

## “The Prayer of Your Servant “

### The Eleventh in a Series of Sermons on Ezra-Nehemiah

*Texts: Nehemiah 1:1-11; Hebrews 7:11-28*

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**A**long with Ezra, Nehemiah is one of the great figures from that period in Israel’s history after the exile (second temple Judaism). Nehemiah is a remarkable leader—serving for a time as governor of Judah—a Godly man as seen in his prayers and desire for his people return to the proper worship of YHWH. At the same time, he is a trusted member of the Persian royal court. Nehemiah stands as one of Israel’s greatest Reformers, and a man from whom there is much to learn.

We return to our series on Ezra-Nehemiah—picking up where we left several months ago, with opening chapter of the Book of Nehemiah. Frankly, it is hard to make sense of Nehemiah, without some knowledge of the Book of Ezra—which is why I felt it important to tackle both books together, not just the Book of Nehemiah as many preachers do. The two books of Ezra-Nehemiah circulated together in the Jewish canon for a reason—they are clearly connected and depict the return of the Jews from exile and the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple from two different perspectives. If Ezra is the more fact-based narrative utilizing a number of official Persian government documents, Nehemiah is a much more personal book—more than half of which is the author’s journal and which is described by one commentator as “some of the most lively writing in the Bible.” Ezra, he says, was more reserved, while Nehemiah “leaps out of the pages at us.”<sup>1</sup> A practical and emotional man, in this book we are snooping in Nehemiah’s personal journal, written during a time of great difficulty for the people of God.

As we proceed this time, we’ll begin by answering the questions, “who, what, where, and when,” before we turn to our text, the opening chapter of Nehemiah, which includes “Nehemiah’s prayer.” As for the “who” question, in the opening verses the author introduces himself as Nehemiah the son of Ha-cal-iah. The name “Nehemiah” means “the Lord comforts” which is certainly an appropriate name for a man who appears on the scene during a very difficult period in Israel’s history. The author introduces himself to us as the “cupbearer” of the Persian king Artaxerxes I, who ruled over the vast Persian empire from 464 until 424 BC. The book opens with Nehemiah pleading with the king to be sent to Judah (the land of his people, the Jews) to help them rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, which were in great need of repair so as to protect the now-returned Jewish exiles from attack from their neighbors—who, as we have seen, are angered that the returning exiles will not embrace the pagan rituals of the Canaanites, most Israelites choosing instead to remain loyal to the religion of their fathers. Nehemiah is appointed governor of Judah, and quickly comes to the realization that his people (the Jews) are in great need of reformation—a reformation of their own hearts.

I have long felt that some of the poorest preaching I have ever heard has been on the Book of Nehemiah. I say poor not because the preachers of whom I am thinking were bad communicators, or that they were not men of faith. Quite the contrary, I’ve heard good preachers do remarkable, spell-binding things with the text of this book. But they do so at the price of missing the whole point. Nehemiah’s purpose really is as mundane as describing how the city and its defenses were rebuilt because his people were in real danger of attack. In our day, the temptation is great to see this book as an allegory which applies to

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<sup>1</sup> Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 77.

modern readers. Because Nehemiah demonstrates passion and capable leadership, sermons on the book of Nehemiah are often framed as a series of principles for successful “leadership.” The image of rebuilding the walls far-too often and far-too easily becomes an illustration to us as to how we can rebuild our own fallen lives and go from ruin to recovery. Even worse, the wall-builder motif has been shamelessly invoked by churches as “biblical” support for fund raising during various church building projects. Be a Nehemiah– “Help us build the walls of our new church.”

But this is hardly Nehemiah’s intent. He is writing about an ancient city and its defensive fortifications. He is not writing about us and our situation today. But the issues he faces are critical. If the walls of Jerusalem are not repaired, then Jews remain under real threat of attack. We know that during the reign of Artaxerxes I, one of the Persian vassal states, Egypt, revolted against their Persian conquerors. Jerusalem is located between Egypt and Persia. A strongly fortified Jerusalem would be of great strategic importance to the Persians. Nehemiah, of course, is thinking about YHWH’s promises and his covenant, along with the sins and failings of his own people, the Jews. Nehemiah understands the urgent need for the city’s walls to be restored so as to protect the rebuilt temple, and so that the people can worship YHWH according to his word.

Artaxerxes I, on the other hand, is thinking that Nehemiah might be able to motivate the Jews to get off the dime and finishing fortifying the city—which would be a great bulwark against any possible Egyptian incursion into Persia. Here we have a classic case of God’s providence including human plotting and scheming, yet which actually furthers YHWH’s purposes. From a redemptive-historical perspective, if Jerusalem falls yet again, and the people of Israel are defeated and/or return to exile, this would be a serious setback, and cause yet another delay in the coming of the hoped-for Messiah, who will finally and ultimately deliver his people from the guilt and power of sin. For the Persians, a fortified Jerusalem protects them from powerful enemies to the southwest. For the Jews, if there is no Jerusalem or temple, there is no coming Messiah.

