

Lesson 1
The Prayer of Nehemiah
(Nehemiah 1:1-11)

I. Scripture Reading

Nehemiah 1:1-11

II. Synopsis

1. The Disaster in Jerusalem (Neh 1:1-4)

In the Book of Nehemiah, we often see Nehemiah expressing himself in the first person; several passages in the Book of Nehemiah are considered part of the memoir written by Nehemiah at an earlier time. In Hebrew, “Nehemiah” means “the Lord is comfort” or “the Lord has

mercy”. Since “Nehemiah” was a common name at the time appearing also in Ezra 2:2, and Nehemiah 3:16 and 7:7, the book begins with “The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah” (1:1a), in order to distinguish this Nehemiah from the others.

The beginning Scriptures tell us that the incidents recorded in this book started in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes (446 B.C.) in the month of Chislev—the 9th month of the Jewish calendar, sometime between November and December. Nehemiah was serving in the palace in Susa, far away from Jerusalem. When he heard from his brother Hanani that “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire” (1:3), he was deeply grieved. Although Nehemiah enjoyed great wealth and status as a high-ranking official in King Artaxerxes’ empire, he broke down and wept at the news. He mourned for days, fasting and praying over the disaster that had befallen his hometown (1:4).

This reference to the walls of Jerusalem being destroyed and the gates burned is not the same as the disaster brought on by the Babylonian army under King Nebuchadnezzar when they captured Jerusalem in 586 B.C., which happened more than 100 years before the time of Nehemiah. Rather, the destruction and burning cited here

are probably related to the events in Ezra 4:7-24, where the local rulers and leaders accused the Jews before King Artaxerxes and attacked Jerusalem, set the gates on fire, destroyed the walls, and halting its rebuilding by force.

2. Nehemiah Prayed and Confessed (Neh 1:5-7)

Even though Nehemiah was living a privileged life in the palace, he was a God-fearing man who had not forgotten his homeland. Upon receiving the terrible news of the broken walls and burned gates in Jerusalem, he immediately prayed to God. He recognized that in order to reverse the fate of Israel, he must fully rely on the Lord and pray! Nehemiah's prayers demonstrate his knowledge of God's attributes, the relationship between God and the Jews, his reverence of the law that God gave to Israel through Moses, and his belief that the Jews suffered subjugation, misery, and exile because they had sinned and turned away from God.

From Nehemiah's proclamation in his prayers, "the God of heaven, the great and awesome God" (1:5), this God is not just the God of Israel, but the Creator of heaven and earth. Nehemiah believes that the God of heaven and earth is the Almighty God who has the power to save the Israelites, those who had escaped the captivity (1:2) and had lost their homeland. Had not "the great and awesome"

God moved King Cyrus to decree that the exiled Jews should return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple a hundred years ago? Nehemiah trusts that his God is the God who “keeps covenant and steadfast love” (1:5) with His people forever.

However, the Israelites failed to follow God’s commandments, laws, and ordinances. Therefore, in his prayer, Nehemiah confessed to God, “We have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned” (1:6). Although Nehemiah himself had not forsaken God’s word, Nehemiah used “we” instead of “they.” Despite being a high official in the palace and having remained faithful to God, he humbly identified himself with the rest of the Israelites.

3. Nehemiah Prayed for the Lord’s Mercy (Neh 1:8-11)

Nehemiah often cited Scripture from Deuteronomy in his prayers. Apparently, he had taken God’s commandments, statutes, and ordinances to heart. He knew well that if the people of Israel were unfaithful to God, God would “scatter them among the peoples,” but if they returned to God and kept His commandments, God would gather them from the farthest corners and bring them back to the holy city that He had chosen for them. In II Chronicles 6:4-6, King Solomon prayed after building the temple,

“Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who with his hand has fulfilled what he promised with his mouth to my father David, saying, ‘Since the day that I brought my people out of the land of Egypt, I have not chosen a city from any of the tribes of Israel in which to build a house, so that my name might be there, and I chose no one as ruler over my people Israel; but I have chosen Jerusalem in order that my name may be there, and I have chosen David to be over my people Israel.’” Nehemiah’s prayer in verse 10 is almost identical to that in Deuteronomy 9:29. Having grown up in captivity, Nehemiah was not required to study God’s Word to fulfill his job function. His deep knowledge of God’s Word must have come from his love for God rather than out of obligation. His in-depth knowledge of Scripture is indeed a good example for us to follow.

Nehemiah was deeply aware of the eternal covenant between God and Israel—that He is their Lord and Father and they are His servants and His people. Nehemiah acknowledged that God “redeemed the people of Israel by His great power and His strong hand” (1:10). God performed many signs and wonders, leading them out of the misery that they endured under the Pharaohs and into the promised land of Canaan (around 1446 B.C.). Nehemiah proclaimed in his prayer that the eternal covenant between God and the people of Israel did not only stand during Moses’ generation, but was intended to endure forever.

Therefore, he believed that God would definitely save His people from being persecuted by their enemies in Jerusalem.

