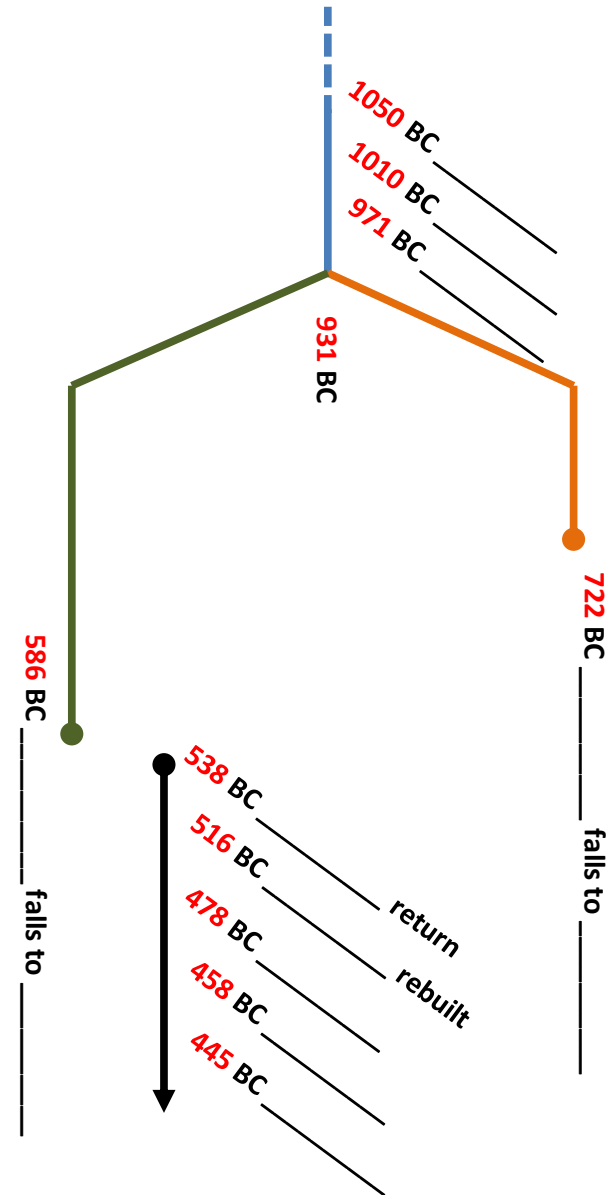


## Problems, Promises, and Prayer

### Nehemiah 1

May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2025

1. The backstory to the book of Nehemiah
2. Jerusalem's problem became Nehemiah's \_\_\_\_\_.  
(1:1-3)
3. Nehemiah's problem turned to \_\_\_\_\_. (1:4-11a)
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_ (1:5)
  - b. \_\_\_\_\_ (1:6-7)
  - c. \_\_\_\_\_ (1:8-11a)
4. Nehemiah's position provided an \_\_\_\_\_. (1:11b)
5. What's the point?
  - a. God will be \_\_\_\_\_ to His promises.
  - b. God uses \_\_\_\_\_ leaders.



### Questions for Discussion/Reflection on Nehemiah 1

1. Have you studied Nehemiah before? Are you familiar with the book already? What do you enjoy about studying Old Testament historical books? What makes it a challenge either to understand or apply?
2. The destruction of Jerusalem and the attempt to rebuild the city are in the background of Nehemiah 1. Review 2 Kings 25:10-11 and Ezra 4:11-24 to read about those events. What stands out to you from them?
3. Our cities today don't have walls around them. Why were the walls so critical to Jerusalem? What would be the effect for the people of not having walls around the city?
4. What does Nehemiah acknowledge about God in v. 5 as he begins his prayer? What is the benefit of beginning prayer in that way?
5. In what way is Nehemiah's confession individual and corporate? How does Deuteronomy 4:25-27 form the backdrop of Nehemiah's confession?
6. How does Deuteronomy 30:1-5 inform Nehemiah's prayer in v. 9? What is the benefit of tying our prayers to specific promises of God in scripture? What are ways that we can do that as Christians today?

