

Women's Bible Study – Winter 2019
Nehemiah 1 – Jan. 16th
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I'd like to ask you something. When you are faced with a big problem or challenge, what do you tend to do? Are you someone who quickly attacks a problem, jumping into action to address things immediately? Or are you more methodical in how you approach a challenge, carefully analyzing each step you think you need to take, setting out to eat the metaphorical elephant one bite at a time? Or are you someone who generally tries to avoid problems, hoping that eventually things will work themselves out or at least get easier with time?

Wouldn't it be nice if we could have someone who was an expert problem-solver to mentor us on how to handle problems better? Someone who could look at our situation and tell us where to begin?

Well, one of the reasons I'm so excited about what we're about to study in this book of Nehemiah is that this book is, in effect, the personal memoirs of someone who was an expert at handling challenges. And even in this first chapter, we're going to get some really practical help that could dramatically improve our problem-handling skills.

If you haven't spent much time in this book before, you're in for a real treat. I'm especially excited for all of you who think you don't enjoy the Old Testament that much, because this was the book that turned that around for me years ago. I used to be one of those people who thought it was only really in the New Testament that we learned about how to live this Christian life well, but it was studying Nehemiah years ago that opened my eyes to the practical wisdom of the Old Testament.

We're about to meet someone who will show us what it looks like to be a mature follower of God in all kinds of situations. Even though we're unlikely to face exactly what he did, listen to some of the themes that we'll see him address: responding to God's call on your life, working with challenging people, dealing with fear, handling opposition to what you're trying to accomplish, recommitting yourself to learning and applying Scripture, and, enjoying a vibrant prayer life. Sound good? I think this book may be one of the most encouragingly helpful books in the whole Bible, as well a really fun one to read. About half the chapters are written in the first person, as in, "so there I was, doing such and such, and feeling this way about it" as if we're getting to read his diary. The action is fast-paced and it's so well written and tells such a good story, that I think it would make a great movie script.

So, let's put this book in its historical context. This true story happened in 445–415BC and is the last story to occur in the Old Testament, the last events written down for us before Christ appeared on the scene 400 years later. It's easy to miss that since it's located about halfway through the Old Testament. But as you many know, the Old Testament is arranged by genre rather than time. The first chunk contains the books which tell the narrative history of God's people, which are Genesis through Esther; and then there are

the poetic books known as the writings or what we more frequently call "wisdom literature" which are Job through Song of Solomon; and then the rest of the Old Testament are the books written by the prophets Isaiah through Malachi which overlap with the events in the historical books.

But now you may be looking at this graphic and saying, "Wait a minute, Svea. If Nehemiah's story comes last, why is the book of Esther after it?" I'm glad you asked! You see, in the oldest versions of the Bible, the books of Ezra and Nehemiah were one long, connected book, as this graphic implies. Over time they became split into two, sometimes being called 1 and 2 Ezra, and eventually, as we know them as Ezra and Nehemiah. Esther describes a story which takes place during the events in Ezra, but, like I said, since Ezra and Nehemiah used to be one long book, Nehemiah is still grouped with Ezra and Esther after it even though Nehemiah's story happens last. That's your fun Bible trivia for the day. :)

The book of Nehemiah tells the story of a man who loved and deeply trusted God and above all, wanted to honor Him by restoring security to the newly rebuilt temple in Jerusalem by re-building a protective wall around the city. He had a deep passion for encouraging God's people to know and follow God wholeheartedly. Along the way, we'll see his incredible heart for prayer as he models for us both long, deep intentional prayers as well as his delightful so-called "arrow prayers," you know, the ones you shoot up to heaven quickly when you're in a tight spot saying, "Help me, God!" We're going to see Nehemiah face all kinds of challenges both from outside his community with people actively threatening anything they can think to do to stop him from succeeding, as well as handling challenges within his community such as the poverty they faced.

Now, in order to really understand this book, it is helpful to understand the history and context of the people in it. So I'd like to walk through that a bit first before we jump into chapter 1. Nehemiah lived about 150 years after the Babylonian empire destroyed Jerusalem and took the Israelites into exile. Now, I know some of you Bible study lifers are right with me, but out of respect for those of you who were like, "uh yeah, who are the Israelites again?" I'd like to give a quick overview so that we're all on the same page.

