

Nehemiah 1:1-11 (ESV)

¹ The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.

Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the capital,
² that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. ³ And they said to me, "The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire."

⁴ As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

⁵ And I said,

"O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments,

⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned.

⁷ We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

⁸ Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,

⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though you are dispersed be under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.'

¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.

¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man."

Now I was cupbearer to the king.

Nehemiah is a book with insights for us into restoration, renewal, leadership, and God's faithfulness.

Read Nehemiah 1:1-11
(Questions for later personal reflection)

1. How many insights can you get into Nehemiah and his character from this chapter?
2. What are the dimensions of the situation that has come to his attention? And how has it affected him?
3. What has gone into this prayer he makes? Why does he address the Lord as “God of heaven”? In what ways is the word “servant” significant?

Background notes: Vs. 1 Susa, the Capital of Persia was located in Iran, about 160 miles East of the Tigris River. As Cup bearer, Nehemiah had a trusted and influential access to the King and probably filled other offices as well.

Vs.2 The Exile came about as the Babylonian King, Nebuchadnezzar, overwhelmed the little Kingdom of Judah and in a series of deportations between 597 and 586 B.C. carried off its treasure, its leading citizens and crafts-people, finally destroying Solomon's Temple and the city of Jerusalem. There was much destruction of surrounding cities as well, many fled to Egypt and elsewhere, and only the “poor of the land” were left. (II Kings 23). For seventy years, through a series of Babylonian monarchs, they remained scattered, some given the tasks of rebuilding cities in Mesopotamia. Life was not harsh, there was some continuity of elders and prophets and priests, there was fertile land to farm. Some would rise to prominence like Daniel. With the fall of the Neo-Babylonian empire to Cyrus II the Great of Persia in 538 B.C. came the opportunity for a remnant to return. (2 Chronicles 36:22-23).

The first return permitted by Royal Edict was led by Sheshbazzar. 42,360 people and 7,337 servants made the journey back. (Ezra 2:64) Work was begun on

rebuilding the Temple by Jeshua and Zerubbabel, but it would take 23 years, in the face of significant opposition (Ezra 4:4-5ff), with the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah to complete that task. (Ezra 6:14).

Between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7 is a gap of about 60 years, of which we know little of Jewish life. Meanwhile Persian monarchs fought wars in Egypt and the Greek city states. Esther became Xerxes' queen and providentially delivered many thousands of Jews who had remained in Persian provinces from Haman's genocidal plot.

Then Ezra, a scholar and priest, led a second return of about 1,500 men that was authorized by Artaxerxes I in 458 B.C. (Ezra 7-8). He came to Jerusalem with the intention to teach and restore worship and Mosaic law. He arrived to find Jerusalem still remained mostly in ruins and Mosaic law neglected, while comfortable homes had been established, and there was much interaction and intermarriage with surrounding pagan peoples. (Ezra 9:1-3).

Nehemiah enters the story in 444 B.C. now 14 years later. What we have is material from his personal Journal, which was originally included in the book of Ezra.