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### Nehemiah 1

May 25<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Big idea: Prayer is our first response to crisis when God's Word shapes our convictions.

#### Intro

On college campuses, at busy shopping centers, in the military, The Gideons have been giving out pocket NT for decades. It's a neat outreach as it puts God's word in the hands of people and the Lord uses His word.

But I've heard it said that many Christians live as if God only gave us pocket New Testaments. We functionally overlook 2/3's of the Bible.

Sometimes it's because the OT can be harder to understand – crossing over several millennia; crosses over the rise and falls of nations that we can't identify, heavily prophetic areas can be confusing

Sometimes it's because the NT is more immediately accessible and applicable.

We study James and talk about anger, conflict, and the damaging power of our words. It isn't hard to apply.

But a narrative that unfolds over chapters without immediately clear "do this, believe this" language makes it harder to apply.

If that is true of you, Nehemiah is a great book to dive into to help change that.

Straightforward, dramatic storytelling

great nuggets to pull out of the narratives

awesome picture of God's sovereign, providential hand working over and above and through circumstances

unhidden human failings requiring the mercy of God

#### 1. The backstory to the book of Nehemiah

##### a. Overview of OT Timeline

##### b. Babylonian invasion

i. **2 Chronicles 36:18-20** All the articles of the house of God, great and small, and the treasures of the house of the LORD, and the treasures of the king and of his officers, he brought *them* all to Babylon. <sup>19</sup> Then they burned the house of God and broke down the wall of Jerusalem, and burned all its fortified buildings with fire and destroyed all its valuable articles. <sup>20</sup> Those who had escaped from the sword he carried away to Babylon; and they were servants to him and to his sons until the rule of the kingdom of Persia,

ii. The people were carried away more than 800 miles to Babylon

iii. The Medes and Persians overthrew Babylon and had a different way of handling their concurred subjects.

1. Babylonians – exiled and dispersed people from their homelands

2. Persians – left people in homelands or returned them, thinking this would promote loyalty

iv. Book of Ezra recounts the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel

1. Temple was in "rubble"

2. Rejoicing and weeping as it was completed

3. But the city was still without a wall, meaning they were defenseless and vulnerable
- v. Book of Nehemiah recounts the rebuilding of the wall and the people under Nehemiah
  1. Wall was “knee high” (Knee-high-amiah)
2. Jerusalem’s problem became Nehemiah’s **problem**. (1:1-3)
  - a. Setting:
    - i. Chislev – late autumn, Nov/Dec
    - ii. 20<sup>th</sup> year – of Persian King Artaxerxes reign – about 445 BC
    - iii. Susa – winter capital of the Persian empire, too hot in the summer, makes sense that he is there in Nov/Dec
      1. Persian empire around 3,000 miles long, 500-1500 miles wide, 539-333 BC, modern day turkey, Iraq, Iran, Kuwait, Syria, Jordan, Israel, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, northern Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, part of India – at its peak it ruled over 44% of the world’s population, the highest figure for any empire in history! In todays world that would be 3.2 billion people – more than the populations of India and China combined.
      2. Also where the book of Esther takes place
      3. Show a map
        - a. Met a descendant of the “mountain Jews” in Azerbaijan that trace back to this period.
  - b. Hanani and the men from Judah
    - i. Traveled about 800 miles, a journey of several months, to Susa.
    - ii. They had either been on a “fact finding” journey to Jerusalem or perhaps they were among those who had returned earlier to live in Jerusalem.
    - iii. Why wasn’t Nehemiah among those who had already returned to Jerusalem?
      1. No idea. However, if he had returned to Jerusalem, he wouldn’t have been in this providential position to work on behalf of his people.
  - c. Gathered information – about the Jews who had escaped and Jerusalem
    - i. “The Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity”
      1. A scattered, mostly impoverished remnant had remained in the land. Others had returned from the exile in the previous decades before Nehemiah’s time. Both groups are probably in mind.
      2. Those people are in distress and the reason given is what they tell Nehemiah about the wall.
    - ii. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire.
      1. Attempts had been made in the past to rebuild the wall

- a. **Ezra 4:12** let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem; they are rebuilding the rebellious and evil city and are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.

