

- *In a better financial position...*
- *Feel better...*
- *When I move...*
- *When I graduate...*
- *Next...*
 - *Year*
 - *Semester*

- We fail to see that God has something for us to do (to succeed in) right now!
- We gripe and complain about our circumstances.
- We have this attitude that one day, when my circumstances are different, then...
- No! You can begin from right where you are!
- Until you know this, you will forever be stalled out in life.

II. Prayer always precedes progress.

- Look back at the priority of prayer in Nehemiah's life...
 - **Nehemiah 1:4-6a, 11**
 - This is a great model prayer to study.
 - Read this prayer every day for a week.
 - You will begin to see things that will inform and improve your prayer life!
- Nehemiah knew some things about prayer that we must learn...
 - A. How you start is how you will proceed.**
 - If you do not start with prayer, you will not proceed with prayer.
 - If you start like it all depends on you, then that is how you will proceed
 - This is why prayer must be the first step to any truly successful endeavor.
 - B. The power/solution/answer lies with the Lord.**
 - **I call this the Humpty Dumpty principle...**
 - **Rhyme...**
 - **Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall;**
 - **Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;**
 - **And all the king's horses and all the king's men...**
 - **Couldn't put Humpty Dumpty back together again.**
 - **What is missing in this nursery rhyme?**
 - **The king!**
 - **Someone needs to call the king!**
 - The only hope we have is the power of the Lord.
 - Probably the two greatest leaders in the Old Testament...
 - Moses & Nehemiah
 - What is their common trait?
 - They were both always praying!
 - **I announced one time I was going to preach a series of messages on the life of Moses.**
 - **Then I began studying...**
 - **Then I discovered what I had on my hands was about ten sermons all on the same subject: PRAYER!**
 - And we will see through **Nehemiah** that Nehemiah was also a man who constantly prayed!
- Now, before we move on too quickly, let's notice what Nehemiah prayed for because this isn't how we often pray.
 - **First, he prayed for an opportunity.**
 - There is a difference between praying for a miracle and praying for an opportunity.
 - **Miracle prayer: God, rescue and strengthen your people in Jerusalem.**
 - **Opportunity prayer: God, show me how I can get to Jerusalem to serve you by rescuing and strengthening the people.**
 - God certainly does miracles.
 - But too often we sit on our hands waiting for a miracle when God wants to give us an opportunity.
 - **Praying for godly children, good marriage, successful pursuits...**
 - Ask God to give you an opportunity to be the answer to your own prayer.
 - **Second, he prayed through the details.**
 - We read in **2:6** that when Nehemiah was asked how long it would take him to build the walls and restore the city, he didn't hesitate. He had worked out an answer on his knees.
 - We didn't read it, but in **2:7-8** we learn that Nehemiah had worked out a whole task list of what he needed to do and what he needed the king to do.

- Often, people will use prayer as an excuse for inaction.
 - Nehemiah used prayer as an opportunity to prepare for action!
- We often just shoot up a quick “help me” prayer.
 - We should pray through the details...

— God blesses moving targets.

- Nehemiah could have just folded his arms and said, there is nothing I can do.
 - He didn’t.
 - He couldn’t do everything or even most of what he was burdened to do, but he did what he could do.
 - **Nehemiah 2:6-8...**
 - Nehemiah made every plan and preparation he could possibly make.
- Has God put a burden or a dream on your heart?
 - Do what can be done today.
 - Tomorrow, do what can be done tomorrow.

III. Success begins when obedience begins.

- Let me tell you how the story turns out...
 - The wall does get built; revival comes to Jerusalem; Nehemiah’s dreams become a great success!
- Here is the question though, “When did Nehemiah become a success?”
 - We often get success mixed up with the rewards for success...
 - Nehemiah was successful when he was obedient!
- **Our focus needs to be obedience, and letting God give the rewards in due time.**
 - **1 Peter 5:6 | Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, so that he may exalt you at the proper time. (CSB)**