Back in the beginning, God first demonstrated His relationship with people by choosing a specific people group to focus on so that the whole world could observe and learn about Him through these people. These were the Israelites, also known as the Hebrews, and later, the Jews. They originated from the line of the patriarchs whose stories are told in Genesis. These so-called patriarchs are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, and then Jacob, whose name God changed to Israel. Jacob/Israel had 12 sons, and these guys or their sons in Joseph's case began 12 family groups or tribes which made up the nation of Israel. This nation ruled itself for nearly 1000 years, but eventually decided they wanted a king like the other nations, and made Saul their first king. He was succeeded by David and then his son, Solomon. After Solomon, a family feud resulted in a big split of the Israelites. 10 of the 12 tribes formed what became the Northern Kingdom of Israel and 2 of the tribes (Judah and Benjamin) became the Southern Kingdom. The Northern Kingdom was later conquered by the Assyrian Empire. Now the Assyrian strategy when taking over a society was to basically assimilate that society into their own culture. So those 10 tribes intermarried with the Assyrians and soon lost their national and religious

integrity. It is from these people that the group known as the Samaritans arose, as in "The Good Samaritan," and it is for this reason, that these former Jews relinquished their national and religious purity as God's people and assimilated into the pagan culture that the Jews in Jesus's day had such bitter dislike for the Samaritans. I'm telling you this about the Northern Tribe because a key character in Nehemiah is one of these former Northern Tribes hybrid Jew-pagan. He's a nasty guy named Sanballat who is going to cause all kinds of trouble for Nehemiah because he has serious resentment issues towards the remnant of Jews who remained faithful to God. Now, the Southern Kingdom of the remaining 2 tribes (which again were Judah and Benjamin) were also conquered, them by the Babylonian Empire led by King Nebuchadnezzar. Unlike the Assyrians who assimilated the people they conquered, the Babylonians took the Jews captive and made them serve the Empire, but allowed them to keep their identity as Jews which some did better than others. Over the hundred or so years, the Babylonian empire was taken over by the Medes and then the Persians. One very powerful Persian king, Cyrus the great, had this interesting idea that rather than follow any one god, it might be a good idea to keep them all happy, and so he told these exiled Jews that they were free to go back to their religious home in Jerusalem and rebuild the temple to their God, thinking that he would only benefit if the Israelites' God was appeased.

And that brings us up to the book of Ezra, the book right before Nehemiah. Give me another minute to recap that for you since, remember, Nehemiah is kind of a sequel to Ezra so it's helpful to know the story that came first. In Part 1 of our story, a man named Zerubbabel rallied a first group of exiled Jews to go back to the ruins of Jerusalem to begin the rebuilding process. Just, imagine what it would have been like for these guys. Most of them had probably been born in Babylon and had never known life in Jerusalem. They grew up hearing stories from their parents about life in the good old days, and probably were raised with a dream of when they might return to their homeland, but the reality was that they were returning to the ruins of a home they'd not known, to a city that was lying in rubble and completely non-functional, no homes to live in, no gardens producing food, and no temple in which to worship.

Rebuilding the temple became their focus, and appropriately so, because they knew that God had allowed Jerusalem to be destroyed because their ancestors had forsaken Him, and now it was time to return to worshipping God rightly. Some of the surrounding nations got word of this and wanted to get in on the action, not because they wanted to worship God but because they were thinking that the Jews would become powerful with God on their side. When Zerubbabel, knowing their motivations, turned them down, they became angry and sought revenge by sending a letter to the current king of the Persian Empire saying that if he knew what was good for him he'd stop the rebuilding of this wicked and rebellious city because if he was so foolish as to allow them to rebuild, the Israelites would withhold money from the King, would probably dishonor him and rebel against him, and maybe even take over the whole region. None of these threats were true or realistic, but the letter did the trick, and the king put the kibosh on rebuilding Jerusalem. And the work was effectively stopped for 16 years. But God raised up two prophets to get the work on the temple going again. These prophets were Haggai and Zechariah, and you can read what they said in their books which are found later in the Old Testament. Eventually, the temple was rebuilt and dedicated, and for a brief time, it

looked like things were getting back on track for the Israelites. All of that story of rebuilding the temple is found in Ezra chapters 1–6.

Then the rest of the book of Ezra takes place about 60 years later. When Ezra 7 begins, we'd hope that after 60 years of this rebuilt temple, things would be in full operational mode for the Israelites, but sadly, that wasn't the case. Ezra led a second group of Jews from the Persian capital back to Jerusalem, because God had laid it on Ezra's heart to see that the people knew and followed the Law of the Lord. He went and tried to preach the Word mightily, but found that the people had intermarried with the surrounding nations and were becoming infiltrated with their pagan practices and not faithfully following the Lord. Ezra ends really abruptly on this downer note.

