

BUILD MY LIFE

"THE TROUBLE WITH RUBBLE"

NEHEMIAH 1:1-11

The book of Nehemiah tells the story of a truly a remarkable man. One author describes him this way, "God's promises for the future seldom come to pass unless some person 'catches the vision' and works with God to bring the future to reality. Nehemiah was just such a person" (Frederick C. Holmgren, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, ITC, 89). He understood what God envisioned for the exiles who had returned to Jerusalem from Babylon where they had been taken by Nebuchadnezzar almost 150 years before (586-444 B.C.). He knew that Jerusalem had been destroyed and his people deported to Babylon because they had disobeyed the Law of Moses. He also knew that God had promised to restore them to their land and bless them if they returned to him to obey his commands. Based on what God had said and what God was doing, Nehemiah caught the vision of a restored, secure Jewish community in the land and worked with God to see the vision realized. As far as we know, God did not tell Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem and rebuild the walls of the city. God did not need to. When Nehemiah heard that the Jewish remnant in Jerusalem was in trouble, he realized the seriousness of the situation, recognized what needed to be done, and resolved to do something about it—with God's help.

God's promises for the future seldom come to pass unless some person 'catches the vision' and works with God to bring the future to reality.

— Federick C. Holmgren

This Week's Core Competency

Humility – I choose to esteem other above myself.

No one can be humble by *trying hard* to be humble. Such effort amounts to a fool's errand. Humility is more likely to result from *failure* rather than *success*, from *servicing others* rather than *being served*. Generally speaking, virtue is rooted in right beliefs and right practices. In our context, Core Beliefs + Core Practices = Core Virtues. This can be illustrated from the experience of Nehemiah. In his prayer of confession in the first chapter of his book, he acknowledges that the God of heaven is faithful to the covenant he made with his people Israel. What's more, he acknowledges that God had said to Moses, "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name" (vv. 8-9). Nehemiah believes these things and weds his beliefs to the practice of prayer. He prays to God confessing the sins of the Israelites, including himself and his family, which resulted in their captivity. He agrees with God when he says, "We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses" (v. 7). And then he petitions God to remember what he said to Moses and restore them in the land for "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand" (v. 10). Nehemiah's is the perfect expression of 2 Chronicles 7:14. "If my people, who are called by my name,

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will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

day 1 ENCOUNTER – read God's word to put yourself in touch with him.

Nehemiah 1:1-11

1 *The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:*

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

3 They said to me, "Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire."

4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. 5 Then I said:

"LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses.

8 "Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'

10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man."

I was cupbearer to the king.

Cf., complementary passages

Deuteronomy 30:1-4

1 When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, 2 and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, 3 then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. 4 Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back.

1 Kings 8:46-51

46 "When your people sin against you—for there is no one who does not sin—and you become angry with them and give them over to their enemies, who take them captive to their own lands, far away or near; 47 and if they have a change of heart in the land where they are held captive, and repent and plead with you in the land of their captors and say, 'We have sinned, we have done wrong, we have acted wickedly'; 48 and if they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies who took them captive, and pray to you toward the land you gave their ancestors, toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name; 49 then from heaven, your dwelling place, hear their prayer and their plea, and uphold their cause. 50 And forgive your people, who have sinned against you; forgive all the offenses they have committed against you, and cause their captors to show them mercy; 51 for they are your people and your inheritance, whom you brought out of Egypt, out of that iron-smelting furnace."

EXAMINE – what the passage says before you decide what it means.

* Bracket "month of Kislev in the twentieth year" in v. 1.

* Circle "Jewish remnant" in v. 2 and "exile" in vv. 2, 3.

* Underline "mourned," "fasted," and "prayed" in v. 4.

* Bracket "covenant of love" in v. 5.

* Circle "LORD" in v. 5.

* Circle "confess" in v. 6.

* Box "but" indicating contrast in v. 9.

day **2**

EXPLORE – the answer to these questions to better understand what the passage means.

Consult the explanation of the message and the notes to follow if you need help.

1. *When* and *where* does Nehemiah's story begin?
2. Describe *conditions* in Judah and Jerusalem that trigger what happens next in the book.
3. Nehemiah's *threefold* reaction to the news from Judah (v. 4) is the mark of what virtue?
4. Nehemiah says he is praying for the people of Israel "day and night" (v. 6). What does he mean by that?
5. Describe what Nehemiah believed about the LORD based on the content of his prayer.
6. Identify the substance of his confession; what did he actually confess?
7. Explain the *contrast* introduced in verse 9.
8. Describe the kind of success Nehemiah wants from the LORD (v. 11b).
9. **Discussion:** Talk about what you find *exemplary* in Nehemiah.

day 3

EXAMINE – an explanation of the message to better understand the meaning of the passage.