The temptation to allegorize the message of Nehemiah is great because we moderns do not know much about biblical history—much less the history of the ancient Persian empire and the various palace intrigues which figure prominently in this period of Israel’s history. If the truth were known—most people do not care to know such things. History is boring, right? I’ll concede that Nehemiah takes on a much more compelling story-line if we take his wall-building account as a metaphor for starting over after we’ve suffered some personal calamity and are trying to recover from the frustrations of life. But the fact is the Book of Nehemiah is not about us, or our trials, nor is it written to help us rebuild our broken lives.

This book is about Israel’s trials and need to for the Jews rebuild the city’s defenses so that this people, this temple, and this nation, will fulfill their ultimate purpose in redemptive history. When Nehemiah gets word of the deplorable situation in Jerusalem he immediately realizes that the city’s walls need to be repaired for the safety of his people (the Jews)—a small and seemingly minor event in the big picture of biblical history. In actuality, the safety of the city and the preservation of its temple is a necessity for God to accomplish his purposes for his people. This book is not about us rebuilding anything. It is about God keeping his promises and accomplishing his purposes which eventually bring us to the coming of Jesus and salvation from sin and the advance of God’s kingdom.

So, as for the “who,” Nehemiah is Artaxerxes I’s cupbearer, a man whose job it was to oversee the king’s table so that the king could eat and drink in safety without fear of being poisoned. The office of “cupbearer” was considered a position of great importance in the ancient world and was held by someone with unquestioned loyalty to the king. This was especially the case with Artaxerxes, whose own father,

Xerxes was assassinated by a royal courier. The cupbearer functions as the head of the king's security—no small matter. And in this case, the cup-bearer goes on to become the Persian governor of Judah—a logical, and not improbable promotion as it appears at first glance.

As for the “what,” Nehemiah is a sequel to the Book of Ezra, drawing upon many of the same kind of source documents Ezra does—lists, inventories, genealogies, diaries, handbooks, etc. There is a remarkable covenant renewal ceremony recounted in chapters 8-9, as well as a hero-story in the person of Nehemiah himself, who is used by YHWH every bit as much as was Ezra the priest. The first-person style of Nehemiah means we are reading through this man's memoirs, which is why it has a more personal and compelling feel than does Book of Ezra.

We can answer the “where” and “when” questions at the same time. According to the opening verses, Nehemiah was written in the month of Chislev (November-December) during the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I, which would be 445 BC—some 13 years after Ezra arrived in Jerusalem. As the book opens, Nehemiah is in Susa (the royal winter palace of the Persian kings in the Zagros Mountains, just to the East of the Tigris River in modern Iran), where the Persian court assembled because of better weather during winter months. The Book of Nehemiah concerns the people of God and God's redemptive purposes, but plays out within well-documented events in Persian history.

As we turn to the opening verses of the Book of Nehemiah, it immediately becomes clear that things are not going well in Jerusalem—and this nearly one hundred years after the first group of Jewish exiles had returned from their captivity in Babylon in 538 BC. In the first three verses of Nehemiah 1, we read, *“the words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. And they said to me, ‘The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.’”* How does the disturbing news which comes to Nehemiah fit with chronology of Ezra?

By the year 445 B.C. the Jerusalem temple (the so-called “second temple”) had been rebuilt despite a series of on-going political troubles and the continual disruption of the rebuilding process. We know from Ezra 4:7-23 that Israel's neighbors to the north (the so-called “people of the land”) had petitioned king Artaxerxes so that the king would direct that work on the city's walls and foundations should stop, and that he would quit writing the checks to pay for the rebuilding of the city. As we read in Ezra 4:12–13, the people of the land write the king, *“be it known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city. They are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. Now be it known to the king that if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be impaired.”* The people of the land get their wish.

Upon reading their letter, Artaxerxes did indeed order a halt to the rebuilding of the city for a time. According to Ezra 4:23-24, *“then, when the copy of King Artaxerxes' letter was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their associates, they went in haste to the Jews at Jerusalem and by force and power made them cease. Then the work on the house of God that is in Jerusalem stopped, and it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.”* Israel's enemies had not only managed to stop efforts to rebuild the city of the God whom they despise, but they could also claim the backing of the Persian government. The Jews may be back in their land. They may have made great progress in rebuilding the temple and laying the city's foundations, but now they were on their own. No permission

from their Persian landlords, and no more funding from the Persian coffers.

But the people of the land have failed to learn one important thing about YHWH. When his people have nothing left, then they trust in YHWH's gracious provisions. When they do so they realize that they have everything they need, for YHWH's power is without limit.

