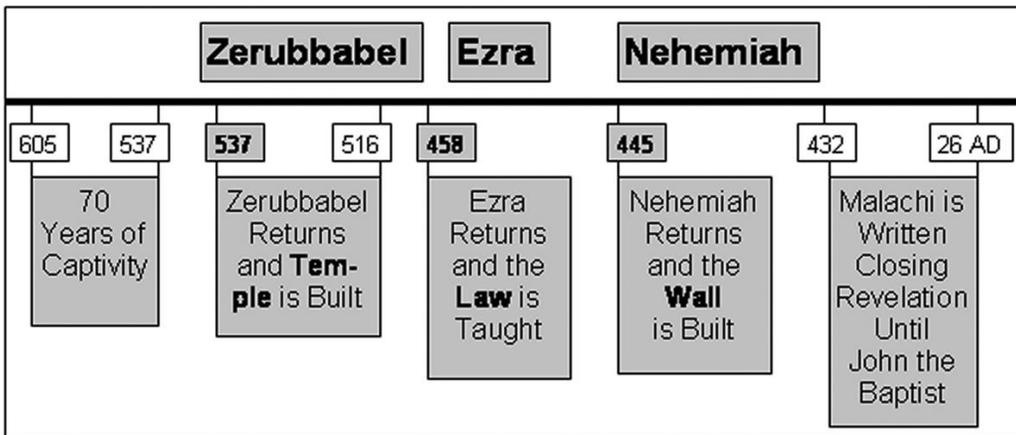


THE GOSPEL PROJECT – CHRONOLOGICAL EXILE and RETURN GOD THE PROVIDER *Nehemiah Prays*

Today, we turn to a godly man of prayer, Nehemiah, as we continue our study of the time period after the Jewish Babylonian captivity and God’s people are slowly returning to the Promised Land. This chart helps us understand the time of their return. From the dates on the chart it appears that Nehemiah was most likely unborn at the time of the first return.



Nehemiah whose name means ‘the LORD is My Comfort’. served as a cupbearer to the Persian King Artaxerxes. Most believe that King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) who married Esther was Artaxerxes’ father. Esther could have been still living when

Nehemiah served as cupbearer. The city of Nehemiah’s forefathers (Jerusalem) was more than a 1,000 miles from where he lived in Susa. Nehemiah’s staying in Persia did not mean that Nehemiah had no interest in his people. In fact, from the prayer that is recorded in chapter 1, we clearly find Nehemiah praying out of a burden for his people.

Read Nehemiah 1:1-4 (ESV) ¹ *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,* ² *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.* ³ *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.”* 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.*

In the beginning of his testimony, Nehemiah mentions his brother Hanani’s return from Judah. Therefore, it seems that Nehemiah had family in Judah while he was serving the Persian king. No particulars of the family are revealed other than Hanani was later appointed by Nehemiah to be in charge of Jerusalem’s military protection.

Recall that when Nebuchadnezzar took the Kingdom of Judah into captivity, he made the city of Jerusalem uninhabitable. In addition to tearing down the city walls, he destroyed the temple of the LORD. For a period of time, the city of Jerusalem and the tribe of Judah ceased to exist. After Cyrus the Persian king took control of the Babylonian Empire, he issued a decree allowing all captured peoples to return to their homelands. Zerubbabel returned with the first group and constructed a new but smaller temple. Ezra, the priest, returned with the second group. King Artaxerxes gave Ezra a royal letter granting him civil as well as religious authority and provided the finances needed to furnish Zerubbabel's Temple.

As the king's cupbearer at each meal, Nehemiah's responsibility was to taste the king's wine for either quality or poison or both. After tasting, he served the wine to the king. In such a position, Nehemiah was more than a servant; he was a trusted confidant and advisor. His position was one of responsibility, power, and honor in the Persian Empire.

Would Nehemiah's position as cupbearer to the king be the reason the LORD would use Nehemiah? I don't think so. It is obvious that the LORD had placed Nehemiah in his position much like he had placed Esther in her position that Mordecai called *such a time as this*. However, God always looks at the heart – not a person's appearance or position. (**1 Samuel 16:7**) What did the LORD see when He looked into Nehemiah's heart? (1) God saw a man of burden. Nehemiah had a burden for God's people reflecting the heart of God Himself. (2) Nehemiah was a man of prayer. In Nehemiah's valley of despair for God's people, he would share God's vision for the people! (3) God knew when Nehemiah 'caught the vision', he would become a man of action in God's own timing!

Nehemiah prays to God who forgives and redeems.

Read Nehemiah 1:5-11 (ESV) ⁵ And I said, "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, 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 ... confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. ⁷ We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments ... that you commanded your servant Moses. ⁸ Remember the word that you commanded ... 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 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.' ¹⁰ They are ... your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. ¹¹ 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." Now I was cupbearer to the king.

This prayer is the first of 12 prayers recorded in this book. The book opens and closes with prayer. It is obvious that Nehemiah was a man of faith who depended wholly on the LORD to help him accomplish the desires of his heart. **Psalms 37:4 (ESV)** ⁴ Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart.