IV. With God, nothing is impossible.

- We’re going to talk about how to overcome obstacles and how to deal with critics a little later in this book.
 - What you need to know now, is obstacles are no hindrance to God.
- Look at the impossibilities before Nehemiah...
 - **He was a slave to the king..**
 - **The King was a wicked man who had earlier forbidden the walls from being built.**
 - **He lived 800 miles from the scene.**
 - **He had no money with which to rebuild the walls.**
 - **He had no expertise in wall building.**
 - **The city of Jerusalem had bitter enemies determined to keep the walls down.**
 - **The people of Jerusalem had no desire to see the walls built.**
 - **Other leaders had largely failed to restore order and safety to the people.**
 - **The city had no resources to build the walls if they wanted to.**
- **People say, I would like to _____, but I can’t because _____.**
 - **That is an insult to God.**
 - If God wants you to do it, you can do it. Nothing is impossible with God!
- The question is not about possibilities, but rather the question is about your faith...
 - Nehemiah had faith and he proved it when he went before the king!

Conclusion

- How is this all about Jesus?
 - Two ways...
 - A. The rebuilding and restoring Jerusalem was part of God’s redemptive plan.**
 - Prior to the rebuilding of Ezra and Nehemiah, there was really no Jerusalem and no temple worship.
 - The events we read about in the gospels couldn’t have happened without the work of Nehemiah.
 - Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem might seem an insignificant part of the history of redemption, but it was a critical part.
 - God has called you to do something that will be a part of his redemptive plan for someone.
 - That is why it is important for you to succeed.
 - What has he called you to do?
 - Ask the Lord to give you the urgency Nehemiah had.
 - Embrace the four truths Nehemiah embraced...
 - I. You are where you are for a reason.
 - II. Prayer always precedes progress.
 - III. Success begins when obedience begins.
 - IV. With God, nothing is impossible.
 - B. The rebuilders of the walls around Jerusalem want to rebuild the broken walls in your life.**

- The God who removed the rubble from the streets of Jerusalem wants to remove the rubble from your life.
- It seemed unlikely and impossible with respect to Jerusalem...
 - Reasons it was unlikely God would intervene...
 - The rubble had been there a very long time.
 - There was no readily apparent way to solve the problem.
 - Jerusalem was a distant concern.
 - And, besides, the rubble was 100% the fault of the Jews who had rebelled against the Lord.
 - So, why would he help?
- But God did rebuild. God did restore.
 - And he wants to do the same today.
 - We will learn how as we walk through this series, but let it begin today...

Discussion Guide

Connect

- If you could visit one city where you have never been, what city would you visit and why?

Discover

- Which statement or experience stood out to you from the worship service?
- Read Esther 4:10-16.
 - Both Esther and Nehemiah seemed to be at the right place at the right time to make an impact for the Kingdom of God. How often do you think God orchestrates these kinds of situations?
 - How can you recognize that God has put you where you are for a special reason?
 - Both Esther and Nehemiah could have come to the conclusion that their situation was hopeless when it was really a time of great opportunity. How does this encourage us when we seem to be in dark times?
- Read Nehemiah 1:4 and Nehemiah 2:4-5.
 - How were Nehemiah's two prayers similar? How were they different?
 - What role should Nehemiah's 1:4 prayer play in our lives? What about his 2:4 prayer?
- Read Nehemiah 1:5-11.
 - Identify at least four categories of things Nehemiah prayed about before he made his request in verse 11.
 - When Nehemiah issued his request (vs. 11), what exactly did he ask for? How does this differ from the way we often pray? What can we learn from Nehemiah's model prayer?
- Read Philippians 4:11-13 and Ephesians 3:20-21.
 - What was Nehemiah's attitude when he faced the impossible task of rebuilding the walls and restoring God's people while serving as a slave to a pagan king and living 800 miles away?
 - What should be our attitude when we face impossible challenges?

Respond

- If Nehemiah would have looked for excuses not to rebuild the walls, what excuses would he have cited? How would you have counselled him to move forward?
- We are all Nehemiah's! God has prepared a task for us to further his Kingdom. What is he calling you to do? How can you use Nehemiah's plan to get started in achieving an impossible task for the Lord?

