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Nehemiah 1

(2021)

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Although I believe my aim is pure and God's will perfect this document is still the product of a human man, as to such I neither claim perfect knowledge or perfect understanding.

Nehemiah 1.

INTRODUCTION TO THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

In 445 B.C. the Persian King Artaxerxes gave Nehemiah, an Israelite who was a trusted official written permission to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. Nehemiah went with the third wave of returning Jewish exiles. There was intense opposition from other people in the land, and disunity within Jerusalem. Despite the strong opposition, Nehemiah rebuilt the walls and overcame many threats. He served twice as governor and did what God had put in his heart (Neh. 2:12) (Neh. 7:5), and found that the joy of the LORD was his strength (Neh. 8:10). For an overview of the entire book see the title: "Overview of the Book of Nehemiah" (at the beginning of the index to Nehemiah).

NEHEMIAH 1:1

- **Nehemiah 1:1:** The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel,

The words of Nehemiah mean the following is a record of Nehemiah's acts, deeds and affairs. Though little is known of his genealogy, it is highly likely that he was a descendant of the tribe of Judah and the royal family of David. This Nehemiah is to be distinguished from the Nehemiah mentioned in (Neh. 3:16), and the Nehemiah mentioned in the list of those who accompanied Zerubbabel in the first group of returning exiles. (Ezra 2:2) (Neh. 7:7).

Hachaliah: nothing is known of Hachaliah, Nehemiah father.

The month Chisleu: is a winter month and ninth month of the Jewish calendar, corresponding to the close of our November and the larger part of December.

In the twentieth year: not the twentieth year of Nehemiah's age, but in the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes Longimanus (Neh. 1:1), which began B.C. 465 and ended B.C. 425.

The completion of the Temple: The date for the completion of the Temple was 516 B.C., while Nehemiah's arrival was 445 B.C., which clearly shows that the returned exiles had made very little progress during that long period. The many reforms that Ezra had to initiate fourteen years prior to Nehemiah show that the enthusiasm of the returned exiles had waned, and that they had had settled down.

I was in Susa (also called Shushan) the citadel (the palace): this is one of the most ancient cities in the world. It was a city in Persia and capital of Susiana; where, after the capture of the Babylonian empire, a great palace was built by Darius Hystaspis, the ruins of which are still seen. The following verses show that it was the favourite royal seat of the kings and the principal residence of the Persian court.

- In those days King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Susa, the citadel. (Esther 1:2)
- And when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the citadel, both great and small, a feast lasting for seven days in the court of the garden of the king's palace. (Esther 1:5)
- And I saw in the vision; and when I saw, I was in Susa the citadel, which is in the province of Elam. And I saw in the vision, and I was at the Ulai canal. (Dan. 8:2)

There is no mention of the name of king (Artaxerxes Longimanus), this maybe because Nehemiah was so familiar with the king's greatness that he took it for granted that readers would know who he had in mind. The king trusted Nehemiah as his faithful servant while he filled his post in Shushan, however, Nehemiah noble position did not diminish his undying love for Israel, which has always been a national characteristic of the Jewish people. The following verses show that the condition of the returned exiles at this time was one of great affliction and reproach.

- Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision." (Neh. 2:17).
- (And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?" (Neh. 4:2).
- Hear, O our God, for we are despised. Turn back their taunt on their own heads and give them up to be plundered in a land where they are captives. (Neh. 4:4).

NEHEMIAH 1:2

- **Nehemiah 1:2:** 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.

Hanani: is a shortened form of Hanania, and means "God has been gracious." He is mentioned again in the following verse.

- I gave my brother Hanani and Hananiah the governor of the castle charge over Jerusalem, for he was a more faithful and God-fearing man than many. (**Neh. 7:2**).

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One of my brothers: (v2) one of my brothers: during these ancient times it was common for Jews to call near kinsman brothers, which means, the statement, "one of my brothers" could refer to a kinsman or mean that Hanani was literally the biological brother of Nehemiah.

Hanani and certain men: (v2) brings news to Nehemiah of the Jews affliction and misery and gives him a clear understanding of the great afflicted state of Jerusalem.

Jew who escaped: (v2) refers to the Jews that had returned to Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile, which ended around 538 BC.

NEHEMIAH 1:3

- **Nehemiah 1:3:** 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."

More than 90 years had passed since Cyrus' had written a decree allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem in 538 BC. Following are four things that may have led to the failure of the returned exiles to rebuild the city and the wall during this time.

1. Fear of enemies (Ezra 4:1–4) Neh. 4–6).
2. Artaxerxes' denial of permission earlier in his reign. (Ezra 4:7–23).
3. In the same way that the Jews had wrong priorities concerning the rebuilding of the temple, they may have had wrong priorities concerning the rebuilding of the city and the wall. (Hag 1).

Some suppose that the breaking down of the walls and burning of the gates, mentioned in this verse were recent events, but it is more likely that the rebuilding had been stopped by those who had authority over the land spoken of in the following verses.

- Be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. (Ezra 4:12).
- We make known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and its walls finished, you will then have no possession in the province Beyond the River.” (Ezra 4:16).

It is most probable that the building work had not been resumed from this time on and that their lack of enthusiasm remained, especially since communication between Shushan and Jerusalem would not have been so infrequent that the news now brought to Nehemiah would not have been known. However, having the news brought to him by such close kinsmen, brought him to tears and great sorrow over the dismal news and set in his heart a determination to do something.

NEHEMIAH 1:4

- **Nehemiah 1:4:** 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.

