

## Disrepair is met with Prayer –Nehemiah 1:1-11

### Scripture Reading:

### Introduction

This morning we are embarking on a journey through the Old Testament book of Nehemiah

Most people, if they are aware of Nehemiah at all, know that Nehemiah was the man who directed the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem which was without a doubt an amazing feat

But the book of Nehemiah is about so much more than just the rebuilding of a wall; it also concerns the restoration of a people who were in need of ongoing reform so that God could continue to bless them

Nehemiah is a companion to and continuation of the book of Ezra that appears just before it in our Bible and the two books are joined together into one in the Hebrew Bible with Nehemiah being considered the second part of Ezra

While these two books certainly contain a single narrative there are good reasons to separate them not the least being the opening statement “The words of Nehemiah, the son of Hacaliah” and the use of first-person language throughout the book which strongly suggest that Nehemiah should rightly be considered the author of the book that bears his name

In order for us to properly place it on the timeline of history we need to know that the last of the Minor Prophets in our canon of the Old Testament, Malachi, lived and ministered during Nehemiah’s day

Both Ezra and Nehemiah are set during the reign of King Artaxerxes I of Persia

who reigned between 464 and 423 B.C. and, as a side note, Queen Esther of the biblical book of the same name, was Artaxerxes’ stepmother

So, despite its rather early placement in pages of the Bible, Nehemiah and Ezra tell us what life was like in Israel shortly before and during the 400 years of silence between the Old and New Testaments

As we begin our study, we need to understand that Nehemiah was written primarily to the nation of Israel and some of what we find in it – such as promises made to Israel under the old covenant – won’t directly apply to the church today

But, like all Scripture, Nehemiah was certainly written and preserved for the benefit and edification of Christ-followers in all times and places as we know from 2Timothy 3:16 that says “all Scripture” is God-breathed for our benefit

So as we proceed with our study we will be looking for timeless truths, or principles, that still apply today such as what we can learn about God’s character and our relationship to God that results from it

We will also look for exemplary attitudes and actions that we would do well to emulate as we navigate through our lives in a world with concerns and challenges that are not altogether unlike those Nehemiah faced

Nehemiah is, after all, a book that is filled with practical examples of godly character and conduct such as the priority of prayer and obedience as well as lessons about leadership such as planning and carrying out a task

All of which makes this ancient book well worth our time and energy as we seek to understand and apply its lessons

We always say it’s necessary to look at the context of any passage we study and that includes the cultural context

So, let’s begin by looking at the setting that existed during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah

### **I. The Setting**

In **2Chronicles 36:15-21** we read the following regarding the kingdom of Judah:

*The Lord, the God of their fathers, sent persistently to them by his messengers, because he had compassion on his people and on his dwelling place. But they kept mocking the messengers of God, despising his words and scoffing at his prophets, until the wrath of the Lord rose against his people, until there was no remedy.*

*Therefore he brought up against them the king of the Chaldeans, who killed their young men with the sword in the house of their sanctuary and had no compassion on young man or virgin, old man or aged. He gave them all into his hand. And*

*all the vessels 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 princes, all these he brought to Babylon. And they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem and burned all its palaces with fire and destroyed all its precious vessels. He took into exile in Babylon those who had escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and to his sons until the establishment of the kingdom of Persia, to fulfill the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah, until the land had enjoyed its Sabbaths. All the days that it lay desolate it kept Sabbath, to fulfill seventy years.*

Because the people persisted in disobeying God and refused to listen to the prophets God sent to warn them of impending judgment, God eventually brought the Babylonians under King Nebuchadnezzar to attack and destroy the temple and city wall and a whole lot more in Jerusalem

Many people were killed and many others were taken into exile in Babylon

These actions were the consequence of one of the possible outcomes foretold by God when he made his covenant with Israel

Covenants typically had a section that contained a list of blessings that would be realized if the conditions of the covenant were met and a list of curses that would result if they were not

We find the blessings listed in **Deuteronomy 28:1-14** and the curses listed in **Deuteronomy 28:15-68**

Notice the formula God used in **Deuteronomy 28:15** before the list of curses:

*But if you will not obey the voice of the Lord your God or be careful to do all his commandments and his statutes that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.*

Then we come to **Deuteronomy 29:24-28** after God again describes what will happen if the Israelites disobey him –

*...all the nations will say, 'Why has the Lord done thus to this land? What caused the heat of this great anger?' Then people will say, 'It is because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord, the God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them out of the land of Egypt, and went and served other gods and worshiped them, gods whom they had not known and whom he had not allotted to them. Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against this land, bringing upon it all the curses written in this book, and the Lord uprooted them from their land in anger and fury and great wrath, and cast them into another land, as they are this day.'*