Bonus for Thinkers

- Why did God allow the Jews to be scattered and Jerusalem to be brought to ruins only to use Ezra and Nehemiah to rebuild the city 70 years later? How does this both warn and encourage Christians today?

References

- **Ephesians 3:20** | *Now to him who is able to do above and beyond all that we ask or think according to the power that works in us— (CSB)*

Notes on Prayer

- I am often asked the question, “How does prayer work?” My answer usually begins with the admission, “**I don’t know how prayer works; I just know that prayer is work! And those who work at prayer discover that prayer works.**”ⁱ
- The Scottish novelist George MacDonald said, “**In whatever man does without God, he must fail miserably, or succeed more miserably.**”ⁱⁱ
- **Too often, we plan our projects and then ask God to bless them; but Nehemiah didn’t make that mistake.** He sat down and wept (Neh. 1:4), knelt down and prayed, and then stood up and worked because he knew he had the blessing of the Lord on what he was doing.ⁱⁱⁱ
- It has well been said that **prayer is not getting man’s will done in heaven but getting God’s will done on earth.**^{iv}
- Nehemiah 1 is a **blend of prayer and action.** All who lead must place a high priority on prayer. Why is prayer so important? Here are the four shortest reasons I know.
 - **Prayer makes me wait.** I cannot pray and work at the same time. I have to wait to act until I finish praying. Prayer forces me to leave the situation with God; it makes me wait.
 - Secondly, **prayer clears my vision.** Southern California often has an overhanging weather problem in the mornings because of its coastal location until the sun “burns through” the morning fog. Prayer does that. When you first face a situation, is it foggy? Prayer will “burn through.” Your vision will clear so you can see through God’s eyes.
 - Thirdly, **prayer quiets my heart.** I cannot worry and pray at the same time. I am doing one or the other. Prayer makes me quiet. It replaces anxiety with a calm spirit. Knees don’t knock when we kneel with them!
 - Fourthly, **prayer activates my faith.** After praying I am more prone to trust God. And how petty and negative and critical I am when I don’t pray! Prayer sets faith on fire.^v
- Our prayers of dependence should be of two types: planned periods of prayer and unplanned, spontaneous prayer. We see both beautifully illustrated for us in the life of Nehemiah, who was one of the Jews in exile and was cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes.^{vi}
 - Both types of prayer were needed in Nehemiah’s situation. Each gave validity to the other. And each reflected Nehemiah’s consciousness of his total dependence on God.^{vii}

Notes on Nehemiah

- **WEeping OVER HUMPTY DUMPTY**^{viii}
 - **This rhyme first appeared in print in 1803. Humpty Dumpty was an egg, which explains why, having fallen off the wall and broken apart, he could not be put together again. However, eggs do not usually sit on walls. So what exactly did this wall-perched egg represent? For the original rhyme maker, Humpty Dumpty was intended to be a symbol of the origin of life and the world of humanity. It was designed to lament the fact that humanity had fallen and was broken, and not even the most powerful people on earth—the king himself, his army, nor his wise men—were able to put the broken pieces of life back together again.**^{ix}
- Nehemiah left a comfortable job as an assistant to the king of Persia in order to help the demoralized people of Jerusalem. His new work involved motivating the people to rebuild the city’s walls in spite of their neighbors’ opposition. Nehemiah’s work was not just with bricks and mortar. He also mediated a financial crisis, initiated religious reforms with the help of Ezra the scribe, and reorganized civic responsibilities in Jerusalem. Nehemiah demonstrated that with faith, prayer, integrity, and God’s help, God’s servants can succeed.^x
- It looks like it’s in the middle of your Old Testament. But **Nehemiah is chronologically at the end of the Old Testament** books recording the history of Israel. There’s a lot more Scripture that follows it: the Wisdom Literature, the Psalms, the prophetic utterances. But in Nehemiah, we get the last glimpse of Old Testament history before the curtain comes down and the silence of four hundred years begins, only to be broken by the angels singing about the birth of the Messiah.^{xi}
- If we look in the book of Ezra, which is essentially a companion piece to Nehemiah, we see that the first wave of exiles had returned under the leadership of Zerubbabel, whose first priority was to rebuild the temple so that worship could recommence. The return had started and the rebuilding had begun, but then disaster had struck—the pressure of surrounding adversaries brought the work to a halt, and it was not to be resumed until about fifteen years later, when Zerubbabel’s temple was finally completed with the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.^{xii}
- However, there is one book, written about 425 B.C., that looms as a classic work on effective leadership; yet it is strangely obscure and virtually unknown to people of today. It was written by a man who was prominent in business and politics in the ancient Middle East. He not only possessed an exceptional personal philosophy of leadership, but he

