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Nehemiah Intercedes for Jerusalem

Nehemiah 1: 1-11

Nehemiah intercedes for Jerusalem DIG: What was Nehemiah's burning issue? Why was it so important to him? What did Nehemiah do about his passion? What costs was he willing to pay? What does that say about his relationship with God? How vital was his relationship with God? How vital a force do you think prayer was for him: Daily routine? Crisis times only? Intimate? Energizing? What do you see of God's nature through Nehemiah's prayer? What does Nehemiah see in himself, the more he focuses on God? What does he recall as he persists in prayer? What do Nehemiah's actions tell you about his character?

REFLECT: What do you feel passionately about? How grieved are you about the physical and spiritual state of God's people? Enough to pray? Fast? Act? When news from around the world of exiled people, brokenness and famine hits you, do you react anything like Nehemiah? Do you tend to despair over what is? Accept what is? Or pray for what *should* be? Why is that? What is the one thing you can do this week about an issue you feel passionately about?

445 BC During the ministry of Nehemiah (to see link click [Bt](#) - The Third Return).
Compiled by: The Chronicler from the Ezra and Nehemiah memoirs
(see [Ac](#) - Ezra-Nehemiah from a Jewish Perspective: **The Nehemiah Memoirs**)

Thirteen years after **Ezra's** spiritual revival, **Nehemiah** came to **Jerusalem** to revive the spirit of **the** discouraged **exiles** and bring **them** hope (**Isaiah 57:14-21**); **ADONAI** used **him** to lead **the Jews** in **rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem** (for a summary of **Nehemiah - From Persia to Jerusalem** [click here](#)). **Nehemiah** comes to us as a man on top of **his** profession, but we know nothing of **his** background or the stages of **his** rise to position and influence.¹⁹⁹ We can make a reasonable assumption that **Nehemiah** grew up in Babylon among the exiles and that for some reason - possible because **he** was too young - **he** did not return with **Ezra**.

Now it happened that in the month of Chislev (November-December) in the twentieth year of King Artakh'shasta, I was in Shushan, or Susa the capitol (Nehemiah 1:1).

Nehemiah first appears **in the fortress** (capital) **of Susa**, about 225 miles east of Babylon, built on three hills overlooking the Shaur River. **ADONAI** put **Nehemiah in Susa** just as **He** had put **Esther** there a generation before, and just as **He** had put **Joseph** in Egypt and **Dani’el** in Babylon. When **God** wants to accomplish a work, **He** always prepares **His** workers and puts them in the right places at the right time.²⁰⁰

Susa was the winter resort of **the Persian** kings, located on the western edge of Iran about 150 miles east of the Tigris River. Greater **Susa** stood on a mound about two and a quarter miles in circumference, covering nearly 250 acres. The ten-acre citadel was located on an elevated area on the northern point of the site. **Susa** itself was an ancient city of the Elamite, **Persian**, and Parthian empires of Iran, and one of the oldest known settlements of the world. **The city** had been taken during the reign of Cyrus at the time of **the First Return** of exiles in 538 BC. The palace was built by Darius approximately fifty years before the period in question here in **Nehemiah Chapter One**. Modern excavations of the site have shown an audience hall, where **the Persians** held court. It was a square building over 350 feet long on each side, featuring seventy-two stone columns, each estimated at eighty feet tall.²⁰¹

No doubt, it was just routine day when **Nehemiah** met **his** older **brother Hanani** who had just returned with **some men from Jerusalem**, but it turned out to be a turning point in **Nehemiah’s** life. Like large doors, great life-changing events can swing open on very small hinges. It was just another day when **Moses** went out to care for **his** sheep, but **he** heard the call of **YHVH** and became a prophet (**Exodus 3**). It was just an ordinary day when **David** was called home from shepherding **his** flock, but on that day, **he** was anointed king (**First Samuel 16**). It was a normal day when **Peter, Andrew, James** and **John** were mending **their** nets after a night of futile fishing, but it was a day when **Yeshua** called **them** to be **fishers of men (Luke 5:1-11)**. You never know what **God** has in store for you, even in a commonplace conversation, so keep your heart open to **His** leading.²⁰²