And that brings us to where we begin here in Nehemiah. Chapter 1 happens 12 years after Ezra left with that second group of Jews who went back to rebuild and repopulate Jerusalem. It opens with a few of the Jews who had gone back returned to the city of Susa in the Persian Empire giving a report on what was happening in Jerusalem. So if you haven't already, open your Bibles to Nehemiah, which is about halfway through the Old Testament, or find it in your Bible app, and let's discover the status of the Holy City and see what we learn about Nehemiah from his account of the events. We'll read the first four verses.

"The words of Nehemiah son of Hakaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, ²Hanani, 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.

³They 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."

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

And with that, our story is off and running. I love that this book reads like Nehemiah's personal journal. Like a journal entry, he begins by telling us the date and place. Now to us, Kislev in the 20th year might not be obvious, but it really is quite specific. The Hebrew month of Kislev overlaps our months of November and December, and the 20th year refers to the number of years that the current king had been reigning, King Artaxerxes of Persia in this case. That's how they dated things in the Ancient Near East, marking time by the years of the reigning king. Since historians know the dates of Artaxerxes reign, we know then that Nehemiah is describing a day that happened in early December of our year 445BC.

It's also an interesting detail that he mentions that he was in the citadel of Susa. Another famous Old Testament story took place in the citadel of Susa. Anyone remember what that was? Yes, Esther. Remember I said Esther took place before Nehemiah even though their order is reversed in our Bible. So, this event Nehemiah is writing about happened in the very same place where Queen Esther stopped her husband-king from killing the exiled Jews about 30 years earlier. If those walls could talk, huh?

FOUR THINGS WE LEARN ABOUT NEHEMIAH'S CHARACTER

As we go forward with this chapter, I'd like to pull out four things we can learn about Nehemiah's character, and verse 2 brings out the first one, that Nehemiah cared deeply about the well-being of God's people and their city. He says he questioned his brother and the other men about what life was like in Jerusalem. This might not seem like much at first glance, but what it shows me is that he was someone who had God's chosen people and God's dwelling place in the temple at the forefront of his mind. You see, Susa, if it were still around today, would be in modern day Iran. The traveling distance between the cities was nearly 1000 miles, or to put it into terms we can relate to, about the distance from here to Boston.

So, with distances like that in a day when the fastest mode of travel, or communication for that matter, was on horseback, it's likely that Nehemiah knew very little about what was going on in Jerusalem so was probably quite excited to hear from these dear brothers.

Now you may say of course he asked them how things were going in Jerusalem. But it's not just Nehemiah wanted to know. It's that he truly cared. After hearing the horrible report in verse 3, what was his response? Verse 4 says he broke down and wept. This wasn't just news he was asking after politely or out of curiosity. He genuinely cared about what was happening with his people in Jerusalem and when the report was of further destruction and disgrace, he was devastated.

When was the last time you were brought to your knees by news of what's going on with other Christians around the world? When did you last weep over a report of work for God's glory that hadn't going well?

Constantly on my mind right now is our team of seven people from Autumn Ridge currently serving at Compassion Evangelical Hospital in Guinea, West Africa although I'll admit that it's at the forefront of my mind mostly because my husband is there. But if on Saturday when Steve gets back he told me that the missionaries working at the hospital were in great trouble and disgrace and the hospital itself was in a state of disrepair, would I weep and mourn over this? Obviously Compassion Hospital and the temple of God are not the same thing, but both have the purpose of being a place meant to connect people to God, and so it is a worthy thing to be emotionally invested in places where God's name is declared.

Nehemiah's example challenges me to ask myself how concerned I am for God's people and the work they are doing. He was a man devastated to hear that this place that was supposed to be the dwelling of God and His people was not restored and functioning as it should have been by this time. When he found out about this, he didn't say, "Oh, that's awful. I'm so sorry to hear that, my thoughts and prayers are with you." No, he wept over this. This broke his heart. Look at verse 4 again. It says he sat down and wept and then for some days he mourned and fasted and prayed.

Right from these first four verses, I see a man who has a tremendous heart for God and His people. A man who doesn't just pay lip service to being concerned about the things of God, but someone who deeply cares about what matters to Him.