- i. The project was halted by a decree from the king in Ezra 4:21

- 2. Raymond Brown, “broken walls meant frightening insecurity, negligible commercial development and serious economic deprivation, but the depressed people within the city were infinitely more important than its shattered walls.”

- 3. **Proverbs 25:28** *Like* a city that is broken into *and* without walls Is a man who has no control over his spirit.

- a. Proverbs like this use something known and obvious to teach another lesson. The point of this proverb is to describe the vulnerability of someone who lacks self-control. What was obvious to the reader at the time is that a city without walls was very vulnerable.

- d. Nehemiah takes this problem on.

- i. It would be easy to say, “not my problem.”

- ii. But he identifies with his people and he intercedes, first in prayer, then at risk to himself, then in planning, then in leadership.

- 3. Nehemiah’s problem turned to **prayer** (1:4-11a)

Sat down and wept and mourned for days

He was personally grieved by what was happening to his people and his ancestral city.

He didn’t just identify the problem, he identified with the people.

Could have just gotten frustrated and judged the people – 100 years and no wall has been built?! If “I” were there the walls would be done by now!

ACTS model of prayer

Adoration – Confession – Thanksgiving – Supplication

We see 3 of the 4 in this prayer

- a. **Adoration** (1:5)

- i. YHWH Elohim, the great El

- 1. Nehemiah worked for the King, the most powerful man in the then known world of Nehemiah, yet God was ultimately supreme.

- ii. Lovingkindness - hesed –

- 1. quality that honors a covenant through thick and thin – (Expositors BC)
      - 2. God’s Never Stopping, Never Giving Up, Unbreaking, Always and Forever Love (Jesus Storybook Bible)

- iii. *Why start prayer this way? Is this buttering God up?*

- 1. “There is more than rhetoric in this elaborate opening. It deliberately postpones the cry for help, which could otherwise be faithless and self-pitying. It mounts immediately to *heaven* (as the Lord’s prayer does), where the perspective will be right, and it reflects on the character of God” (Kidner).

2. Same example modeled by Jesus

- a. **Matthew 6:9-10** "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. <sup>10</sup> 'Your kingdom come. Your will be done, On earth as it is in heaven.
- b. Nehemiah was in Persia but his homeland was Israel. But God is in heaven and He rules overall.

3. It aligns our hearts with truth

- a. It does the same thing when we worship the God in heaven whose will is done in heaven and we ask for His will to be done on earth and in our situation.

4. It is appropriate worship

b. **Confession** (1:6-7)

- i. He owned up to his role and the sin of his people – neither individualistic (just me n' Jesus) nor impersonal – they stood and fell before God as individuals and a nation
- ii. A true sense of the awesomeness of God reveals the depths of our own sinfulness (EBC)
  - 1. We saw this last week in Psalm 25 when David asked God to pardon his iniquity, because it is immense.
  - 2. What right does a sinful man ask God for pardon?
  - 3. Why does Jesus tell us to pray, “forgive us our debts?”
  - 4. We would have no grounds for this if God had not told us that He is a God who forgives.

c. **Supplication** (1:8-11a)

- i. “Remember” occurs several times throughout the book – not as if God could forget though – as we saw in Psalm 25 last week, be mindful of, act according to.
- ii. If you are unfaithful, I will scatter
  - 1. **Leviticus 26:33** 'You, however, I will scatter among the nations and will draw out a sword after you, as your land becomes desolate and your cities become waste.
  - 2. By NT time there were more Jews in the diaspora than in Palestine (EBC)
    - a. My experience with Jews for Jesus – NY, South Africa
    - b. If you return, I will gather
- iii. But if you return to me, I will gather them and bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.
  - 1. **Deuteronomy 30:2-4** 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, <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> "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.
- iv. Nehemiah bases his confidence and requests on God's word – not “claiming promises” that are not really promised – i.e. continual prosperity and health