It has been said that a true **Jew** never completely forgets **Jerusalem**. This was certainly true of **Nehemiah**. **He** wanted to know about **the people** and the condition of **the Holy City**. **Nehemiah** asked **Hanani** about **the Israelites, the remnant who had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem**. **They said to him, “The remnant is in great distress and disgrace” (Nehemiah 1:2-3a)** The word translated **distress** (Hebrew: *raah*) means *misery, distress, calamity, or injury*. It is closely related to a term in other Semitic languages that means *sharp, cutting, or piercing*. The picture painted by this term portrays someone suffering from the lacerations of cutting words. **The Jews** were severely criticized and slandered by people who were enemies of the faith. Not only that, but **Hanani** related that

the walls of Jerusalem were **broken down and its gates had been burned with fire (Nehemiah 1:3b)**. In **Nehemiah's** day, pagans thought **the walls** and fortifications that surrounded a god's temple reflected his strength. The lack of **city walls** in **Jerusalem** reflected badly on the character of **Ha'Shem** in the eyes of **Judah's** neighbors, and it also left **the Temple** unprotected against further attacks and destruction.

Nehemiah was heartbroken.

In the fourth example of leadership in the life of Nehemiah, there are four vital factors that characterize the lives of competent spiritual leaders (see [Bt - The Third Return](#)).

First, a leader sees the needs of the problem clearly. The beginning of **verse 4** reads: **Upon hearing these words . . . Nehemiah** wasn't preoccupied. **He** didn't live in a dream world, isolated from reality. **He** asked, "What's the condition?" **Hanani** answered, "It's a miserable situation." **He** heard what **his brother** said. You might think recognizing needs is an elementary concept, especially for leaders. But there are many people in responsible leadership positions who never seem to see the problems they ought to be solving. Now I think people can be so problem-oriented that problems are all they can think of - and that's not good either. But a person who is a leader has a clear recognition of needs.

Are you aware of needs? How about the needs in your own family? Are you sensitive as a parent or a spouse? Maybe you live alone. Do you know what is on your parents' or friends' hearts? If you teach, do you know your students' needs? If you are in business leadership, are you in touch with more than the perks of your executive privilege? What about those otherwise hidden areas where problems start to fester?

Second, a leader is personally concerned with the needs. **Nehemiah** went a step beyond recognition of the problem. **He** not only heard about the matter, but **he** identified with it. **I sat down and wept and mourned for days (Nehemiah 1:4a)**. You never lighten the load unless you first have felt the pressure within your own soul. You are never used of **God** to bring a blessing to others until **He** has opened your eyes and made you see things as they are.

As we study **Nehemiah** as a model for leadership, realize that we are not only talking about **Nehemiah** and some ancient **City** in the far historical past. We are talking about today! The higher you are elevated in what the world calls success, the easier it is to fade into theoretical preoccupation and to leave the realistic "lesser things" to work themselves out.



Third, a serious leader goes to the LORD with the need. Prayer is absolutely essential in the life of a leader. **I prayed and fasted before the God of heaven (Nehemiah 1:4b).** This prayer is the second of twelve prayers recorded in Nehemiah (9:5ff, here, 2:4, 4:4, 4:9, 5:19, 6:9, 6:14, 13:14, 13:22, 13:29, 13:31). Nehemiah's story begins and ends with prayer. It is obvious that Nehemiah was a man of faith who depended entirely on ADONAI to help him accomplish the work that He had called him to do.²⁰³ First, he praised ADONAI. Then I said: YHVH, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps the covenant and lovingkindness (see the commentary on [Ruth Af - The Concept of Chesed](#)) with those who love Him and keep His mitzvot (Nehemiah 1:5).

Who did Nehemiah work for? The king of Persia. Was this king great and mighty on the earth? The mightiest! But compared to YHVH, King Artakh'shasta was nothing. And so, it stands to reason that when we go to God in prayer, we put things into proper perspective. If you are having difficulty loving or relating to someone, take him or her to God in prayer. Bother the LORD with this person. Don't be bothered with them - leave them at the throne.