THE WALL

Before we go on, though, maybe you're wondering why this hit Nehemiah so hard. After all, what's the big deal about a wall and its gates being broken down? In their day, the wall around a city was an absolutely essential thing in order for a city to function. Now, let's just get something out of the way right away. For us, today, the concept of a national wall is a hot, politically charged topic. Let me be clear, Trump's border wall and Nehemiah's wall around Jerusalem are two entirely different animals, not to be confused.

In his day, all major cities were protected by gigantic walls. And don't think a wall like a fence, but these walls were huge structures that even had rooms and homes integrated inside of them. The purpose of a wall like this was primarily for the security of a city, like a moat around a medieval castle, keeping marauders out from sneaking in and raiding the city, but also protecting livestock and people, and ensured safety in the community, allowing children to roam freely and families to be protected. If human resources didn't have to be spent on constantly guarding the city on all fronts, then people were freed up to tend gardens, and build homes, and worship God.

So, Nehemiah immediately understood from this news that Jerusalem was not doing well and that the temple of God was not secure, and that this process of restoring the base community of God's people was shamefully dying out.

Imagine if Rochester was leveled by a tornado and Autumn Ridge was destroyed. And we gathered together and pooled our resources to rebuild the church so that we could worship together again, but then lost our commitment to the project and never got around to installing any locks on the doors or repairing the parking lot. The church would be unprotected and would still look disgraceful and unkempt.

Now obviously it takes time to restore something as big as a city to its former glory, but an entire generation had passed since the temple had been rebuilt. The fact that the wall protecting the community was still lying in ruins was a direct reflection on the disgraced state of Jerusalem. And that fact is what led our man Nehemiah to mourning and fasting and praying. For days.

Don't you wish you could know how a man like this prayed? Trick question. He tells us next what he prayed. Let's read his prayer starting in verse 5.

⁵Then 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, ⁶let 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. ⁷We 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, ⁹but 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. ¹¹Lord, 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.”

Isn't that a beautiful prayer? I love that his instinct wasn't to impulsively book a ride on the next camel headed towards Jerusalem. Or that he didn't simply throw 1000 darics of gold at the problem. Although we'll soon see how personally and financially invested he was in making things right. Before he did anything else, his first action was to spend days and days praying. And that's the second thing we learn about Nehemiah from this chapter. Nehemiah was a man of prayer.

His example in this, in making prayer the first step in addressing a problem, has been so helpful to me as I've been immersed in this book in recent weeks. I've been training myself to consciously make prayer a first response to a problem or challenge. If I'm feeling anxious, pray. If I'm not sure how to handle an issue with my kids, pray. This renewed priority proved itself invaluable in a situation I faced over Christmas break. During the month of December, I had a migraine that lasted for 3 weeks. Now, headaches aren't a new thing for me, but this was odd even for me. My doctor noted that the arteries on the left side of my head had become inflamed and after doing some bloodwork that wasn't normal, he ordered an MRI to check for a kind of vascular disease. I'll tell you right away that it all turned out to just be a whopper of a migraine and I'm perfectly healthy, but that experience gave me a really good chance to put this instinct of bringing everything to God in prayer into practice. In fact, it was how I finished out 2018. The date I got scheduled for the MRI was New Year's Eve, and that afternoon, as I laid there strapped down in that tube of magnetic pounding torture, prayer was my oxygen. I got through the test fine, but when they went to check to make sure they had all they needed, they discovered there had been some kind of computer glitch and they had to do the whole MRI over again. So that afternoon, I was "blessed" with more than 2 hours of uninterrupted time to pray. I prayed for the test results which quickly came back normal, I prayed for my family and friends, and I prayed for this study and you. It ended up being a sweet time because Nehemiah had reminded me that taking all of our problems to God in prayer is a most excellent thing to do before anything else.

I think what makes Nehemiah's prayer so powerful is his confidence that God is faithful to His promises. And he knew that because of what I have as listed as the third point on your outline, Nehemiah knew the promises in God's Word. In case that didn't immediately jump out to you, let's walk through the prayer again and see it together.

Notice in verse 5, how he addresses God as the one who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and keep His commandments. This is taken directly from what Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 7:9 which says, "Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; he

is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments." That's a good promise to know, isn't it?