lived it out as well. In his lifetime, this gentleman rose from total obscurity to national recognition. His book bears his name: Nehemiah.^{xiii}

- There are several benefits of studying this Old Testament book and the man for whom it is named:
 - It **gives us a timeless example of how God can make a *somebody* out of a *nobody*.**
 - It **reveals what God can do with a person who yields his life** to the will of His Father and doesn't have to receive the credit but gives any and all glory to Him.
 - It **removes any excuses** that we may offer regarding our own inadequacies or inability.^{xiv}
- What Nehemiah had to say concerning leadership speaks to the very same issues you and I face today. For example, from his book we learn—
 - how to relate to a touchy boss
 - the balance between faith in God and personal planning
 - how to handle executive discouragement
 - what to do with unwarranted criticism^{xv}
- Nehemiah was the kind of person who cared. He cared about the traditions of the past and the needs of the present. He cared about the hopes for the future. He cared about his heritage, his ancestral city, and the glory of his God. He revealed this caring attitude in four different ways.^{xvi}
 - 1. He **cared enough to ask** (Neh. 1:1–3)^{xvii}
 - 2. He **cared enough to weep** (Neh. 1:4)^{xviii}
 - 3. He **cared enough to pray** (Neh. 1:5–10)^{xix}
 - 4. He **cared enough to volunteer** (Neh. 1:11)^{xx}
- In the Book of Nehemiah, the man who led his people is presented in three roles. Early in the book, he is the *cupbearer* to the king. Midway through the story, he is the *builder* of the wall. In the third part of the book, he is *governor* of the city and surrounding sections of Jerusalem.^{xxi}
- **Principles to Live By**
 - **Principle 1. Like Nehemiah, we must pray out of a heart of deep concern.**^{xxii}
 - **Principle 2. Like Nehemiah, we must make prayer a priority over other needs.**^{xxiii}
 - **Principle 3. Like Nehemiah, we must pray persistently.**^{xxiv}
 - **Principle 4. Like Nehemiah, we must recognize that God is great and awesome.**^{xxv}
 - **Principle 5. Like Nehemiah, we should also remind God of His promises to us.**^{xxvi}
 - **Principle 6. Like Nehemiah, we must acknowledge our unworthiness and sinfulness, our human weaknesses and failings.**^{xxvii}
 - **Principle 7. Like Nehemiah, we must be specific in our prayers if we want to get specific answers.**^{xxviii}
- Sixteenth-century reformer Martin Luther once commented, **“God created the world out of nothing. When I realize that I am nothing, perhaps God can create something out of me, too!”**^{xxix}
- Hebrew name Nehemiah literally means *the consolation of God*. This average, yet consecrated, man will be used by God to live out the meaning of his name. Nehemiah will indeed bring the consolation of God, the relief of God, and the solace and encouragement of God.^{xxx}

Notes on Nehemiah 1:1

- “Chislev” corresponds to what we call November/December, and Artaxerxes began to reign in 465 BC, so “the twentieth year” is 445. Ezra had arrived in Jerusalem in the seventh year, which would be 458 BC (Ezra 7:8). Susa was the king of Persia’s winter residence.^{xxxi}

Notes on Nehemiah 1:2

- Like large doors, **great life-changing events can swing on very small hinges.** It was just another day when Moses went out to care for his sheep, but on that day he heard the Lord’s call and became a prophet (Ex. 3). It was an ordinary day when David was called home from shepherding his flock; but on that day, he was anointed king (1 Sam. 16). It was an ordinary day when Peter, Andrew, James, and John were mending their nets after a night of failure; but that was the day Jesus called them to become fishers of men (Luke 5:1–11). You never know what God has in store, even in a commonplace conversation with a friend or relative; so keep your heart open to God’s providential leading. I attended a birthday party one evening when I was nineteen years old, and a statement made to me there by a friend helped direct my life into the plans God had for me; and I will be forever grateful.^{xxxii}

