

Chapter One

PRELIMINARY QUESTIONS

1. What were Nehemiah's feelings toward his brethren in Israel?
2. What was his view of the character of God?
3. What pattern do you see in his prayer that could be of help to you in your prayers to God?
4. What was the immediate objective of his prayer?

OUTLINE

- I. The Wall is Rebuilt, and Reforms are Instituted at Nehemiah's First Visit: chapters 1-7
 - A. Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness.
 1. Report on Jerusalem (vss. 1-4).
 2. Nehemiah's prayer (vss. 5-11a).
 3. Identity of Nehemiah (vs. 11b).

TEXT AND VERSE-BY-VERSE COMMENT

- I. The Wall is Rebuilt, and Reforms are Instituted at Nehemiah's First Visit: chapters 1-7
 - A. Nehemiah hears of Jerusalem's helplessness.
 1. Report on Jerusalem.

TEXT, 1:1-4

- 1 The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.
Now it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol,
- 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.
- 3 And 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."
- 4 Now it came about 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.

COMMENT

Verse 1 begins with a statement that its source is Nehemiah: adequate evidence that he is the author of the entire book, or at least the major part of it. The month Chislev, their ninth month, would correspond roughly with our December. The reference to the twentieth year is explained more fully in 2:1. The custom of the time was to date all events from the beginning of the rule of the present king; each king's rule would begin with the year one. Comparing this with Ezra 7:1, 8, and assuming that the Artaxerxes is the same person in each case, we can determine that the events of the book of Nehemiah begin thirteen years after Ezra's start for Jerusalem, or twelve years after the conclusion of Ezra's book, i.e., 445 B.C.

Susa was the city in Elam, 200 miles east of Babylon, where the Persian kings maintained a residence, and from which they ruled their kingdom for a part of each year (cf. comments on Ezra 6:2).

The Hanani of *verse 2* was probably Nehemiah's own brother: cf. 7:2. From the emphasis which is made in the sentence, it would appear that the visitors from Judah had not searched Nehemiah out with a grievance, but that Nehemiah had initiated the inquiry concerning his fellow-Jews who had "escaped," i.e. returned to their homeland, and concerning affairs at Jerusalem.

Their report in *verse 3* indicates both physical and mental distress, arising out of the condition of the city's walls and gates. The breaking down of the wall (chiefly of stone) and the burning of the gate (chiefly of timbers) had been done by Nebuchadnezzar, 141 years earlier. Some suppose that this is a reference to more recent events of which Nehemiah would not have been aware before this, and that therefore, the walls and gates had been partially restored after the Captivity. The Bible makes no mention of previous reconstruction of the walls, except in the false report of Israel's enemies in Ezra 4:12. If there had been any repairs, they surely could not have been very extensive.

Nehemiah's grief as portrayed in *verse 4* (It was perfectly acceptable for a man to weep because of mental anguish in their culture.) would be easily understood. Without walls the city would

have no defense against vandalism or military action, except what they could supply with watchful human bodies. They would be especially vulnerable to the Samaritans, their nearest neighbors. There was something he could do, however: he could fast and pray.

2. Nehemiah's Prayer

TEXT, 1:5-11a

- 5 And I said, "I beseech Thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and loving-kindness of those who love Him and keep His commandments,
6 let Thine ear now be attentive and Thine eyes open to hear the prayer of Thy servant which I am praying before Thee now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Thy servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against Thee; I and my father's house have sinned.
7 "We have acted very corruptly against Thee and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which Thou didst command Thy servant Moses.
8 "Remember the word which Thou didst command Thy 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.'
10 "And they are Thy servants and Thy people whom Thou didst redeem by Thy great power and by Thy strong hand.
11a "O LORD, I beseech Thee, may Thine ear be attentive to the prayer of Thy servant and the prayer of Thy servants who delight to revere Thy name, and make Thy servant successful today, and grant him compassion before this man."

COMMENT

This prayer by Nehemiah is as noble as that of Ezra (9:6-15), though Ezra was a religious official and Nehemiah was a secular ruler. This speaks well of Nehemiah's habits of spirituality and fellowship with God: his practice of the ceremonies of religion.

The prayer begins in *verse 5* with praise to God for His (1) greatness and (2) character of loving kindness. So Jesus began His model prayer with praise: a good model for us today. The loving kindness mentioned in this verse is not merely sentimental; it "always implies faithful compliance with . . . the covenant . . ."