Next, he confessed his part of the problem. Please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant that I am praying before You today persistently, both day and night on behalf of Your servants, the Bnei-Yisrael. Notice the progression of Nehemiah's confession. First, he acknowledged that the children of Isra'el had sinned against YHVH by pursuing other gods (Ezeki'el 81-18). I am confessing the sins of Bnei-Yisrael that we have sinned against You (Nehemiah 1:6). Then he confessed that his ancestral house had sinned, which encompassed his family and those for whom he was personally responsible. Finally, he acknowledged that he was personally guilty of sin and failure before God.²⁰⁴ Nehemiah knew that God would hear; he was asking God to take action. How great is YHVH that He can pay attention to each of our prayers, millions and millions of them around the world, individually and simultaneously! Our minds cannot comprehend it, but the LORD is beyond our comprehension.

We have acted very corruptly (Hebrew: *habal*, meaning *to offend*) **against You. We have not kept the mitzvot, the statutes, nor the rulings of the Torah that You commanded Your servant Moses (Nehemiah 1:7).** The concept of disobedience goes right to the heart of the matter. **God's mitzvot** are not trivial; **He** knows what is best for **His people** and for all society. **Nehemiah** recognized the seriousness of disobeying **Ha'Shem's** ethical demands. We have many ethical dilemmas in our day that are not easily solved; however, we often make them more difficult by not accepting the clear teaching of **the Scriptures**.

Next, **he** claimed the promise. **Please recall the word that You commanded Your servant Moses**, saying: **If you act unfaithfully, I will scatter you among the peoples.** What was **Nehemiah** doing? **He** was quoting Scripture (**Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 30**). **He** knew the Torah. It was as if **he** was saying, "**LORD**, I open the Torah before **You**. I bring **You** the very words **You** spoke, the promise **You** made. And I am claiming it right now!" What was the promise? It was twofold. The promise was that if **the people of Isra'el** disobeyed, they would go into a foreign land. That had come to pass (see the commentary on [Jeremiah Gu - Seventy Years of Imperial Babylonian Rule](#)). The second part was that when the time of captivity had ended, **ADONAI** would bring **the Jews** back to **Jerusalem** and protect **them**. That part was unfilled.²⁰⁵

So, **Nehemiah** repeated **God's** own words back to **Him** as if to claim the promise: **But if you return to Me and obey My mitzvot, and do them, then even if your dispersed people are at the ends of the heavens, I will gather them from there, and bring them back to the place where I have chosen for My Name to dwell (Nehemiah 1:8-9).** Most of this prayer is based on **Deuteronomy**, many phrases of which are practically the same (**Deuteronomy 4:27, 6:1, 7:9, 9:29, 10:17, 12:5, 21:15, 28:64, 30:1-4**). **Nehemiah** realized that **ADONAI** had fulfilled much of **Deuteronomy 30:1-10**; but **he** was convinced that **God's** promise included more than the situation in which **the Jerusalem community** found **itself** at that moment. **Nehemiah** challenges us to **pray** based on an understanding of **God's** purpose and will as found in **His Word**. **He** also reminds us that we can always begin again in our relationship with **YHVH** if we return to **Him** in humility.

They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great strength and by Your mighty hand (Nehemiah 1:10). This is almost a copy of **Deuteronomy 9:29**. **Redemption** involves payment of a price to reclaim a person from slavery. Here reference is made to **God's** act in delivering **Isra'el** from slavery in Egypt. The exodus theme is used many times in the B'rit Chadashah to emphasize redemption from the power and judgment of sin, and the changed relationship between **the Redeemer** and

the redeemed. You know that you were redeemed from the futile way of life handed down from your ancestors - not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood like that of a lamb without defect or spot, the blood of Messiah (First Peter 1:18-19).²⁰⁶

Next, **he** brought **his prayer** before **God**. **Nehemiah** finished **his prayer** by saying: **Please, my Lord, let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and to the prayer of Your servants who delight in revering Your Name (Nehemiah 1:11a).**

Fourth, a leader is available to personally meet the need. Give Your servant success today and grant compassion in the presence of this man, the king (Nehemiah 1:11b). A genuine leader is marked by diligent faithfulness in the midst of the task. It is demonstrated by being available and personally involved in meeting needs. **He** didn't pray for **God** to send someone else, nor did **he** argue that **he** was ill-equipped for such a difficult task. Like **Isaiah**, **he** simply said: **Here I am, send me (Isaiah 6:8).** **Nehemiah** knew **he** would have to approach **the king** and ask for a leave of absence.