Notes on Nehemiah 1:3

- Kenyon (*Digging Up*, p. 170) notes: "The effect on Jerusalem was much more disastrous and far-reaching than merely to render the city defenseless.... The whole system of terraces down the (eastern) slope, dependent on retaining walls buttressed in turn by the fill of the next lower terrace, was ultimately dependent on the town wall at the base, forming the lowest and most substantial of the retaining walls."^{xxxiii}

Notes on Nehemiah 1:4

- **If we love God and the advance of His glory, we will feel deep sorrow when the advance of the gospel is halted**, and we will be disciplined and diligent to fast and pray.^{xxxiv}
- Nehemiah is in exile in Persia, but though he is in the world he is not of it. He doesn't mourn like those who have no hope. He mourns because the enemies of God's kingdom have prevailed, and he mourns because he loves God's kingdom more than life.^{xxxv}
- **What makes people laugh or weep is often an indication of character.**^{xxxvi}
- Nehemiah says he prays night and day, and he mentions Kislev in the beginning and Nisan at the end (Neh. 1:1; 2:1). That indicates he is probably praying this prayer night and day for sixteen weeks. Of course, the prayer itself (1:5-11) has to be a summary of that long, long prayer time, but it shows the trajectory of his weeks of prayer.^{xxxvii}
- People cry about a lot of things. They cry at weddings. Parents cry when their children leave home. Sometimes they cry at the birth of their children and grandchildren. They cry at sad movies. Today we're going to look at a man who cried about a broken wall.^{xxxviii}
- Nehemiah was a praying man. This prayer is longer than any other of Nehemiah's prayers in the book. Most of his recorded prayers are short and prayed on-the-spot during some crisis which indicates that he was in a constant attitude of prayer and could pray quickly whenever necessary.^{xxxix}

Notes on Nehemiah 1:5

- **A Serious Leader Goes First to God with the Problem.** In verse 5 we hear Nehemiah say, "I beseech Thee, O Lord God of heaven." He prayed.^{xl}
- This prayer is the **first of twelve instances of prayer** recorded in this book. (See 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 9:5ff; 13:14, 22, 29, 31.) The Book of Nehemiah **opens and closes with prayer.** It is obvious that Nehemiah was a man of faith who depended wholly on the Lord to help him accomplish the work He had called him to do.^{xli}
- To what kind of a God do we pray when we lift our prayers to "the God of heaven"?^{xlii}
 - We pray to a "great and awesome God" (Neh. 1:5, NKJV; and see 4:14, 8:6, and 9:32), who is worthy of our praise and worship. If you are experiencing great affliction (v. 3) and are about to undertake a great work (4:19; 6:3), then you need the great power (1:10), great goodness (9:25, 35), and great mercy (v. 31) of a great God. Is the God you worship big enough to handle the challenges that you face?^{xliii}
 - He is also a God who keeps His Word (1:5).^{xliv}
- First, in verse 5, **Nehemiah spends time just looking at God:** he is heavenly, great, awesome. And while, yes, he keeps his covenant of love, it's with those who love him and obey his commands. Nehemiah begins in a remarkably God-centered way, recognizing God's complete freedom. He actually owes us nothing. Derek Kidner says Nehemiah begins by putting us in our place.^{xlv}
 - That's **not the way we modern people usually pray**, is it? **We start with our own feelings or needs.** Or if we start with God, we want to hear warm, fuzzy reassurances from him, speaking to our hearts. Nehemiah, it seems, starts by getting his heart reoriented. Even the most godly people tend to lose perspective under the stress of a crisis, and Nehemiah doesn't want to let that happen to him.^{xlvi}
- Much of the prayer is a mosaic of earlier biblical phrases which had no doubt been absorbed into liturgical patterns and so were thoroughly familiar to Nehemiah.^{xlvii}
- Now, what was his prayer like? Let me give you the four elements of this prayer.^{xlviii}
 - **A Prayer of Contrition**
 - **A Prayer of Confession**
 - **A Prayer of Confidence**
 - **A Prayer of Commitment**