Nehemiah’s mourning most likely went on for four months (until the events of the following chapter Neh. 2). Nehemiah prepares himself by fasting and prayer. Even though he was one of the kings’ favourite servants, and as such would have had a life of relative ease and security, the rebuilding of Jerusalem was far more important to him than the ease and security he had in the city of Shushan. He willingly sacrificed his chances of a great career to take on a life of affliction and reproach. He chose to suffer with the people of God than to enjoy pleasures of the world for a season.

NEHEMIAH’S PRAYER

NEHEMIAH 1:5-7

- **Nehemiah 1:5-7:** 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.

This is the first of 12 prayers recorded in this book.

Much of Nehemiah’s prayer is taken from the Old Testament and is full of biblical allusions and quotations, which shows that Nehemiah had read, meditated and absorbed God’s word. His prayer is founded upon the fact that God is merciful and a covenant keeping God, because God has bound Himself by a promise and to a covenant concerning the Jews. This is no short prayer, but a continual cry night and day.

Being fully aware of the terrible unfaithfulness that had marked and still continued to mark, the whole nation, Nehemiah humbles himself and confesses their sins before the LORD, for it is pointless to ask God to help us to repair any damage if we do not firstly acknowledge the sins that have brought such damage upon us. Many have prayed for the relief of distresses, which have come to nothing because unlike Nehemiah they did not acknowledge sin.

The expression, "God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him" implies that God would forever honour the covenant He made with His people because of His loyal and faithful love, while the phrase, "the ones who love him and for those who keep His commands," is a reference to the following verses:

- But showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Exod. 20:6).
- But showing steadfast love to thousands of those who love me and keep my commandments. (Deut. 5:10).

Daniel uses this same expression to begin his prayer concerning the seventy years of captivity predicted by Jeremiah (Dan 9:4).

- I prayed to the LORD my God and made confession, saying, "O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments. (Dan. 9:4).

Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Nehemiah: (v6) Nehemiah here uses this expression to indicate that he desperately and urgently wanted God to answer his prayer. Eyes open in reference to God listening to prayer is also found in the following verse.

- Let your eyes be open to the plea of your servant and to the plea of your people Israel, giving ear to them whenever they call to you. (1 Kings 8:52).

Your servant: (v6) this expression shows Nehemiah's humbleness before the LORD and that he sees his purpose in life is to serve the LORD.

NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER CONTINUED

NEHEMIAH 1:8-11

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- **Nehemiah 1:8-11:** 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 your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them 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.

The place (v9) refers to the city of Jerusalem, which is spoken of in the following verses:

- But you shall seek the place that the LORD your God will choose out of all your tribes to put his name and make his habitation there. There you shall go. (Deut. 12:5).
- Then to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell there, there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, and all your finest vow offerings that you vow to the LORD. (Deut. 12:11).
- However, I will not tear away all the kingdom, but I will give one tribe to your son, for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem that I have chosen. (1 Kings 11:13).

Your people who you have redeemed: (v10) refers to God setting Israel free from bondage and slavery of Egypt.

By your strong hand: (v10) alludes to the following verse:

- But Moses implored the LORD his God and said, "O LORD, why does your wrath burn hot against your people, whom you have brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? (Exod. 32:11).

And the following two verses where the same expression is used in reference to God's redemption of the nation Israel from Egypt.

- But it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Deut. 7:8)
- And I prayed to the LORD, 'O Lord GOD, do not destroy your people and your heritage, whom you have redeemed through your greatness, whom you have brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand. (Deut. 9:26)

As the king's cupbearer, Nehemiah would ordinarily use a title of honour and respect for his king, but here in verse eleven he uses this phrase "this man" (v11) perhaps to emphasize that the powerful Persian king was but a mere man in comparison to Nehemiah's God. All of Nehemiah's prayer has been for the people, it is only in one little sentence at the end of his prayer that he asks the LORD to give him success, but the success he wants is that those at Jerusalem would be delivered from their affliction. Some say that there is no definite request in this prayer, because Nehemiah never says exactly what he so deeply desires, but this is a gross error, for he makes it very clear that he desires God would favour His people and give him and by extension them success. It should also be remembered that Nehemiah is praying night and day, and that this is only one of his prayers.

In the sight of this man: (v11) refers to Artaxerxes the Persian king. However powerful Artaxerxes was, he was but a man. This phrase expresses the thought that the king was a subject of God, and that his heart was in the hand of God to mould as He would.

Now I was cupbearer to the king (Artaxerxes): (v11) when Nehemiah was a youth he was promoted to the office of cup-bearer which was a position of great honour and advantage in the Persian court. Holding such a highly important position during this ancient era shows that Nehemiah was a person of impeccable character with excellent administrative skills. As the king's cupbearer he would have had frequent access to the king's royal presence and opportunities to speak to him, and seek his favour.

CONCLUSION

Nehemiah was a godly man, and had such great authority with the king that he greatly favoured Nehemiah and gave him letters to accomplish all the things he had prayed for and desired. In all ages and generations God sets up worthy persons for the prospering of His people and His church as he raised up various excellent men for the preservation of His people Israel after their return from Babylon. Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah.

Zerubbabel: was the captain of the first wave, to bring them home to Jerusalem and saw that the temple was built.

Ezra: led the second wave and reformed Israel's customs, traditions and religion.

Nehemiah: returned in the third wave and built up the walls, delivered the people from oppression and provided that the law of God was carried out among them.

As the founder of Bible House of Grace, I would like to thank the many Christian scholars, commentators and theologians who have gone before me, and the many today, who have freely made available their works to enhance the knowledge of the Bible to all people worldwide. It is only with the help of these faithful writers that much of Bible House of Grace exists as it does today.
