

**A PERSONAL
VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENTARY**

NEHEMIAH

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Commentators note that Nehemiah showed up on the scene in Jerusalem some 12-15 years after events recorded in the book of Ezra. Guzik offers this summary: "Out of the some two or three million Jews deported from the land, only 50,000 decided to return to the Promised Land. That's only something like 2%! But they did return, and in the days of Ezra, they rebuilt the temple and laid a spiritual foundation for Israel once again. The Book of Nehemiah begins 15 years after the Book of Ezra ends; almost 100 years after the first captives came back to the Promised Land; and some 150 years after the city of Jerusalem was destroyed."

Nehemiah 1:1 ¶ The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace,

The first words in verse one seem to identify this book as a record of Nehemiah's personal journal. The month Chisleu corresponds to our November / December. The 20th year seems to be a reference to the reign of Artaxerxes taken in context with verse 1 of chapter 2.

Nehemiah 2:1 "And it came to pass in the month Nisan, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes the king...."

Nehemiah notes that he was in the palace at Shushan serving as the king's cupbearer as noted in the last verse of this chapter. JFB identifies Shushan as "the capital of ancient Susiana, east of the Tigris, a province of Persia. From the time of Cyrus it was the favorite winter residence of the Persian kings."

Nehemiah 1:2 That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and *certain* men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.

Nehemiah 1:3 And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province *are* in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also *is* broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.

Nehemiah notes that his brother Hanani came to him with some other men of Judah and, at his request, gave him a report of what was happening in Jerusalem. They reported that the surviving remnant were suffering and enduring mistreatment from the surrounding people. The wall of Jerusalem was broken down and the gates had been destroyed by fire; they were just as Nebuchadnezzar's army had left them when they destroyed the city.

Guzik makes this observation that helps explain Nehemiah's reaction: "An unwalled city was always a backwater town, with nothing valuable in it. If there were anything of value in an unwalled city, it could be stolen away easily because there was no defense to stop it. Those living in an unwalled city lived in constant stress and tension; they never knew when they might be attacked and brutalized."

Verse 2 of chapter 7 indicates that Hanani was truly Nehemiah's brother.

Nehemiah 7:1–2 “Now it came to pass, when the wall was built, and I had set up the doors, and the porters and the singers and the Levites were appointed, That I gave my brother Hanani, and Hananiah the ruler of the palace, charge over Jerusalem: for he was a faithful man, and feared God above many.”

Nehemiah 1:4 And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned *certain* days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven,

Nehemiah 1:5 ¶ And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments:

When Nehemiah heard their report he wept in misery over the plight of his people and the city. Though he had remained in Babylon in service to the king, he loved his people and his country. He mourned with fasting and prayer before God for several days.

In his prayer Nehemiah addressed the LORD with great reverence and humility. He acknowledged Him as the LORD, YHWH, the self-existent, eternal God (from the Hebrew). To call Him “great and terrible” was in acknowledgement of His mighty power and that He deserved to be revered (from Hebrew for “terrible”). He also acknowledged the LORD as the God that kept His covenants (promises) and showed mercy to those that love Him and try to keep His commandments.

That is a statement of two very precious truths about our God. He keeps His promises and shows mercy to those that truly love Him as evidenced by their desire to obey Him. Only because God is merciful, His willingness to spare us the penalty of our sin through the sacrifice of His Son, can we hope for a future in His presence. Because He is a covenant-keeping God, that hope is more than just a desire, it is a confident expectation.

Nehemiah 1:6 Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father’s house have sinned.

Nehemiah 1:7 We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses.

Nehemiah 1:8 Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, *If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations:*

Nehemiah 1:9 But *if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there.*

Nehemiah 1:10 Now these *are* thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand.

Nehemiah pleads for the LORD to pay attention to the prayer of one who is His servant; he desires to do God's will. He is not referencing a one-time petition; he notes that he had persisted in prayer day and night over some period of time. As he prays, he acknowledges his own sin along with the sins of his people.

Nehemiah admits that they have not kept God's commandments or the laws He had established to govern their lives as revealed and recorded by Moses. He reminds God (as if He needed reminding) of His words to Moses as recorded in Deuteronomy.

*Deuteronomy 30:1–5 “And it shall come to pass, when all these things are come upon thee, the blessing and the curse, which I have set before thee, and thou shalt call them to mind among all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath driven thee, **And shalt return unto the LORD thy God, and shalt obey his voice according to all that I command thee** this day, thou and thy children, with all thine heart, and with all thy soul; That then the LORD thy God will turn thy captivity, and have compassion upon thee, and will return and gather thee from all the nations, whither the LORD thy God hath scattered thee. If any of thine be driven out unto the outmost parts of heaven, from thence will the LORD thy God gather thee, and from thence will he fetch thee: And the LORD thy God will bring thee into the land which thy fathers possessed, and thou shalt possess it; and he will do thee good, and multiply thee above thy fathers.”*

Other scripture identifies Jerusalem as the place upon which God had placed His name.

1 Kings 11:36 “...that David my servant may have a light alway before me in Jerusalem, the city which I have chosen me to put my name there.”

Nehemiah then “reminds” God that these people are the ones that He had redeemed, the very same people for whom he was praying.

Deuteronomy 9:29 “Yet they are thy people and thine inheritance, which thou broughtest out by thy mighty power and by thy stretched out arm.”

Nehemiah 1:11 O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.

Nehemiah pleads with the LORD to hear his prayer and the prayers of His other servants among the people who desire to revere and honor His name. In other words, he knew that others were beseeching the LORD in prayer in the same way as he was. He then prayed for God's mercy as he determined to seek the king's help (as will be shown in the next chapter).

Nehemiah was close to the king as his cupbearer. He was personally responsible for serving the king's wine and ensuring that no one had tampered with it.