Before they entered the Promised Land, God said that he would bless Israel if they obeyed the Mosaic covenant and he would curse them if they disobeyed it (Dt 28). The history of the nation reflects God's faithfulness to his word. When his people were obedient to the law, God blessed them. Unfortunately, more often than not they were disobedient, and when they were, he disciplined them. In the end he scattered them among the nations like he said he would if they persisted in their disobedience (Dt 28:64; cf. 1Ki 8:46-51; 9:6-9).

In the opening chapter of the book we meet Nehemiah, who is serving as cupbearer to the king of Persia in his winter palace located in Susa. We know nothing about his family background other than that his father's name was Hakaliah and he had a brother named Hanani. We are not told his age in chapter one. Therefore, we can only speculate that his great-grandparents were either taken into captivity when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. or were born soon afterward and that he must have been born about the time Esther became queen in Persia (479 B.C.). As the king's cupbearer, Nehemiah's duties included filling the royal wine cup after first washing it out. Then before offering it to the king, he had to dip out a little wine and swallow it to show that it was not poisoned. When not attending the king, he guarded the entrance to the royal apartment and controlled access to the king. His rise to a position of such prominence suggests something about his character. "A mighty monarch such as the king of Persia would select for that position a man who was wise and discreet, and consistently honest and trustworthy. Nehemiah's position alone reveals much about his intellectual capabilities, his emotional maturity, and his spiritual status" (Gene A. Getz, "Nehemiah," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, 674).

Verses 1-2 introduce the book's central figure and author, Nehemiah, and describe the setting. *Historically*, the book opens in the month of Kislev, the ninth month in the Hebrew calendar, in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes I, which corresponds to late November to early December 445-444 B.C. *Geographically*, Nehemiah is in Susa, one of five royal cities in the Persian empire, the others being

Babylon, Ecbatana, Pasargadae, and Persepolis. Susa (or Shushan, in Hebrew) was a winter capital of Artaxerxes (cf. Est 1:2). Ecbatana was a summer capital (cf. Ezr 6:2). The main Persian capital at this time was Persepolis. Then and there Nehemiah questioned Hanani, his brother, who had recently returned from Judah along with other men, about the exiles, who had returned to Judah from Babylon in 538 and 458 B.C., and about Jerusalem.

Verses 3-4 contain the substance of their report and Nehemiah's reaction. They report that the people are in trouble and living in disgrace and that Jerusalem is defenseless—its wall is razed to the ground and its gates burned with fire. Nehemiah's response is that of a godly man; he mourns, fasts, and prays for days. One author comments: "Nehemiah spends his off-duty hours for several days mourning, fasting, weeping, and praying—seeking, apparently, that God should show him what to pray for specifically (a constantly necessary step, be it said, in the practice of intercession) (1:3-4). 'Then,' with his mind clear at last and his petition formed and focused, he presents to God the plea that the Spirit of God has helped him put in order (1:5-11)" (J. I. Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness*, 46).

Verses 5-10 record his prayer of confession and intercession for the people of Israel and the city of Jerusalem. In verses 5-6a, he appeals to the LORD to hear his prayer. His appeal is grounded in the fact that the LORD is "the God of heaven," is "great and awesome," and "keeps his covenant of love." Put differently, the LORD is "holy." In verses 6b-7, he confesses the sins of the Israelites, including himself and his family. The substance of his confession is found in verse 7; it includes no caveats. "We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses." In verses 8-9, he gets to the point of his prayer. He asks God to remember what he said to Moses, but he's asking him to do more than just recall what he said; he's asking him to do what he said. He's asking him to finish what he started. The LORD gathered his people from Babylon and returned them to Judah. Now Nehemiah is asking him to fully restore them by addressing the desperate situation they are in presently. Nehemiah then

justifies his request by reminding the LORD: "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand" (v. 10).

Verse 11 concludes with Nehemiah's personal petition: "Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." "This man" clearly refers to the king, and the "success" clearly refers to permission to rebuild Jerusalem. When Nehemiah appears before Artaxerxes V sometime later, he asks him, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found

favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried that I can rebuild it" (2:5). And the king grants his request.

The *upper* story of this narrative is about God's restoration of his people Israel to their land in accordance with his promise to Abraham and word to Moses. The *lower* story is about a remarkable man, Nehemiah, who knowing the character of the LORD and the content of his word, volunteered to partner with God in the work he was doing.

day **4** **EMBRACE** – how God spoke to you in his word.

The Message of the Passage

When we catch a vision of what God is doing based on what he has said, we should pray and ask him to give us success in everything we do to make that vision a reality.

Our desire is to not be merely hearers of the word, but doers of the word as James teaches in James 1:22.

Identify character qualities in Nehemiah that you would like to have yourself.

God was working to restore his people to their land. Where do you see God working today?

