

A Study of the Book of Nehemiah

Crying Out to God in the Midst of Adversity (*Nehemiah 1:4-11*)

"If the God of providence is calling someone to a particular ministry, He will so overrule that person's situation that he or she will be able to move into that ministry." ~ J. I. Packer

I. Overview

Faced with the horrific news concerning Jerusalem and his countrymen, Nehemiah is overcome with grief. Through the tears, Nehemiah turns to the Lord. This opening prayer of this Old Testament book lays out one of the finest models of prayers in the entire Bible. This cupbearer from Susa provides key principles in how to approach God—principles that are extremely applicable even for today!

II. The Prayer of Nehemiah (1:4-11)

A. Nehemiah acknowledges God's greatness (vv. 4-5)

v. 4 - Rather than looking to his own talents, abilities, and political contacts to resolve the problem back in Jerusalem, Nehemiah turns to the Lord. Instead of embracing his high position in the Persian courts, Nehemiah humbly bows in prayer—prayer which lasts approximately four months (2:1)!

Most scholars believe Nehemiah mourned because of the human needs back in Jerusalem. However, J. I. Packer suggests that the primary reason for Nehemiah's angst is due to the disarray of Jerusalem (11:18). God had chosen this Holy City as "the dwelling place for His name" (1:9) (see *A Passion for Faithfulness*, 60).

v. 5 - Nehemiah's prayer begins and ends with the word "please". This interjection is an emphatic term for entreaty. As observed in the notes of the NET Bible, "This term is normally reserved for pleas for mercy from God in life-and-death situations (2 Kings 20:3; Jonah 1:14; 4:2) and for forgiveness of heinous sins that would result or have resulted in severe judgment from God (Exod 32:31; Dan 9:4)."

Observe what Nehemiah states concerning the Lord in verse 5:

"heaven" - This term speaks to the Lord's transcendence. He is not confined to the Temple in Jerusalem; but He also knows and sees all—even those living in Susa! This declaration is echoed in the prayer Jesus taught to His disciples (see Matt 6:9).

Even in the midst of the tragic news, Nehemiah displays a proper perspective. One commentator aptly writes that Nehemiah “reflects on the character of God—not only for its encouraging aspect of staunchness and love, but first of all for the majesty which puts man, whether friend or foe, in his place” (Kidner, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 79).

B. Nehemiah appeals to God’s forgiveness (vv. 6-7)

vv. 6-7 - “may your ear be attentive and your eyes be open to hear” - Is Nehemiah assuming that the Lord may not be aware of the situation? If not, then why did Nehemiah include these words in his prayer?

When Nehemiah reflects on the character of God and recognizes his own plight, he then confesses his own sin and the sins of Israel. Afflictions often can assist one’s memory—including the recollection of sins that have been relegated to the recesses of one’s mind. Similar to Daniel in Daniel 9:4-6, both men “did not rationalize away their involvement in Israel’s corporate failure as a nation” (Getz, *When Your Goals Seem Out of Reach*, 18).

Interestingly, Nehemiah does not blame the Jewish people in Judea. “There are no discordant notes of blame, only the resonant notes of compassion” (Swindoll, *Hand Me Another Brick*, 13).

C. Nehemiah rehearses God’s promises (vv. 8-10)

vv. 8-9 - Nehemiah appeals to the same words Moses used in pleading for Israel on Mount Sinai (see Deut 9:29).

Nehemiah carefully recites Scripture in his prayer. As observed by Ivan French in *Principles and Practice of Prayer*: “A common study of the Bible is essential for the nurture of the prayer life, and a consistent prayer life is essential for an understanding of the Bible” (pp. 24-25).

In order for the Lord to answer Nehemiah’s prayer, the Persian king, Artaxerxes, would need to overturn his previous decree (Ezra 4:21), which had prohibited any further work to be done in the Holy City.

v. 10 - This Persian cupbearer reminds the Lord of all that He has invested in His people. Ultimately, the Lord’s reputation is at stake. This point will be reiterated in verse 11 with the reference to the Lord’s name.

D. Nehemiah petitions God's assistance (v. 11)

v. 11 - The humility in which Nehemiah approaches the Lord can be seen once again in the use of the term "servant" in this verse. Throughout this brief prayer, Nehemiah uses the words "servant" or "servants" eight times!

Not only does Nehemiah pray for his people and the situation back in Jerusalem, he also expresses his willingness to serve the Lord in resolving this problem. "Nehemiah was not naive. He knew what lay ahead of him should he leave the king's court and go to Jerusalem. Not only would he give up a choice position with security and safety, but his very life was at stake" (Getz, 18-19).

"this man" - Rather than see this title as a disdain for a pagan king, "this man" builds awareness and anticipation as the king's identity is revealed in 2:1 (see H. G. M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, 174).

"cup bearer" - According to biblical expert in the Persian era, Edwin Yamauchi, "Nehemiah would have been a man of great influence as one with the closest access to the king, and one who could well determine who got to see the king. Above all, Nehemiah would have enjoyed the unreserved confidence of the king" (*Persia and the Bible*, 259-260).

III. Intersect

- A. To be used by the Lord, we must set aside sin, apathy, and sluggishness.

Romans 12:1-2 -

In *The Lord's Prayer*, Puritan writer, Thomas Watson, pens these priceless words: "Let life and money go, welcome Christ. When God's glory weighs heaviest in the balance, and we willing to suffer the loss of all rather than God's name should suffer, we do, in a high degree, hallow God's name" (p. 45).

- B. Even when we are walking in godliness and seeking to serve the Lord, He may have us wait.

Isaiah 62:6-7 -

- C. We must remember that the Lord wishes for us to do His will more than we do!

Jeremiah 29:10-14 -

For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

Is there a task or situation in your life that you need to ask for God's guidance and help? Spend some time in prayer this week seeking the Lord's assistance. You may want to use this prayer written by Max Lucado:

“Father, we are prone to worry and to complain about our problems. We struggle to solve things on our own, instead of depending on you. Forgive us, Father, for living as though we don't need you. Teach us to turn to you first, to face every challenge in your strength, and to give you praise for what you accomplish through us.”

Also, if you desire a great overview of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, we would encourage you to watch the short video produced by the Bible Project. This free video is worth your time! To view this video, please visit the following website:

<https://thebibleproject.com/explore/ezra-nehemiah/>

Why should we pray? Prayer makes us wait, clears our vision, quiets our hearts, and activates our faith.
~ C. Swindoll