Notes on Nehemiah 1:6

- After **adoration comes confession** (vv. 6–7). This, too, comes before any petition. In this, Nehemiah is actually following the model that Jesus put into the Lord’s Prayer.^{xlix}
- There may be some confessions we need to make to be brought into close fellowship with God. I have no doubt that numbers of Christians are hungering and thirsting for a personal blessing, and have a great desire to get closer to God. If that is the desire of *your* heart, keep in mind that if there is some obstacle in the way which you can remove, you will not get a blessing until you remove it. We must cooperate with God. If there is any sin in my heart that I am not willing to give up then I need not pray. **You may take a bottle and cork it up tight, and put it under Niagara, and not a drop of that mighty volume of water will get into the bottle.** **If there is any sin in my heart that I am not willing to give up, I need not expect a blessing.** The men who have had power with God in prayer have always begun by confessing their sins.^l
- Nehemiah did not exclude himself or members of his own family in his confession of sins. A true sense of the awesomeness of God reveals the depths of our own sinfulness (Isa 6:1–5; Luke 5:8).^{li}

Notes on Nehemiah 1:7

- Note that Nehemiah used the pronoun “we” and not “they,” identifying himself with the sins of a generation he didn’t even know. It would have been easy to look back and blame his ancestors for the reproach of Jerusalem, but Nehemiah looked within and blamed himself! “We have sinned! We have dealt very corruptly!”^{liii}

Notes on Nehemiah 1:8

- The word *remember* is a key word in this book (Neh. 1:8; 4:14; 5:19; 6:14; 13:14, 22, 29, 31).^{liii}
- Finally, Nehemiah makes his appeal to God (vv. 8–10). He does so based firmly on God’s own Word. He references Deuteronomy, which affirms that God has promised to bring his people back from exile and reconstitute a nation and a house, Jerusalem and the temple, where God’s name will dwell (12:5; 30:4). He alludes to Exodus in verse 10, reminding God how he redeemed his people from Egypt by his mighty hand. God has gone to a lot of trouble already to create this people, and now they need him to fulfill his promises in order to continue as a people.^{liv}

Notes on Nehemiah 1:11

- **When Nehemiah asks God to “Give . . . success,” he uses the same term found in Psalm 1:3: “Whatever he does prospers.” Nehemiah has evidently been meditating on the Torah of Yahweh day and night, and he is praying for God to do for him exactly what the Scriptures promise** He will.^{lv}
- A cupbearer was much more than our modern “butler” (see Gen. 40). It was a position of great responsibility and privilege. At each meal, he tested the king’s wine to make sure it wasn’t poisoned. A man who stood that close to the king in public had to be handsome, cultured, knowledgeable in court procedures, and able to converse with the king and advise him if asked (see 41:1–13). Because he had access to the king, the cupbearer was a man of great influence, which he could use for good or for evil.^{lvi}
- **God put Nehemiah in Susa just as He had put Esther there a generation before, and just as He had put Joseph in Egypt and Daniel in Babylon.** When God wants to accomplish a work, He always prepares His workers and puts them in the right places at the right time.^{lvii}
- The king’s **cupbearer would have to sacrifice the comfort and security of the palace for the rigors and dangers of life in a ruined city.** Luxury would be replaced by ruins, and prestige by ridicule and slander. Instead of sharing the king’s bounties, Nehemiah would personally pay for the upkeep of scores of people who would eat at his table. He would leave behind the ease of the palace and take up the toils of encouraging a beaten people and finishing an almost impossible task. And with the help of God, *he did it!* In fifty-two days, the walls were rebuilt, the gates were restored, and the people were rejoicing! And it all started with a man who cared.^{lviii}
- Nehemiah leaps into action and prays for four months. In our short-attention-span world, it does not look like it, but Nehemiah is actually hard at work. We would focus on the presenting problem—the walls are broken, the gates are burned, the remnant’s at risk—and come up with a plan of action, address the circumstance, and fix the problem.^{lix}