Nehemiah partnered with God in his work. How might you partner with God today?

v. 2 **exile** Israel was divided in 931 B.C. after Solomon died. His son named Rehoboam ruled over the southern tribes called Judah, whereas Jeroboam ruled over the ten northern tribes called Israel. The story of the divided kingdom, which is told in 1 Kings 12-2 Kings 17, ends with this description of the invasion of Israel by Shalmaneser V: "The king of Assyria invaded the entire land, marched against Samaria and laid siege to it for three years. In the ninth year of Hoshea, 722 B.C., the king of Assyria captured Samaria and deported the Israelites to Assyria" (2Ki 17:5, 6). Why did this tragedy happen? The historian goes on to explain that it happened because the people had sinned against the LORD their God (v. 7). They did evil things that provoked the Lord to anger and then ignored the warnings of their prophets. They neither listened to them nor did they turn from their evil ways. So, "Only the tribe of Judah was left, and even Judah did not keep the command of the LORD their God" (vv. 18b, 19a).

The story of the solitary kingdom, Judah, which is told in 2 King 18-25, similarly ends in tragedy. After a spotted history, Judah's last king, named Zedekiah, rebelled against the king of Babylon. So on January 15, 588 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar marched against Jerusalem and laid siege to the city until July 18, 586 B.C. When his army broke through the wall of the city, Zedekiah tried to escape but was soon captured and taken to Nebuchadnezzar at Riblah. There his sons were killed before his eyes, and then he was blinded, bound in shackles and taken to Babylon. "So Judah went into captivity away from her land" (25:21). Why did this tragedy happen? The historian explains, "It was because of the LORD's anger that all this happened to Jerusalem and Judah, and in the end, he thrust them from his presence" (14:20).

Unlike the people of Israel, the people of Judah returned to the land. Actually, there were three returns from Babylon to the land in 538, 458, and 444 B.C., just as there had been three deportations from the land to Babylon in 605, 597, and 586 B.C. Zerubbabel led the first return to rebuild the temple (Ezra 1-6; Haggai and Zechariah). Over a period of years in spite of tremendous opposition from the Samaritans, the returnees eventually completed their task in 515 B.C. Ezra led the second return and reformed the Jewish community (Ezr 7-10). When he arrived, he found the community in a state of spiritual and moral degradation. For one thing, they had intermarried with the neighboring peoples, which brought them into contact with their pagan practices. Nehemiah led the third return to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and called for obedience to the covenant. The wall was rebuilt in fifty-two days—an incredible feat.

v. 4 **mourned . . .** All of these are marks of humble contrition over sin. "During the exile, fasting became a common practice, including solemn fasts to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem and the murder of Gedaliah (see note on Zec 8:19; see also Est 4:16; Da 9:3; 10:3; Zec 7:3-7)" (*The NIV Study Bible*, note on Ne 1:3). "As Ezra did when he heard about the sin of the exiles, Nehemiah sat down and wept, fasted, and prayed. The religious devotion of this practical man cannot be denied" (F Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, NICOT, 153).

v. 5 **covenant of love** I.e., the Mosaic covenant. The expression speaks to the Lord's loyalty to his covenant. He remains faithful to his covenant with Israel even when Israel did not. "Heb., 'the covenant and loyal love.' The phrase is a hendiadys: the first noun retains its full nominal sense, while the second noun functions adjectivally ('loyal love' = loving). Alternatively, the first might function adjectivally and the second noun function as a noun ('covenant and loyal love' = covenant fidelity)" (*The NET Bible*, 11^{tn} on Ne 1:5).

v. 5 **LORD . . .** "Nehemiah began his prayer with praise for God's greatness and His loyal love for His people (v. 5). As Ezra had done, he acknowledged that the Jews had been guilty of sinning against God (cf. Ezra 9:6-7). They had disobeyed the Mosaic Law (v. 7). Nehemiah reminded God of His promise, in the Mosaic 'covenant' (v. 5), to restore His people to their land if they repented (vv. 8-9; cf. Deut. 30:1-5)" (Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Nehemiah," 2019 ed., 12-13, planobiblechapel.org/tcon/notes/pdf/nehemiah.pdf).

v. 6 **confess** Nehemiah included himself and his family in his prayer of confession. "As the Prophet Daniel (Dan. 9:4-6) and as Ezra had prayed (Ezra 9:6-15), Nehemiah acknowledged that he shared the responsibility for Israel's disobedience to God's laws. He said I confess and three times he said we" (Getz, 675). The substance of his confession is found in v. 7.