But God knew his children so he made provision for the scenario where the curses have come upon Israel and they have been dispersed among the nations but come to repentance

And in **Deuteronomy 30:1-10** God promised to bring Israel back to the land to bless them if they would turn back to him in faithful obedience – he even promised to change their hearts so that they would truly love him and turn back to him

So we understand the exile was the covenant consequence of Israel's disobedience

Then, after 70 years had passed, Cyrus the Persian overthrew Babylon and issued the decree that the Jews could return to their homeland and begin to rebuild the temple – we read about that in **Ezra 1:1-4**

That was the first return in 538 B.C. and there was a second return in 457 BC that is recounted in Ezra 7-10

The temple was rebuilt by fits and starts in the intervening period between the first and second returns and Ezra who is described as a "scribe skilled in the Law of Moses" (**Ezra 7:6**) was sent along on the second return to teach the people

The book of Ezra ends and 13 years pass as the narrative jumps ahead from the winter of 458 BC to the spring of 445 BC as the book of Nehemiah opens in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes I

Nehemiah first appears in Susa which was the winter palace of the kings of Persia located about 225 miles east of Babylon in the region of modern-day western Iran about 50 miles east of the Tigris River

And, as we discover in the last verse of chapter 1 [**Neh. 1:11b**], Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer – a position of immense responsibility, prestige, and access that will play a significant role in the narrative that follows

That's a general sketch of the background of the book of Nehemiah and I recommend you read through the book of Ezra on your own and perhaps look back at Deuteronomy 28 and 30 this week to familiarize yourself further with it

But, having gotten a feel for the setting, let's turn our attention now to the situation that confronts Nehemiah

## **II. The Situation**

As we've just seen, Nehemiah was cupbearer to King Artaxerxes and being a cupbearer was a particularly honorable office because it was the cupbearer's responsibility to select and taste the king's wine in his presence to make certain it wasn't poisoned

That might seem like a pretty crummy job to us but it was typically entrusted to young men or boys of unquestionable loyalty and trustworthiness

One of the things ancient rulers feared most was that their food or drink would be poisoned in the commission of a coup

There actually was an attempted assassination using poison made against the last of the Persian kings before Persia fell to Alexander the Great – years after Nehemiah

The attempt failed when the king, Darius III, got wind of the plot and made the assassin drink the poison himself – a lucky break for Darius' cupbearer, I suppose

But since the office of cupbearer was so important it's noteworthy that King Artaxerxes was able to put his complete confidence and trust in the Jewish Nehemiah

First, it says something significant about the nature of the Jewish response to the exile as it seems they didn't respond to their situation by being unruly and bent on making life as difficult as possible for their Persian masters

Rather, they it seems they were generally accepting of the exile as God's will for them for that season and law-abiding under it much as we see with the first-century church behaving under Roman rule [**Romans 13:1**]

Second, it tells us a great deal about the character and integrity of Nehemiah himself

As we proceed through our study we are going to see a glimpse of Christ-likeness in Nehemiah as godliness is demonstrated in a Persian court

Looking at verse 2 [**Neh. 1:2**] we see a contingent of Judeans have come from Judah to Susa and Nehemiah asked about the situation of his fellow Jews back home in Jerusalem

The status of Jerusalem was of particular interest to Nehemiah because the city has long been the focal point for Israelite hopes for prosperity and well-being

And since Nehemiah knew that they were the expected recipients of God's blessings associated with the restoration he would be able to judge the progress of the restoration by learning about their situation

So Nehemiah was understandably and rightly dismayed when he heard the report of the broken down wall and burned gates

The walls of Jerusalem had been destroyed 141 years ago and, as we read in **Ezra 4:23**, King Artaxerxes had ordered the reconstruction of them halted

Which really only makes sense from the king's perspective because Judah was a subjugated state and walls of defense and the security they bring would be one of the last things he would want to see built

But Nehemiah was a man of compassion and his reflexive reaction to hearing the news was to weep and mourn over the state of his kinsmen and the shame they were experiencing as a city vulnerable to any and all attackers

He wept because a good wall around the city was the principle element in a city's defense and a city without a good wall surrounding it was unthinkable in the ancient Near East

And Nehemiah knew that the vulnerability and shame of his people was connected to their disobedience as we read in **Ezra 9:7**

So Nehemiah wept and mourned at hearing the news but that wasn't all he did

Because Nehemiah was as much a man of action as he was a man of compassion he also began working on the problem and Nehemiah's solution was to fast and pray "*before the God of heaven*" as we read in **Nehemiah 1:4**