Nehemiah begins his prayer by addressing “the God of Heaven.” This is the title that the Gentile King Cyrus had used when he announced that the Jews would be allowed to return to their homeland. Nehemiah called upon the great and awesome God. **Psalm 66:3 (ESV)**³ *Say to God, “How awesome are your deeds! So great is your power that your enemies come cringing to you.* Yes, there are times when we feel at a loss for words in prayer. But, that should not be a problem! Just begin with declaring to the Lord how awesome and great He is! Prayer – conversation with God should begin with our praise.

Nehemiah’s prayer was full of confession. Nehemiah was not even born when his ancestors sinned to the point of coming under the judgment of God and being taken into the Babylonian captivity. Yet, he willingly declares: **We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments.** Today, we should remember **Romans 3:10 (ESV)**¹⁰ *as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one.*

As Christians, we often blame politicians, the younger generation and non-believers for the evils happening in America. However, God places the responsibility of healing, restoration and prosperity of our nations on the shoulders of His children. **2 Chronicles 7:14 (ESV)**¹⁴ *if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.* So, here in the land of Persia, Nehemiah was humbling himself, praying and seeking God’s face – yes, turning from his wicked ways. We should do the same in our generation.

Nehemiah began his prayer with praise and continued with confession of sin. He then closed with a confession of confidence. Unlike Elijah, who thought he was the only faithful Jew left, Nehemiah had confidence that God would raise up other people to help him in his work. He was sure that many other Jews were also praying and that they would rally to the cause once they heard that God was at work.

Today, we are not praying for the walls of a city – yet, we should be about our Father’s business – praying for the building of His kingdom – **Matthew 9:38 (ESV)**³⁸ *therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.”*

Speaking about the church's ministry of prayer, the late Alan Redpath said, “There is too much working before men and too little waiting before God.” Nehemiah prays while he takes action.

Read Nehemiah 2:1-3 (ESV)¹ *In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was before him, I took up the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had not been sad in his presence.*² *And the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, seeing you are not sick? This is nothing but sadness of the heart.” Then I was very much afraid.*³ *I said to the king, “Let the king live forever! Why should not my face be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ graves, lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?”*

Dates are given in both chapters 1 and 2. This little detail reveals that Nehemiah waited in faith. Prayer and patience go together. Four months had passed since Nehemiah had first received the bad news from his homeland. **Isaiah 28:16 (ESV)**¹⁶ *... ‘Whoever believes will not be in haste.’* Waiting on the LORD is not wasting time. True faith in God brings calmness and peace. And yes, I know that waiting patiently in faith for

the LORD to act is often easier said than done. **Philippians 4:13 (ESV)** ¹³ *I can do all things through him who strengthens me.*

Undoubtedly, Nehemiah had been praying for an open door to make his request to the king. Most likely, Nehemiah never imagined that the open door would come because of the look on his face. Nehemiah was not using his countenance as a tool to manipulate the king. The burden in his heart for God's people was just being reflected on his face. In fact, when the king questioned him, Nehemiah was frightened but he did not allow his fear to keep him silent. He freely spoke to the king regarding his sadness. This reminds me of the words of Jesus to the Pharisees when they told him to rebuke His disciples when they were praising Him. **Luke 19:40 (ESV)** ⁴⁰ *He answered, "I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out."* The Lord does not need us to get His message out; however, He does give us the privilege of doing so.

Read Nehemiah 2:4-8 (ESV) ⁴ *Then the king said to me, "What are you requesting?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.* ⁵ *And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' graves, that I may rebuild it."* ⁶ *And the king said to me (the queen sitting beside him), "How long will you be gone, and when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me when I had given him a time.* ⁷ *And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given me to the governors ... Beyond the River, that they may let me pass through until I come to Judah,* ⁸ *and a letter to Asaph, the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress of the temple, and for the wall of the city, and for the house that I shall occupy." And the king granted me what I asked, for the good hand of my God was upon me.*

Using our modern way of communicating, we might say that Nehemiah sent the LORD a quick 9-1-1 text message prayer. But don't forget that this emergency message had been backed up by four months of fasting and praying.

Nehemiah had not only been fasting and praying – he had been planning. So when the king asked, *What are you requesting?* He didn't just stand before the king saying, 'well, I just don't know what to do.' No, Nehemiah had a specific plan prepared to lay out before the king. We can summarize his requests this way – give me and send me! Nehemiah knew from the beginning that he could not leave his post without the king's permission. And, he could not accomplish his mission in Jerusalem without the king's authority. From **Ezra 4**, we know that pressure from locals had stopped the work once before. He asked Artaxerxes to appoint him governor of Judah and to give him the authority to rebuild the walls.

Our focus today has been Nehemiah's foundational prayer work prior to rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. From his prayers, we see that Nehemiah had a relationship with the God of Heaven before his work ever began. If we desire to work for the LORD, we too must make praying a way of life. Michael W. Smith says in his song Breathe: This is the air I breathe, Your holy presence living in me. Immanuel – God With Us! It is prayer (conversation with God) that connects us with the Awesome God of Heaven! He is here with His children and He is always listening. We can talk to Him any time – day or night. It has been said: in prayer God hears more than our words, He listens to our hearts.