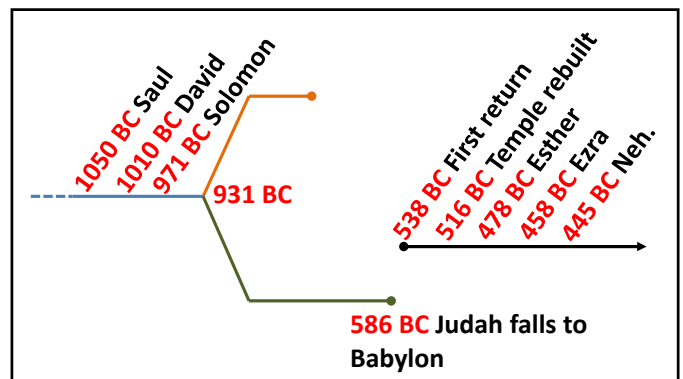
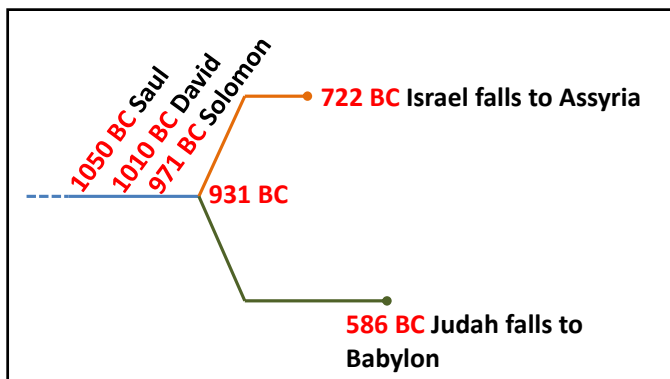
- v. They are your servants – though they had sinned and failed they were still God’s peculiar people.
  - 1. Nehemiah and his companions “delight to revere Your name”
- vi. Grant him compassion before this man
  - 1. The rest of the prayer leads up to this request.
  - 2. “This man” is King Artaxerxes.
    - a. He had stopped the reconstruction of the walls after some officials requested it.
    - b. **Ezra 4:16** "We inform the king that if that city is rebuilt and the walls finished, as a result you will have no possession in *the province* beyond the River."
    - c. **Ezra 4:21-24** “So, now issue a decree to make these men stop *work*, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me. <sup>22</sup> “Beware of being negligent in carrying out this *matter*; why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings?” <sup>23</sup> Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes’ document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms.
    - d. The king would have to overturn his previous decree, a risky thing to ask
    - e. Shows the seriousness of this request Nehemiah will make – it may be seen as sedition if the king believes that rebuilding the city will mean he loses the land “beyond the river” (Judah)
  - 3. Dependent on the Lord to work in the heart of the king, which is amazing that the Lord is capable of doing such a thing.
- 4. Nehemiah’s position provided an ***opening***. (1:11b)
  - a. This cliff-hanger prepares us for what comes next.
    - i. Nehemiah prays for success and that God would grant him compassion “before this man.”
    - ii. Successful in what?
    - iii. But who is this man and how would he even have access to him?
    - iv. The man is the king and his access is because of his unique position.
  - b. The book of Tobit, an ancient work from the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century BC and set centuries earlier includes this line about a cupbearer - “Now Ahikar was cupbearer, keeper of the signet, and in charge of administration of the accounts, for Esarhaddon had appointed him second to himself.”
  - c. Nehemiah is the central human character in the story.
    - i. He isn’t a priest, prophet, or king. He was a layman but he was unusually burdened with zeal for the glory of the God of Israel.
    - ii. He starts as a cupbearer. (1:1-2:10)
    - iii. He became a wall-builder (2:11-6:19)
    - iv. Then he became a governor (7-13)
      - 1. Far more difficult task than rebuilding the wall was rebuilding the spiritual life of the people.
- 5. What’s the point?

- a. God will be **faithful** to His promises.
  - i. He promised to bring them back to the land. Nehemiah was praying in light of that promise, trusting that God will do it.
  - ii. Nehemiah is the central HUMAN character in the story. But the main character is the promise-keeping God of Israel.
- b. God uses **human** leaders.
  - i. Nehemiah prayed and he planned. He intercedes and he leads.
  - ii. I encourage you to read Nehemiah this week and watch for ways that Nehemiah prays and ways that he leads.





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