Notes on Nehemiah 2:1

- The events began back in 1:1 in Chislev, November/December, and now we pick the story up in Nisan, March/April. Nehemiah has been praying for four months or so, and from the way things play out in chapter 2 we will see that he has also been making preparations.^{lx}

- **Nehemiah first answers his vocation not with action, but, as is right, with prayer—and prayer lasting some four months at that!** This period of waiting upon God is not to be regarded as a sign of weakness on his part. From the later narrative we know that he was a dynamic man of action. But if a true vocation has been received to serve God, such a testing time of waiting is often to be expected; prayer during such a period will be an indication of whether the call has been genuine and whether commitment to it is unwavering.^{lxi}

Notes on Nehemiah 2:4

- The kind of prayer that we saw in 1:5-11 will give rise to the kind of prayer that we see here in 2:4.^{lxii}

Notes on Nehemiah 2:8

- At several points in Ezra we read of the hand of God on him (Ezra 7:6,9,28; 8:18,22,31), and this is also true of Nehemiah at the end of Nehemiah 2:8.^{lxiii}

Notes on Nehemiah 2:11

- Consider these facts: Nehemiah can give the king an amount of time that the journey and rebuilding will take (v. 6); he knows exactly what kind of authorization he needs west of the Euphrates (v. 7); and he knows exactly what materials he will need for temple, wall, city, and his own dwelling (v. 8). From these facts it appears that Nehemiah has been praying *and planning*. Nehemiah has been asking the Lord to “have compassion on him in the presence of this man” (1:11), and so when the opportunity arises before Artaxerxes he is prepared to make his requests and unfold his plan.^{lxiv}

Historical Overview of Nehemiah’s Time (Swindoll)

- Jewish history begins with **Abraham at approximately 2000 B.C.** But it was not until one thousand years later that Israel took on world significance as a nation under Saul, David, and Solomon. In the successive reigns of these three kings, Israel's flag flew proudly over the nation. Israel was finally recognized as a major military power under King David's forty-year term of office.
- David advanced the cause of Israel to remarkable proportions. Upon his death, David turned his throne over to his son Solomon. And if you know your Bible, you know that by the last part of his life Solomon had compromised so obviously with the world that God judged him.
 - So the Lord said to Solomon, "Because you have done this, and you have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant. Nevertheless I will not do it in your days for the sake of your father David, but I will tear it out of the hand of your son." (1 Kings II:11)
- **When Solomon died, there was a split in the nation's military ranks. Israel became a divided kingdom: Ten tribes migrated to the north and settled in Samaria; the other two went south and settled in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas. The northern tribes during this period of division and civil war are called *Israel* and the southern group, *Judah*.**
- Just as the lowest ebb in American history was when we took up arms against each other in our Civil War, so it was with this north-south split in Jewish history. They reached their darkest hour nationally, not when they were attacked from without but when they were attacked from within, and the walls of their spiritual heritage began to crumble. During this time of division, all hell literally broke loose. Chaotic conditions prevailed.
- **God judged Israel when the Assyrians invaded in 722 B.C. Those ten tribes were finished; the Northern Kingdom ceased to exist.** But some of the people from the north fled to the south to escape Assyrian control.
- The land of **Judah remained a Jewish nation for more than three hundred years.** However, in **586 B.C. Babylon's King Nebuchadnezzar invaded Jerusalem (and all Judah) and took the people captive. This began what is called "the Babylonian Captivity."** The biblical account in 2 Chronicles **36:18-19** records the end of Judah's history and the beginning of the Babylonian Captivity.
- And all the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the Lord, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he [Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon] brought them all to Babylon. Then they burned the house of God, and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its fortified buildings with fire, and destroyed all its valuable articles.
- They burned the house of God, the temple, and they broke down the protective wall around the city. (Take special note of the words "house of God" and "the wall," for we want to deal with what they mean a bit later.) All the fortified buildings were destroyed with fire as were the valuable articles in the temple.