Finally, in verse 11, Nehemiah prayed specifically for the redemption and deliverance of the Israelites. He prayed: “O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name.” Although he knew that King Artaxerxes was the king of the empire, he also knew that the king was merely a man, and that only the great and awesome God has the ultimate control of everything. He prayed to God, “Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!” It is clear that he had been praying and fasting and actively seeking God’s help for Jerusalem’s plight for many days. His faith came from knowing and trusting in God’s faithfulness and believing that He would honor His covenant with the people of Israel in the face of their current troubles. It is written in Hebrews 4:16, “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need,” and this is precisely what Nehemiah did.

III. Video Viewing

Play DVD Section, “Outline of Ezra-Nehemiah Introduction

and the Stages of the Third Return,” and Section, “The Prayer of Nehemiah.”

IV. Study Questions

1. Fill in the blank

- (1) The words of _____ the son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in _____ the capital. (Nehemiah 1:1)
- (2) The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of _____ is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. (Nehemiah 1:3)
- (3) O Lord God of _____, the _____ God, who _____ with those who love him and keep his commandments. (Nehemiah 1:5)
- (4) The reigning king at the time of Nehemiah was King Artaxerxes (also referred to by historians as Artaxerxes I.) He ruled in the period of _____ - _____ B.C.

2. Scripture study

- (1) In addition to *The Book of Nehemiah*, are there any other books in the Bible that also start with “the son of someone” as a way of introducing the author?
- (2) What year did Ezra return to Jerusalem during the rule of

King Artaxerxes? How many years had elapsed since the time given in Nehemiah Chapter 1?

- (3) Find the similarity between Nehemiah's prayer in Nehemiah 1:8-9 and the passages in Deuteronomy 4:27, 28:64, and 30:4.

3. Discussion and sharing

- (1) In Nehemiah 1:5, Nehemiah prayed that God kept His covenant of love with those who loved Him and obeyed His commands. What was the covenant between God and the Israelites?

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- (2) What are some key points that we can learn from Nehemiah's prayer?

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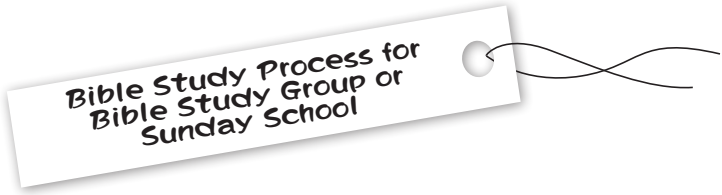
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(3) Please share your views of the differences and similarities between Nehemiah's prayer (Nehemiah 1:5-11) and Ezra's prayer (Ezra 9:6-15).

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**Bible Study Process for
Bible Study Group or
Sunday School**

This part supplies reference for group leaders and Sunday school teachers. If needed, please refer to Appendix: “Instruction for Bible Study Group Leaders and Instructors”. Please feel free to adjust the process according to time limits.

A. Preparation (5-15 minutes)

1. Icebreaker

Game: “My Memories”

The rules:

Starting with the small group leader, everyone takes turns introducing themselves with 1) their name, 2) their job/occupation, 3) one meaningful event they’d like to preserve in their memory and why.

- Discover and discuss the common topics and themes that emerge as students contribute different memories to the discussion.

2. Introduction

Events that are recorded in personal memories are preserved because they must be important to the person. Although the Bible is mostly written in the third person, memories narrated in the first person appear as well, such as in the Book of Nehemiah. By studying this book, we read Nehemiah's memoirs and learn from all the events that are meaningful to him.

3. Opening Prayer

Dear Heavenly Father, as we get together and study your words, please be with us and bless us. May the Holy Spirit prepare our hearts and help us to understand your words. May you open our ears so that we can know your will, follow your lead and be blessed by you. Please give us wisdom and strength through your words, so that we can live a life that is pleasing to you. We also want to seek after your heart and be a blessing to the people around us. We pray all these in Jesus' name. Amen.

B. Development (40-90 minutes)

I. Scripture Reading

Nehemiah 1:1-11.

II. Synopsis

1. The Disaster in Jerusalem (1:1-4)
2. Nehemiah Prayed and Confessed (1:5-7)
3. Nehemiah Prayed for the Lord's Mercy (1:8-11)

III. Video Viewing

Play DVD Section, “Outline of Ezra-Nehemiah Introduction and the Stages of the Third Return,” and Section, “The Prayer of Nehemiah.” Students watch the video and take notes.

IV. Study Questions

Fill in the blanks: Questions (1) – (4)

Scripture study: Questions (1) – (3)

Discussion and sharing: Questions (1) – (3)

C. Conclusion (5-15 minutes)

1. Summary

Though Nehemiah worked in the palace of Susa, the devastating situation in Jerusalem burdened him. Nehemiah was a God-fearing man who knew God and cared about what concerned God—the people of Israel. He prayed humbly for God’s forgiveness of the sins that he and the Israelites had committed. This prayer in Chapter 1 was the catalyst for all the events recorded in *The Book of Nehemiah*.

2. Homework Assignment

Ask small group members to pray for the salvation of a friend or a family member. Small group members can write it down or print it on a piece of paper, place it inside their Bible, and recite it every day.

* **Closing Prayer:** *

Dear Heavenly Father, you are the God of heaven and earth, the great and awesome God. You keep your covenant by showing mercy to those who love you and obey your words. We are full of thanks for how you listen to us and answer our prayers. Please lead us into a deeper and more intimate relationship with you when we read your words and pray to your every day. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen!