

Broken and Restored

An Exposition of Nehemiah^a

1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah^b.

Now it happened in the month Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol^c, ² that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped *and* had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem^d. ³ They said to me, “The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire^e.”

^a Introduction: One well-used resource in this study was *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, by F. Charles Fensham (Part of *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, © 1982, Eerdmans). Comments labeled “Fensham” refer to this work.

^b 1:1 **The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.** The captivity of Judah began around 586 B.C. when the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar systematically deported the citizens of Judah and Jerusalem deemed most useful, leaving only a tiny population behind. They demolished Solomon’s temple, suspending for many years the system of worship instituted by God Himself for Israel.

These events began around 445 B.C., long after Judah’s captives were permitted to return from exile. Nehemiah means “the Lord comforts.” His name is significant because it demonstrates that even after nearly one and a half centuries people still carried “theophoric” names—names that contained part of the proper name of the God of Israel. The people had not been absorbed in the pagan cultures of Babylon and Persia.

^c 1:1 **Now it happened in the month Chislev, *in* the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol.** Chislev on the Hebrew falls around our months of November or December. The twentieth year would have been the twentieth year of the reign of Artaxerxes rather than the twentieth year of captivity.

Around 539 B.C., Cyrus the Persian, who conquered a weakened Babylon, issued a decree to rebuild the Jerusalem temple. The Hebrew scribe Ezra eventually led a contingent in the reconstruction of the Jerusalem temple 458 B.C. Thirteen years later (in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I), Nehemiah began his time as governor and overseer of the rebuilding of the city walls in Jerusalem.

Susa was home to the kings of Persia. The modern city is Shush, Iran is located on the ruins of Susa.

^d 1:2 **that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped *and* had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem.** While we do not know for sure that Hanani was Nehemiah’s physical brother, the way he is singled out from Nehemiah’s other Hebrew brothers may point to that fact.

Even though the Jews were free to return to Judah, their return is called an “escape” here. The word can simply point to people who have been delivered. Ezra’s use of the same word in prayer indicates that the deliverance came from God (**emphasis added**):

O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an **escaped remnant**, as *it is* this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this. Ezra 9:15

^e 1:3 **They said to me, “The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.”** The question of what things were like at home would have been the logical topic of conversation. Without organized government and without protective city walls, the

⁴ When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven^a. ⁵ I said, “I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments^b, ⁶ let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father’s house have sinned^c. ⁷ We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses^d. ⁸ Remember the word which 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 those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell^e.’ ¹⁰ They are Your servants and Your people whom You

returnees’ attempts to get reestablished in Judah were futile. They were very vulnerable to the many who opposed a return to worship and life in Jerusalem.

^a 1:4 **When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.** Nehemiah was understandably grieved. Even though he was not yet born the captivity began, he possessed the Scriptures as they had been preserved by men like Ezra, and understood the promises and prophecies God had spoken there.

^b 1:5 **I said, “I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments.** Possessing the Scriptures also gave Nehemiah examples of people who communed with God in prayer and the call to do that himself. He knew all about leaders like Daniel, who endured very real persecution when Babylon ruled.

Notice how Nehemiah’s prayer began. His adoration included mention of God’s transcendence (He is in heaven, ruling over all), His big-ness and His faithfulness to His promises. Then adoration turned to confession.

^c 1:6 **let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father’s house have sinned.** Here we must address the practice of corporate confession. Under what circumstances is it legitimate to confess the sins of other people or to have a representative confess your sins? While it is true that others cannot find forgiveness on the merits of your prayers, there is a place for corporate confession. Like Isaiah (Isaiah 6), Nehemiah recognized his personal guilt as part of a nation of sinners. God had been very patient with him, but he evidently felt conviction that he was prospering in a place he did not belong.

^d 1:7 **We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.** Nehemiah somehow knew the Scriptures well and therefore had no trouble naming the sins the people had committed. This sin was he reason for the captivity and the same sins apparently continued in Babylon and Persia.

^e 1:8-9 **Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples; but *if* you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.** Nehemiah’s requests centered on his desire that God keep His word and bring back His people from the captivity they indirectly chose. This claimed the promise of restoration recorded by Moses:

redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand^a. ¹¹ O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man^b.”

Now I was the cupbearer to the king^{c, d}

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So it shall be when all of these things have come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call *them* to mind in all nations where the LORD your God has banished you, and you return to the LORD your God and obey Him with all your heart and soul according to all that I command you today, you and your sons, then the LORD your God will restore you from captivity, and have compassion on you, and will gather you again from all the peoples where the LORD your God has scattered you. If your outcasts are at the ends of the earth, from there the LORD your God will gather you, and from there He will bring you back. Deuteronomy 30:1-4

^a 1:10 **They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.** The redemption of Israel not only happened physically when the Lord brought down the Egyptians, it also pointed forward to the redemption of the Church when Jesus died.

^b 1:11 **O Lord, I beseech You, may Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name, and make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man.”** Moving from the general to the specific, Nehemiah asked God to move the heart of the king. He wanted to find favor so he could leave his post and start serving in a faraway land.

^c 1:11 **Now I was the cupbearer to the king.** This footnote brings a lot of color to this account. A Jew had become again the most trusted servant to the king (see Daniel). The cupbearer’s role was to insure the safety of the king’s food, protecting him from overthrow by poison.

^d 1:1-11 Nehemiah is a model in Scripture of a life bathed in prayer. It is worth noting what brought him to this place. Here are some simple prerequisites for approaching God in prayer:

1. You have to sense the need.
2. You have to know the one to whom you speak.
3. You have to know the weakness of your own position.
4. You have to know what is yours to claim.
5. You have to be specific.