

Nehemiah | Introduction and Chapter One

Introduction

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king. As the king's cupbearer, Nehemiah was responsible for tasting the wine before serving it to the king to be sure it was not poisoned. This meant Nehemiah had frequent access to the king. As the king's cupbearer, Nehemiah was responsible for tasting the wine before serving it to the king to be sure it was not poisoned. Nehemiah therefore had frequent access to the king. Some Bible commentators mention that Nehemiah was probably responsible for more than wine tasting including managing the king's schedule and the activities and needs of the household.

This important position in the king's court gives us insight into Nehemiah's life and character. The king would select for that position a man who was wise and discreet, and consistently honest and trustworthy. Something to keep in mind when you read the early verses of chapter two. Nehemiah's position reveals much about his intellectual capabilities, his emotional maturity, and his spiritual status.

We know nothing about Nehemiah's childhood or family background. His father's name was Hacaliah (1:1) and he had a brother named Hanani (1:2). He was probably born in Persia sometime during or soon after Zerubbabel's ministry in Jerusalem. Given his reaction to the news from Jerusalem we ascertain that he was raised in a practicing Jewish home. He responds with distress to the news and reveals a love for the Jewish nation and Jerusalem. His response reminds us of Jesus' lament for Jerusalem in Matthew 23:37.

Nehemiah probably wrote the book soon after all its events were completed about 430 b.c. or shortly thereafter.

Chapter One

Nehemiah was in a regional province of Persia called Susiana. He was staying in the king's winter palace in Shushan. While there he received troubling news from a group of men who had returned from Jerusalem. One of them was his brother Hanani. The news was that the remnant of the Jews were in great distress and reproach from enemies, and the walls of Jerusalem were broken down with no gates.

This report instantly depressed Nehemiah. Jerusalem and the residents were defenseless against enemy attacks. His reaction to this news shows that he was a man of spiritual character. Even though he had not experienced their hardships, he identified with them. As far as we know Nehemiah had not yet visited Jerusalem. His response was to deny himself the luxuries of the palace in order to fast, mourn, and pray.

Nehemiah was facing a situation he knew he could not solve by himself. He also knew that with God all things are possible. He had heard the stories of Zerubbabel and Ezra returning to Jerusalem under God's providence and protection. He knew the story of Esther and God's preservation of the Jews against a powerful enemy.

His first response is to pray. Nehemiah began his prayer by acknowledging that fact. "God of heaven" refers to His sovereignty, and the words "great and awesome" are mindful of His power and majesty. Only God could answer Nehemiah's prayer.

He confessed the sins of the people as his own as the Prophet Daniel had prayed almost 100 years before (Da 9:4-6) and as Ezra had prayed (Ezr 9:6-15), Nehemiah acknowledged that he shared in Israel's disobedience to God's laws. He reminds God that He had told Moses that if the nation Israel was unfaithful, He would disperse them from their homeland (Lev 26:27-28,33; Dt 28:64), but that if they obeyed Him then those who were exiled would be regathered to Jerusalem (Dt 30:1-5).

Pray

In chapter one we see a man of amazing compassion, emotional depth, and great love for God and the people of God. This should remind of the life of the Lord Jesus while he was here on earth. Just as Nehemiah was distressed over the condition of the Jews and Jerusalem so to is the Lord Jesus for us (Mark 10:45; John 3:17; 6:38).

Humanly speaking only one person could make it possible for Nehemiah to help the Jews in Jerusalem—the king he served. Artaxerxes had issued a decree to stop the construction work in Jerusalem, and he was the only one who could reverse that order. That is why Nehemiah prayed specifically, give your servant success today by granting him favor (lit., "compassion") in the presence of this man.

Nehemiah took the first, best course of action by fasting and praying to God for an answer. No doubt he saw that the position he was in within the king's court gave him access to the means to do something. But he also knew the king's directive against the rebuilding in Jerusalem. What else could he do but pray?