### **III. Nehemiah's Solution**

And the remainder of chapter 1 is taken up with Nehemiah's prayer

Look again with me at Nehemiah 1:4 because we could easily miss something very important about Nehemiah's prayer

Notice the text shows Nehemiah saying "*I **continued** fasting and praying before the God of heaven*"

That word, "continued," is very important but we can easily overlook its significance because of our unfamiliarity with the Hebrew calendar

Notice in 1:1 [**Neh. 1:1**] the narrative and the report Nehemiah received were in the month of Chislev which ran from mid-November to mid-December on our calendar

Now look ahead to 2:1 [**Neh. 2:1**] which picks up the narrative at its next key point in the action and it says takes place in Nisan of the same "twentieth year of King Artaxerxes"

Nisan ran from mid-March to mid-April on our calendar which means that, before he did anything else, Nehemiah spent between three and five months fasting and praying about the situation seeking God's insight and waiting on his timing

We have the tendency to approach prayer with impatience and we seem to believe that it's essential that God answer us quickly, even immediately

And when he doesn't, we tend to do one of two things – we either give up on prayer or we engage in all manner of accusations and complaints against God and the futility of making requests of him

And then we go ahead and take whatever steps we think are necessary concerning whatever we were praying about

But God's timetable is different than ours because he views things from the perspective of eternity

And God's timing is perfect – never early and never late – and all things work out according to God's execution of his perfect decree that is predicated on his love for us and he desire for the very best for his people

In contrast, we see that Nehemiah prayed for between three and five months before he did anything else but he wasn't simply idling in neutral and doing nothing – Nehemiah was quite active in finding the solution to the problem before him

Nehemiah's action was praying – praying was his solution to the problem until God told him otherwise

Look with me at the first part of verse 11 [Neh. 1:11a] which contains the closing words to Nehemiah's prayer

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

What I want you to see is that Nehemiah's request sought an immediate response just like our prayers often do

He asked God to give him success "today"

But since we know he prayed for between 3 and 5 months that means he prayed the same prayer asking for success "today" for between 90 and 150 days

And since verse 8 [**Neh. 1:8**] says he prayed "day and night" he might well have made that same request for an instantaneous response from God as many as 300 times before God granted his request

Talk about patience and persistence in prayer!

We'll be looking at the specific aspects of Nehemiah's prayer in just a moment but just consider the difference it might make if we were to model Nehemiah's approach to prayer and not be so quick to give up on it thinking, "Well, that didn't work so I'd better either do something on my own or admit it's not God's will and move on"...

In the time we have left this morning let's take a look at the elements of Nehemiah's prayer to see what we might learn from it

Remember that Nehemiah likely prayed some version of this prayer for a prolonged period of time and what we have recorded for us may not be a rote prayer that Nehemiah prayed in this exact form, word for word, each time he prayed. It more likely contains the general form and tenor of the prayers he prayed each day and, as such, shows us the pattern and basis for the prayer of petition that Nehemiah used – we are going to break it down into four elements

**First**, we see in verses 5 and 6 [**Neh. 5-6a**] that Nehemiah began his prayer with words of **adoration** toward God

In other words, Nehemiah started by praising God and telling God about God

This one very basic practice helped Nehemiah put everything in perspective

Taking time to recognize and verbalize God's greatness and his awesomeness makes whatever problems we are facing shrink by comparison

Things may be falling apart all around us and our problems and concerns may appear as large as mountains before us but God remains the same and God is still in charge

He is, as Nehemiah says, the "Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God" who loves us and keeps his promises to us

The things we are facing don't even present a hint of a challenge to our powerful, loving, and dependable God

And Nehemiah begins his prayer with adoration to let God know that he is aware of and relying on God's character

Then he asks God to hear his prayer

The second element is found in the latter part of verse 6 and verse 7 [**Neh. 6b-7**] as Nehemiah turns to **confession** of sins

Notice that Nehemiah makes open confession, without making excuses for it, on behalf of "the people of Israel," "we," and even "I"

Nehemiah was far from the city of Jerusalem but he so identified with the problem that he included himself in the cause

And the root cause behind the state of the wall and the shame of the people was the sin of the people

And the particular sin that Nehemiah singled out was disobedience

The people possessed and knew the Law but didn't keep the "*commandments, the statutes, and the rules*" that God commanded through Moses

The story is told about how, when *The Times* of London invited several authors at the turn of the twentieth century to respond to the question, "What's wrong with the world today?," G.K. Chesterton responded simply in the form of a letter:

Dear Sirs,

I am.