It was while Nehemiah was in Susa with the royal court that he receives word of the deplorable conditions of Jerusalem and its defenses. As someone close to court, Nehemiah knew first-hand about the dangers facing the Jews in Jerusalem, both from the rebellious Egyptians, as well as from the people of the land living just to the northwest of the city. The city's walls had been breached and then completely destroyed when the city first fell to Nebuchadnezzar in 587. After work on the temple had been completed, the Jews turned their full attention to rebuilding the city—specifically its walls, so that the city's inhabitants and those nearby could remain safely within the confines of a walled city with steep slopes on three sides. Without the walls to the north protecting the approaches to the city and its water supplies, the inhabitants of Jerusalem were effectively trapped on the rocky finger of land which included the temple mount and the old city of David with no way of escape. Nehemiah immediately realizes the gravity of the situation. According to verse 4, *“as soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven.”*

Nehemiah may be a man with great responsibilities to a pagan king, and from his presence in the royal court he is obviously aware of the strategic dangers his people face from enemies who could easily defeat the Jews, but it is remarkable that his reaction is that of despair. Here is a man of action, whose first reaction upon learning of the state of his people and the condition of their capital is sorrow. The glory days of David and Solomon are long-gone. How the mighty have fallen! Heart-broken by the realization of pitiful state of his people, and well-aware of the gravity of the danger the Jews face from enemies and schemers, Nehemiah turns to the only one who can help—not Artaxerxes, but YHWH. The language of verse 4 clearly indicates a sustained process of weeping and mourning for his people, and crying out to YHWH through prayer and fasting, pleading for the deliverance of his people from peril.

The fallen walls not only reveal Israel's weakened military defenses, but are illustrative of the spiritual condition of the nation. God's covenant curses have been meted out because of the nation's repeated and callous disobedience to YHWH, and although God kept his covenant promise and returned his exiled people from Babylon to the Jerusalem, things are not the same after the exile, as they were before. Israel no longer governs itself as it did under David and Solomon and their successors—Israel is now a vassal state of a pagan empire. The people are back in the land, but must chafe under the rule of Persian suzerains. Sadly, many Jews are still drawn to pagan gods and pagan practices, and when realizing that the condition of the city's fortifications reflects the nation's current spiritual condition, Nehemiah is overcome with emotion.

Recall that Ezra reacted much the same way when he realized how far Israel had fallen as seen in the tolerance of intermarriage with neighboring pagans. In Ezra 9:6–9, Ezra cries out, *“O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. But now for a brief moment favor has been shown by the LORD our God, to leave us a remnant and to give us a secure hold within his holy place, that our God may brighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our slavery. For we are slaves. Yet our God has not forsaken us in our slavery, but has extended to us*

*his steadfast love before the kings of Persia, to grant us some reviving to set up the house of our God, to repair its ruins, and to give us protection in Judea and Jerusalem.*” And now in verses 5-11, we read Nehemiah’s prayer to YHWH for deliverance which is much the same as Ezra’s. Nehemiah knows that YHWH is the faithful God who always keeps his promises and never fails to aid his people.

In verse 5, Nehemiah prays, “*O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.*” There is no self-pity here on Nehemiah’s part, and he begins by reflecting upon the character and promises of God, just as Jesus teaches us to do in the Lord’s Prayer.<sup>2</sup> Nehemiah illustrates that proper prayer is a matter of perspective—if we focus on our needs we reflect our self-centered and whiny sinfulness. Even worse, our problems can seem insurmountable. By focusing upon who God is—the Lord, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who is loving and keeps his covenant—Nehemiah now sees things from God’s perspective. For such an all-powerful and sovereign God, even apparent calamity serves God’s greater purposes. Reflecting upon God’s redemptive promises, Nehemiah invokes the promises of the covenant as well as those promises made by YHWH to those who love him and strive to obey his commands. A sound theology of God and salvation is the basis for prayer, in addition to providing a motive to pray.<sup>3</sup> “To whom are we praying?” The Lord God of heaven. “What can he do for us?” Whatever he wishes according to his will because he is great and awesome. “Will he turn his back on us?” No, he always keeps his covenant promises! “What about me?” YHWH is steadfast in love to those who love him, strive to keep his commands, and who humbly draws near to the Lord in prayer.

With the bond in mind between YHWH and his people Israel established by the covenant, Nehemiah humbly invokes the promises of the covenant as the basis for his petition for Israel. We read in verse 6, “*let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned.*” Although Nehemiah was born long after the days in which Israel sinned against YHWH, bringing down YHWH’s covenant curses in the form of defeat at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar and exile in Babylon, and even though Nehemiah serves in the court of Artaxerxes and is not with his people in Jerusalem, Nehemiah refuses to pass blame and guilt to others. He confesses both “his” sins and “our sins,” when he intercedes for his people.

