

The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah

Lesson 7: Nehemiah's Prayer and Commission -- Nehemiah 1:1-2:20

Picture a man with one of the most enviable jobs in the ancient world. Nehemiah is cupbearer to Artaxerxes, king of the Persian Empire, the largest the world had yet seen. He lives in Susa, in the winter palace, surrounded by marble columns, glazed-brick lions, and the smell of imported spices. His station is one of trust and comfort. He tastes the king's wine to guard against poison, which means he has the king's ear and the king's confidence. By any measure, Nehemiah has arrived. And then, on an ordinary winter day, a few travelers come up from Judah, and one of them is his own brother. Nehemiah asks a simple question about home, and the answer breaks him.

The remnant in Jerusalem, they tell him, are in great trouble and shame. The wall is broken down, and the gates are burned with fire. We need to feel the weight of that. A city without a wall in that world was a city without protection, without dignity, without a future. It lay open to every raider and every insult. The wall had been down for over a century, and Nehemiah, hundreds of miles away in his comfortable post, suddenly cannot bear it. He does not shrug and say it is somebody else's problem. He sits down and weeps. Then he fasts and prays, not for a day, but for days. Some burdens are too heavy to set down quickly.

What follows is one of the great models of prayer in all of Scripture. Nehemiah does not march in with demands. He approaches the great and awesome God, confesses the sins of his people and his own family, and then reminds God of His own promises. He prays Scripture back to God. He pleads the covenant. And he ends with a strikingly practical petition: grant me mercy in the sight of this man. He is already planning. He prays as one who fully intends to do something. That is the heart of this lesson. Nehemiah shows us a faith that trusts God completely and then rolls up its sleeves and gets to work.

We will watch him stand before the king with a heavy heart he is afraid to show, breathe a single silent arrow prayer in the half-second before he answers, and then receive far more than he asked. We will ride with him by night around the ruined wall, counting the broken stones. And we will hear him rally a discouraged people with four words that still stir the soul: let us rise up and build. Along the way the mockers will sneer, as mockers always do. The question this lesson presses on each of us is simple and searching. When God lays a burden on your heart, do you weep, pray, plan, and build? Or do you only sigh and look away?

Group Discussion: Think of a time your church or family faced something broken down, a need that had been neglected for so long that everyone had quietly accepted it. What happens to a group of believers when they stop expecting things to change? As you share, talk about what it might take for a discouraged people to hear and answer the call, let us rise up and build.

Personal Reflection: Nehemiah let himself feel the weight of a problem he could easily have ignored from the comfort of the palace. Is there a broken-down place, in someone's life, in your congregation, in your own walk, that you have grown numb to? Spend a moment letting God soften your heart toward it, and ask Him whether He is calling you not just to grieve it but to do something about it.

Read Nehemiah 1:1–2:20

Study Questions

1. Nehemiah's prayer in chapter 1 moves through clear stages: he praises God's greatness and covenant faithfulness, he confesses sin (including his own), he appeals to God's promises, and he makes a specific request (Nehemiah 1:5–11). What does this pattern teach us about how God's people ought to approach Him in prayer?
2. When was the last time a need for God's people moved you to actual tears and fasting, and not just a passing concern? What does your honest answer reveal about the state of your heart toward the things that grieve God?
3. Nehemiah confesses, both I and my father's house have sinned (Nehemiah 1:6), identifying himself with the sins of his nation though he was not personally responsible for the exile. How does honest, owned confession differ from the kind of excuse-making and blame-shifting that comes naturally to us, and why does God call us to it (1 John 1:8–9)?
4. Nehemiah waited and prayed for about four months before the moment came to speak to the king (compare Nehemiah 1:1 and 2:1). Where in your life right now is God asking you to keep praying and waiting rather than forcing the door open?

5. Before answering the king, Nehemiah prayed to the God of heaven (Nehemiah 2:4), a silent prayer breathed in an instant even while his lips were already speaking to Artaxerxes. What does this brief arrow prayer, set beside his long prayer in chapter 1, teach us about a life of continual dependence on God (1 Thessalonians 5:17)?
6. Nehemiah went out by night and inspected the broken wall personally before he said a word to anyone about rebuilding it (Nehemiah 2:11–16). What burden or task is God laying on you that calls for honest, unhurried examination before you act or speak?
7. Nehemiah repeatedly credits the good hand of my God upon me for the king's favor and his success (Nehemiah 2:8, 2:18). How do we hold together God's providential hand at work and Nehemiah's own careful planning, courage, and labor, without falling into either fatalism or self-reliance?
8. Sanballat and Tobiah laughed Nehemiah to scorn and despised the work before it even began (Nehemiah 2:19). When you sense God calling you to something good, how do you tend to respond to mockery, opposition, or the fear of looking foolish?
9. Nehemiah answered the mockers, The God of heaven, he will prosper us; therefore we his servants will arise and build (Nehemiah 2:20). His confidence rested wholly on God, yet it expressed itself in the resolve to rise and build with his own hands. Trace this same union of prayerful dependence and faithful, courageous action across Scripture (Philippians 2:12–13; 1 Corinthians 15:58; Proverbs 16:3). How does this guard us from the error that God's sovereignty cancels human responsibility on one side, and the error of trusting our own strength on the other, and where does all such God-given work finally point us in Christ?

10. Name one specific way the Lord Jesus is forming you through this lesson. Is He calling you to feel a burden you have ignored, to pray with deeper honesty and dependence, to plan and labor courageously where you have only sighed, or to rise and build despite the mockers? What is the one next step?

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Daniel 9:3–19, another exile pleading God's covenant mercy and confessing the nation's sin in prayer; Ezra 9:5–15, Ezra's parallel prayer of confession and identification with his people; Philippians 2:12–13, working out salvation while God works in us, the union of dependence and action; James 2:14–26, faith that is alive shows itself in works; Colossians 3:23–24, doing our work heartily as unto the Lord

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