Verse 6 speaks of Nehemiah's persistence, day and night, and moves to confession. As Ezra had done (9:6), so Nehemiah also identified himself with their sins. The mention of "thy servant" and "thy servants" was the formula of polite address.

Verse 7 enumerates some of their sins. There were sins of commission ("we have acted very corruptly") and sins of omission ("and have not kept thy commandments . . ."). See the Word Studies, end of this chapter, for the difference in emphasis between commandments, statutes, and ordinances. Note that Nehemiah identifies Moses with God's giving of His law.

In *verse 8, 9* Nehemiah relies on one of God's promises in His word, assuming they have repented. As Ezra had enabled us to see his familiarity with the Scriptures in 9:11f, so Nehemiah's prayer at this point is also a composite of several Scriptures:

- 1) If you are unfaithful I will scatter you: Lev. 26:33.
- 2) But if you return to me: Dt. 30:2f.
- 3) I will gather them from there and will bring them: Dt. 30:4; 9:29.
- 4) to the place where I have chosen to cause my name to dwell: Dt. 12:5.

Verse 10 recalls actions in the past in which God has assisted his people.

Verse 11 asserts that the people were truly God's servants, that they qualified for His promises by their regard for His name

1. *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. III, p. 670.

(personality), and asks that the prayer may succeed on the basis of compassion or mercy beyond deservings. "This man" of verse 11 is a reference to Artaxerxes (2:1 ff), whom God should move to favor the request which Nehemiah would bring before him.

3. Identity of Nehemiah

TEXT, 1:11b

11b Now I was the cupbearer to the king.

COMMENT

The appearance of this statement here instead of in verse one is probably explained by Nehemiah's humility; he has not overawed us at the outset with his rank.

The duty of a cupbearer went far beyond that of serving the king's drink or food. He would be the taster who would assure that the food was safe and that no poison had been added by his enemies; he risked his life on the king's popularity or unpopularity at every meal, to protect the royal household. At the same time, he must be the most trusted person in the whole empire. If he added poison when the food had been brought to him, it would be beyond the last defense short of the king's palate. In addition, he had access to the entire palace, including the king's harem; no one else in the kingdom, outside the royal family, would be trusted farther than this. His position was next to that of the crown prince himself.

It is a credit to Nehemiah that, having attained this highest position open to him in the most powerful kingdom of his day, he was willing, like Moses, out of compassion for his brethren to make himself one of them for a sufficient length of time to improve their condition as far as he was able.

WORD STUDIES

SUSA (vs. 1; Shushan): lily, something brightly colored. It was named possibly from the lilies growing in its pools, or from the beauty of the city as the king's residence. Its base is the origin of the names, Susan, or Susanna, and of the headings for Psalms 45 and 80.

COMMANDMENT (vs. 7; Mitzvah): what has been set up, or put, or placed; that is, a monument. Something established, confirmed, appointed, ordained; hence commanded. By keeping these, one is enabled to stand, or endure: Ex. 18:23. "Bar Mitzvah," "son of the commandment," uses this word.

STATUTE (vs. 7): to cut in, hew, hack; engrave, or carve. Then, something decreed, prescribed, appointed, because it is carved in stone.

ORDINANCE (vs. 7): the primary idea is to set upright, or erect, or render justice; to govern or rule; hence, judgments.

NEHEMIAH: The last three letters represent the name of God: Jehovah. The first five letters portray drawing the breath forcibly, panting, sighing, or groaning; they come to mean "console, comfort." Thus the name means "Comfort of Jehovah" or "Jehovah has comforted." The word "comfort," also occurs in the names Menahem and Nahum. It is the first word in Isa. 40.

SUMMARY

Nehemiah was a Jew who had advanced to a position of great responsibility and trust within the government of Persia. His brother came on a visit with other Jews, and in reply to Nehemiah's concern told him about the defenseless, impoverished conditions in Jerusalem. Nehemiah wept, then he prayed. He recalled God's greatness and His lovingkindness to Israel in the past; he confessed that he and all Israel had sinned and had violated God's commandments; he asked that God keep His promise and restore them, as they were his servants. He further asked

that God would cause the king to respond favorably to the request which he was about to make before him.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Where was Nehemiah at the beginning of the book?
2. Who was Hanani, and how did he influence Nehemiah?
3. What were the conditions in Jerusalem at the time?
4. What was the position which Nehemiah occupied?