Sincerely Yours,

G.K. Chesterton

Because Nehemiah knew the terms of the covenant he knew their current, continued state was the result of the continued sin of God's people

We often lament and even rail against the state of the world today but how often do we look in the mirror to recognize that we might well be the problem that keeps God from changing the world for the better?

Might it be the sins of God's people and particularly the sin of disobedience in sharing the gospel and making disciples of all people that keeps the world as it is? – It bears consideration doesn't it?

Nehemiah understood where the problem lay so he began his prayer with adoration of God and then contrasted that with national and personal confession

Next we see that the **third** element of Nehemiah's prayer was **repentance**

That only makes sense doesn't it?

If sin is the problem then repentance – the turning away from sin and toward righteousness – is the cure

So in verses 8-10 Nehemiah talked to God about God's covenant nature and the promises he had made to his people

Nehemiah recognized the state they were in was their own fault based on the blessings and curses clause of the covenant between God and Israel so he wasted no time in admitting it

Then he went to Deuteronomy 30 to remind God of his promise of restoration upon repentance and he basically tells God, "You can't abandon your people if they repent without going back on your word"

And since he knew the people had for the most part been repentant under the ministry of Ezra he was letting God know he expected the covenant to be upheld

Repentance is an often missing or under-practiced element in the modern church today as we can be far more concerned with and emphasize forgiveness more than repentance

We want the blessings without the pain of turning our backs on our sin but there can be no balm of forgiveness without the burn of admittance and repentance

The **fourth** and final element of Nehemiah's prayer is found in verse 11 and I call it "**the big ask**"

Thus far, Nehemiah has praised God for who he is, confessed his sins and the sins of God's people, and reminded God of his covenant promise that is based on repentance

Now, in verse 11, [**Neh. 1:11a**], Nehemiah acknowledges God's sovereignty and asks for success in the situation and mercy in the sight of the king for the sake of those who are faithful

I want you to notice that Nehemiah didn't ask God for anything that God hadn't already promised – but he did ask

In addition to repentance, obedience, and trusting in God's promises, the process of restoration involves reconnecting in relationship and a vital part of that is communicating with God in prayer

God wants his people to trust him submissively but he also wants them to talk directly to him and to ask him about what they are trusting him for

He also wants them to think and even dream creatively about how their God-given abilities and opportunities might be utilized and leveraged to produce results that line up with God's stated purposes about which his people are praying

## **Conclusion**

During the months that Nehemiah was praying I doubt that he had any idea how God was going to work this situation out and he didn't pray for a specific plan to be carried out

It's also unlikely that he had any inkling of the role that he would play and that he would be making a trip to Jerusalem to oversee the re-construction of the wall

After all, he was a servant to the Persian king and he had no autonomy and a crucial role to fulfill before the king

In fact, one hint or word of dissatisfaction with his situation could well have meant imprisonment or death for him

We do get the sense from verse 11 that Nehemiah believed God could use him in some way but that any assistance he might give was completely dependent on God

And so Nehemiah prayed with discipline, patience, and perseverance as he carried out his daily duties never forgetting the plight of his kinsmen in Jerusalem

Nehemiah was longing and praying for the restoration that God had promised to Israel that was based primarily on their faith in God that was to be expressed mainly through obedience to the Mosaic Law and shown through the material prosperity and peace that God would give them in return

Things are quite a bit different for us today as the concern for Christ-followers isn't limited to any cultural or ethnic group or any particular geographic location but has to do with how God is working in and through his church throughout the world and faith in God that is expressed mainly through a personal relationship with Jesus

Therefore, our emphasis today must be on the spread of the gospel and the production of the character of Christ in our lives and the lives of others than on material blessings and comfort

However, one thing hasn't changed; the priority and primacy of prayer must be the same today as it was for Nehemiah. Nehemiah could have easily put his trust and hope in his influential position with Artaxerxes to get the wall of Jerusalem rebuilt

And it's no less tempting for Christians today to put their trust in the power of political forces or money or technology or any number of other things to bring God's purposes to fruition

But Nehemiah recognized it was God alone who was responsible and able to bring about all God intended for his people. Believers today need to follow his example and develop a deep conviction that only God himself can accomplish his will in the world

And when God's people develop that perspective, it will become natural and instinctive for them to place prayer at the top of their agenda

Praying as Nehemiah did prepares the way for individual believers to see more clearly how they can be directly involved in God's work of fulfilling God's purposes in the world

And that understanding puts them in a position where they can make specific requests in complete confidence and trust so that they might be fruitful in the work God gives them as we see in **John 15:16**

Nehemiah knew that prayer was primary so he made it his work and we would do well to do likewise

Let's pray