Family Talk

Encouragement from one parent's heart to another

You know how your kids always behave better in other places than in your home? Our school nurse stopped me one day and asked, "How did you do it?" She wanted to know how I got my kids to be such good friends with each other and went on to compliment them on how self-controlled they were. Once I stopped laughing hysterically and picked myself off the ground, I replied, "Jesus. And an incredible amount of prayer!" What she didn't know was I had specifically prayed for months that my children would be best friends and they would be filled with self-control. Prayer works, my friends, and it's our best line of defense, especially when it comes to our kids. What are you praying for your kids right now? Summer is around the corner and I always feel like it's a time to recapture my kids before sending them into the world again. What aspect of their character or fruit of the spirit (Gal 5:22) are you boldly and specifically praying they develop over the next few months? Are you praying for their friendships? What about their future spouse? Don't panic, but that precious little angel is likely to get married one day and you need to start covering their spouse in prayer today. When Nehemiah was faced with a problem, he immediately went to God in prayer. Let's seek to do the same this summer as we study this beautiful book of restoration and revival.

What Does The Bible Say

Weekly Verse: Read Nehemiah 1

1. Who is Nehemiah and what do you learn about him from this passage?
2. What did Nehemiah ask his brother and what was the answer?
3. What did Nehemiah do when he heard how bad things were?

What Do You Think

Why was Nehemiah so sad that the wall was broken and gates were burned?

What R U Going To Do

Begin each day this week in prayer by writing in your prayer journal.

Core Comp

Humility - I choose to make others more important than me.

Memory Verse

Romans 12:12 - *Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer.*

KIDPIX COUPON

I memorized my verse _____, completed *Scrolls* _____, brought Bible _____, brought a friend _____.

Series Discipleship Challenge located in KidPix Store.

Child's name _____ Grade ____ Parent's signature _____

Earn 1 token by completing the PantegoKids Bible study and another token by reciting the memory verse.

Questions: Kids@pantego.org

30 CORE COMPETENCIES

10 CORE BELIEFS

Trinity *2 Corinthians 13:14*

I believe the God of the Bible is the only true God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Salvation By Grace *Ephesians 2:8-9*

I believe a person comes into a right relationship with God by His grace, through faith in Jesus Christ.

Authority of the Bible *2 Timothy 3:16-17*

I believe the Bible is the Word of God and has the right to command my belief and action.

Personal God *Psalms 121:1-2*

I believe God is involved in and cares about my daily life.

Identity in Christ *John 1:12*

I believe I am significant because of my position as a child of God.

Church *Ephesians 4:15-16*

I believe the church is God's primary way to accomplish His purposes on earth today.

Humanity *John 3:16*

I believe all people are loved by God and need Jesus Christ as their Savior.

Compassion *Psalms 82:3-4*

I believe God calls all Christians to show compassion to those in need.

Eternity *John 14:1-4*

I believe there is a heaven and a hell and that Jesus Christ is returning to judge the earth and to establish His eternal kingdom.

Stewardship *1 Timothy 6:17-19*

I believe that everything I am or own belongs to God.

10 CORE PRACTICES

Worship *Psalms 95:1-7*

I worship God for who He is and what He has done for me.

Prayer *Psalms 66:16-20*

I pray to God to know Him, to lay my request before Him and to find direction for my daily life.

Bible Study *Hebrews 4:12*

I read the Bible to know God, the truth, and to find direction for my daily life.

Single-mindedness *Matthew 6:33*

I focus on God and His priorities for my life.

Spiritual Gifts *Romans 12:4-6*

I know and use my spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purposes.

Biblical Community *Acts 2:44-47*

I fellowship with other Christians to accomplish God's purposes in my life, others' lives, and in the world.

Giving Away My Time *Colossians 3:17*

I give away my time to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Money

2 Corinthians 8:7

I give away my money to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Faith *Ephesians*

6:19-20

I give away my faith to fulfill God's purposes.

Giving Away My Life *Romans 12:1*

I give away my life to fulfill God's purposes.

10 CORE VIRTUES

Joy *John 15:11*

I have inner contentment and purpose in spite of my circumstances.

Peace *Philippians 4:6-7*

I am free from anxiety because things are right between God, myself, and others.

Faithfulness *Proverbs 3:3-4*

I have established a good name with God and with others based on my long-term loyalty to those relationships.

Self-Control *Titus 2:11-13*

I have the power, through Christ, to control myself.

Humility *Philippians 2:3, 4*

I choose to esteem others above myself.

Love *1 John 4:10-12*

I sacrificially and unconditionally love and forgive others.

Patience *Proverbs 14:29*

I take a long time to overheat and endure patiently under the unavoidable pressures of life.

Kindness/Goodness *1 Thess. 5:15*

I choose to do the right things in my relationships with others.

Gentleness *Philippians 4:5*

I am thoughtful, considerate and calm in dealing with others.

Hope *Hebrews 6:19-20*

I can cope with the hardships of life and with death because of the hope I have in Jesus Christ.

About the Authors

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