- After the Babylonian takeover, Jerusalem was totally leveled! The magnificent place where God's glory was once displayed was destroyed. The wall lay in ruins, and wild dogs fed upon any edible remains. The armies of Babylon marched back home with all the treasures of Judah.
 - Psalm 137 was written during this dismal time. The psalmist cried out, "How can we sing the Lords song in a foreign land?" (v. 4). Babylon had come and taken away the Israeli captives. Their song was ended. Second Chronicles 36:20 adds a final word:
- And those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia.
- That's important. Those Jews who lived through this siege of Jerusalem were bound together, chained like slaves, and sent to Babylon, a trek of more than eight hundred miles. And under Nebuchadnezzar and his wicked son, the Jews lived as they had centuries before in Egypt, as slaves to a foreign power.
- But God didn't forget them. He had a purpose and a plan. Notice how verse 20 concludes: ". . . until the rule of the kingdom of Persia." Here's what happened. There was a king named Cyrus who ruled Persia and another king, Darius, who ruled the neighboring Medes. The two nations were allies, but since the Persian force was the larger of the two, the two countries were often called simply "the kingdom of Persia." The Medes and the Persians invaded Babylon and overthrew it, forcing the Babylonian empire to surrender. What happened then? Second Chronicles 36:22 tells us: "Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia—in order to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah—the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia." Was Cyrus a believer? No. On the surface he may have sounded like one, but he was not. He was, however, concerned for the welfare of the Jews. God is not limited to working with His people only. He works in the lives and minds of unbelievers whenever He chooses. He moves the hearts of kings from one plan to another. And this is what He did with Cyrus. Gods ultimate plan was to get the Jews back into their land.
- Cyrus sent a proclamation in writing throughout his kingdom, which said:
- Thus says Cyrus king of Persia, "The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has appointed me to build Him a house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever there is among you of all His people, may the Lord his God be with him, and let him go up!"
- He was saying, "Let Gods people go back—back to that city that was destroyed seventy years ago." This period of history has been called by some Bible historians "The Second Exodus." And so the Jews went back to Jerusalem under the leadership of three men.
- "Company A" left first with Zerubbabel as their commanding officer. About eighty years later, another group, "Company B," left Babylon with Ezra as commander-in-chief. By now, Cyrus had died and Media-Persia was led by Artaxerxes. Then, thirteen years later, Nehemiah led "Company C" back to the destroyed city.
- Remember I asked you to take special note of the terms "the house of God" and "the wall"? Here is the reason for that. I wanted you to remember "the house of God" because that is the main subject of the Book of Ezra and "the wall" of Jerusalem because that is the heart of the Book of Nehemiah. The Book of Ezra (which comes just before Nehemiah in the Old Testament), records how the house of God was rebuilt in the city of Jerusalem. But the temple was without protection for ninety years until God led Nehemiah to provide the leadership necessary to build a wall, and it is his account of that project that we call the Book of Nehemiah.^{lxv}
- Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 444 B.C., about 13 years after Ezra had returned there.^{lxvi}

Timeline for Ezra and Nehemiah (Getz)

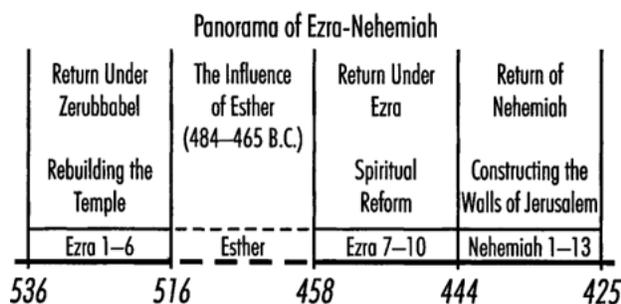


Figure 1-2

- ⁱ Stephen Davey, *Nehemiah*, ed. Lalanne Barber, Wisdom Commentary Series (Apex, NC: Charity House Publishers, 2012), 27.
- ⁱⁱ Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 18.
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- ^{xviii} Warren W. Wiersbe, *Be Determined*, “Be” Commentary Series (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 16.
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- ^{xli vii} H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, vol. 16, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1985), 172.
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