This is far more than a confession of personal sins—although his own sins are included. This is a confession that YHWH’s people have sinned against him in a corporate sense—the people of Israel, the Lord’s servants, even I, and my father’s house have sinned against YHWH. This is because the covenant God made with the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai was a covenant between YHWH with his people as a nation (not just individuals), with Moses as mediator. It is through the law of God that the knowledge of sin is revealed—God’s commandments are holy, righteous, and true, and they quickly expose us to be guilty, unrighteous, and liars. This point becomes clear in verse 7, when Nehemiah confesses, “*we [i.e., your people collectively] have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.*”

If our sin exposes us to God’s rebuke and punishment, we must not forget that there are wonderful covenant promises made to those who confess their sins unto the Lord. In verses 8-10, Nehemiah appeals

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<sup>2</sup> Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, 79.

<sup>3</sup> Davis, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (part nine).

to these promises made by YHWH through Moses. *“Remember the word that 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 your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand.”*

Despite his current occupation and distance from the land of his people, his prayer reveals that Nehemiah is well-familiar with the Book of Deuteronomy, referring to verse 64 of Deuteronomy 28, verses 1-4 of chapter 30, as well as Deuteronomy 12:5. But the most remarkable petition is taken from Deuteronomy 9:27-29 when Moses pleads for Israel while up on Mount Sinai when God gave Israel his law.<sup>4</sup> There we read, *“remember your servants, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Do not regard the stubbornness of this people, or their wickedness or their sin, lest the land from which you brought us say, ‘Because the LORD was not able to bring them into the land that he promised them, and because he hated them, he has brought them out to put them to death in the wilderness.’ For they are your people and your heritage, whom you brought out by your great power and by your outstretched arm.”*

Like Moses, Nehemiah pleads with the Lord that he continue the work he had begun. YHWH has been pleased to bring his people back to the promised land after their exile. But now, Israel is in serious danger and there is the real possibility that the return of the Jews from their exile in Babylon might not have a happy ending. So Nehemiah takes on the role of intercessor for the people of God, perhaps an echo here from Psalm 106:23<sup>5</sup> where the Psalmist had written, *“therefore he said he would destroy them—had not Moses, his chosen one, stood in the breach before him, to turn away his wrath from destroying them.”* In verse 11, Nehemiah cries out, *“O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.”* Moses is long gone, but Nehemiah will step in and intercede for Israel. He will plead with YHWH for the deliverance of his people.

In what seems like a passing and rather insignificant comment, the opening chapter ends with the line, *“Now I was cupbearer to the king.”* As we will see next time, it is because Nehemiah is cupbearer to the most powerful man in the world of that age, the door is open wide for YHWH to answer Nehemiah’s fervent prayer through the good graces of the Persian king, who without realizing it, becomes the means through which YHWH will answer Nehemiah’s prayer. The cupbearer will become the governor over Judah and will lead the people in rebuilding the city and its walls.

What then, do we say by application? First, it is vital that whenever we come to an account like this in the Bible, we make every effort to read and understand it in its redemptive-historical context. If we rip this story out of its context and turn it into an allegory about ourselves and rebuilding our lives, we will miss the true, far more interesting story—that God intervenes in the lives of his people so as to keep his promises and send to them a Savior, Jesus Christ. These events take place (as does our redemption) in ordinary human history against the backdrop of well-verified historical events. Although an allegorical approach to Nehemiah makes sense in a culture such as ours when we twist everything into a story about ourselves, nevertheless, we really do distort the message of the Bible whenever we depreciate the

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<sup>4</sup> Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 79.

<sup>5</sup> Kidner, Ezra and Nehemiah, 79.

historical events through which God secures our salvation from sin and wins for us eternal life.

A second thing to consider is that Nehemiah's prayer, is, in many ways, a model for us. Just as Jesus does in the Lord's prayer, Nehemiah prays for his people by addressing God as alone worthy to hear his prayer. *O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments.* This is much like the Lord's Prayer in which we begin by addressing, "Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed by our name," before we lay out before the Lord those things we are seeking (which he already knows), and which he still invites us to lay before him.

Finally, one way in which the new covenant is far better than the old, can be seen in the fact that Israel had Moses as covenant intercessor, and then, at times of great peril, people like Nehemiah jumped in and made intercession on behalf of the people of God. So let us read Nehemiah's prayer and learn the importance of interceding for others. But let us then give thanks, because according to the Book of Hebrews (11:25 ff—part of our New Testament Lesson), we have a much better high priest than the people of Israel did, Jesus Christ, who, the author of Hebrews says, "*is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For it was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.*"

When Jesus prays, "Father, hear the prayer of your servant," the Father hears. He acts. He answers.