Now I was a cupbearer to the king of Persia (Nehemiah 1:11c). On the surface, this doesn't sound very impressive. **His** position sounds more like a dishwasher, or at best something like a butler. But **the cupbearer** was far more important than that. The office of **cupbearer** was a place of great honor in **the Persian** court. Being in the daily presence of the king, and seeing him in a relaxed atmosphere, **the cupbearer** had many opportunities to ingratiate **himself** into the good-will of the king, and therefore doubtless obtained many favors that were denied to others. In fact, it has been suggested by historians that the cupbearer typically wielded enormous political power, even more than the king's own family.

They held **the cup** for the king in **their** left hand, and in the right hand a fly-flap made of split palm leaves. A long napkin, richly embroidered and fringed, is thrown over the left

shoulder for the king to wipe his lips with. Among the Medes and **the Persians the cupbearer**, before serving the king, poured some of the wine into the palm of **his** hand and drank it; so that if the wine were poisoned, the king would not be harmed. An attempt was made, for example, by an assassin named Bogoas to poison the last of **the Persian kings**, Darius III, before **the Persian** Empire fell to the onslaught of Alexander the Great. The attempt failed when Darius got wind of it and made the assassin drink the poison himself. Pharaoh had **cupbearers** to attend him (see the commentary on **Genesis Jn - So the Chief Cupbearer Told Joseph His Dream**); Solomon also had **them** (**First Kings 10:5; Second Chronicles 9:4**).²⁰⁷

Nehemiah had **prayed for days**, but now **he** was at the decisive moment. After **prayer**, action was needed. **He** decided that the time was **today**. **He** asked that **King Artakh'shasta** might be divinely moved to act on behalf of **the righteous of the TaNaKh**. Humanly speaking, **Nehemiah** had no reason to expect such a favor. **Artakh'shasta** had earlier issued a **decree to stop work on the city of Jerusalem** (see **Aw - The Resumption of the Work Under King Darius**). To make such a request was clearly contrary to royal policy and, like Queen **Esther** (see **the commentary on Esther Ba - I Will Go to the King: If I Perish, I Perish**), possibly even cost **him his** life. But **Nehemiah** called **the king "this man,"** perhaps to stress that **he** was only a human in **God's** sovereign hands. Like many after **him**, **Nehemiah's** greatness came from asking great things of a great **God**, and attempting great things in reliance on **Him**.²⁰⁸

Nehemiah pleaded for **compassion (mercy, or not getting what we deserve)**. Compassion is always optional with **ADONAI**. In effect, **Nehemiah** was asking that **he** might be used in some way to help in the cause of the Kingdom. He wasn't exactly sure how that was going to happen. As **cupbearer to King Artakh'shasta**, **he** was committed to doing his duty every day. **The king** ate and drank every day, and **Nehemiah** would have been expected to be in attendance. **God** is sovereign and **His** ways are marvelous, but until things become clearer to **Nehemiah**, all he could do was **fast**, and **pray**, and wait . . . wait in the spirit of David: **I waited patiently for ADONAI. He bent down to me and heard my cry. He brought me up out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire. Then He set my feet on a rock. He made my steps firm (Psalm 40:1-2).**

Perhaps that is where you find ourselves . . . **waiting on the Lord**. The question that faces us is whether we are **waiting** patiently. **Nehemiah** waited for four or five months (**Nehemiah 2:1**) when all **he** could do was pray. But it was the first thing **he desired** to do. Has **God's** Word shaped your **prayer** in this way? Does the love of **Yeshua Messiah** and **His** will in your life lead you to plead in the way **Nehemiah** did?²⁰⁹