In verses 6 and 7, Nehemiah confesses sin. His own, his family's and his people's. This is a beautiful thing that he does that we would do well to do more often. In our individualistic society, it is rare to hear someone bear responsibility for the sins of a group or nation. But this was significant, because when God laid out His Covenant to Moses, it wasn't a Covenant made with certain individuals, it was for the whole group. Nehemiah knew Scripture so he understood this. His recognition of how the people had failed God isn't just on his own behalf, or even his family's behalf, but he is recognizing that all of God's people have failed to live up to the commands, statutes, and decrees given to Moses.

Fortunately, though, he didn't just know the commands they'd broken, he also knew God's promises of restoration and what God was waiting for them to do to be restored as a healthy nation again. Look again at verses 8 and 9. 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.'* This is basically Nehemiah's really good paraphrase of Deuteronomy 30:1-4.

My point is, what he was praying here wasn't simply a nice-sounding prayer asking God to forgive his people and to restore them, Nehemiah is praying Scripture. He is praying that God would fulfill the promises He had made. This is a prayer of a confident man because He knows God, He knows God's character, He knows God's faithfulness, and He knows God's plan, all of which is because He knows God's Word.

And that, my friends, is why we're here, right? We want to be women who know God with confidence in who He is, of what He does, and what He will do. We gain confidence in God just like Nehemiah by knowing Him through what He has revealed about Himself and His character and plans in the Bible.

Well, there's one more thing about Nehemiah that I'm excited to point out to you from this chapter, and it's the one that speaks to my own heart probably the most out of all these things, and that is that Nehemiah completely believed that God was in control.

The rest of verse 11, the end of this chapter, reveals a detail that could blow your mind and help you see how extraordinarily significant it was that Nehemiah believed so deeply the truth that God is the one in control. You know how excited you get when you're about to watch your favorite movie with someone who's never seen it before? That's how I feel right now for those of you who don't know what's in store for us in this book.

The chapter ends with Nehemiah revealing the detail, "I was cupbearer to the king." In case that didn't just knock your socks off, in the Ancient Near East, the cupbearer was one of the most powerful and trusted positions in the whole kingdom. A Persian king's cupbearer is a role often compared to a butler, so for you Downton Abbey fans, Nehemiah was Carson to the king's Lord Grantham. The closest comparison in our culture might be the President's chief of staff. The cupbearer was the king's most senior and

trusted servant. His place was at the king's side, assuring that everything around the king proceeded with decorum and dignity. The person chosen for this role would have been a very attractive individual in personality if not also in appearance, and would have been the king's companion, probably even confidant. The name "cupbearer" comes from a chief duty he would have had as the one to select the king's choice wines for him and to gladden him with delights such as these. He would have had the closest of access to the king and would have been implicitly trusted. In fact, history tells us that this king's father, King Xerxes, the husband of Esther, was murdered in his bed by one of his courtiers so I think it goes without saying that this king, King Artaxerxes would have been extraordinarily cautious with whom he trusted, which speaks highly of Nehemiah.

With that in mind, did you notice how Nehemiah refers to the king in verse 11? He asks God to grant him success and favor in the presence of "*this man*." Given Nehemiah's privileged role as the king's most trusted servant, I doubt that he means this disrespectfully. Rather, the expression *this man* at the end of the prayer shows the distinction between Nehemiah's reverence for God, the King who rules over all of Creation, and his view of his earthly king. In the eyes of the world King Artaxerxes was the person who held the power to decide to do whatever he pleased. But in Nehemiah's eyes, Artaxerxes was a man like any other man, subject to the sovereign will of God.

Nehemiah will bring this matter of Jerusalem up with the king in the next chapter, but do you see how powerful it is that before he did that, he spent 4 months bringing it to God in prayer. That says to me that he believed that, first and foremost, God was in control of the situation. And Nehemiah wasn't going to act alone, or even under the authority of the king, until he was confident it was in God's plan.

So, it's time for us to go reconnect with our small groups, but let me close with this: observing these things about Nehemiah has really inspired me and I hope it does you too. This chapter reveals someone who cares deeply about things that matter, who believes in the power of prayer, who has complete confidence in God's faithfulness to the promises in His Word, and who knows that God is in control.

Let me ask you the question I opened with again. What approach have you typically taken to handle challenging problems? Could Nehemiah be that mentor that you've wished you had? Would you look at life differently if you looked at it the way he did?

I don't know what challenges you are facing right now, but I do know that the great and awesome God that Nehemiah trusted and prayed to is the very same God that hears our prayers too. And I hope that as you watch Nehemiah's story unfold over the next several weeks, that you will see ever clearer God's faithfulness in your unfolding story as well.

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