

"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.

NEHEMIAH 1:11 (ESV)

# RENEWAL

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## THROUGH PRAYER

**DATE**  
May 2 & 3

**WEEK**  
1 of 5

**OVERVIEW**  
Nehemiah 1

**KEY VERSE**  
Nehemiah 1:11 (ESV)

### SETTING THE STAGE

At this point in our study, the Babylonian Empire has conquered Israel and destroyed Jerusalem, exiling the Israelite people out of their homeland and scattering them all over the known world. The Israelites' exile and their nation's destruction came as a result of their rebellion against God. However, as we studied in Jeremiah 29 last week, God promises to bring them back to Jerusalem and their homeland after 70 years of exile.<sup>1</sup>

The book of Nehemiah picks up where the book of Jeremiah leaves off. While Jeremiah pleads with the Israelites to turn to God and rely upon His promises while in exile, Nehemiah shows how God fulfills His promise of renewing Israel from its plight and suffering.

Historically, the Babylonian Empire ruled the known world in the 6th century BC until the Persian Empire gained prominence in the 5th century BC; and the book of Nehemiah specifically takes place during the relatively early stages of the Persian domain. In fact, Nehemiah, after whom the book receives its name, is a Jewish layman who serves as the cupbearer for the King of Persia at the time, "Artaxerxes Longimanus," in the empire's capital city of Susa.

During Nehemiah's time of service for the king, the people of Israel continue to wade through the rippling effects of their national downfall. They are scattered and unsettled, destitute and hopeless. They even attempt several rebuilding efforts of Jerusalem, but their work falters and fails each time because of varying obstacles and threats from other nations.

*Continued on page 34 >*

#### LESSON OUTLINE

3 Dimensions of Prayer:

1. Positional
2. Propositional
3. Personal

#### THINGS TO KNOW

- A cupbearer was a high-ranking official in charge of serving the king who had to be trustworthy and loyal. Because of his character, Nehemiah had the king's confidence and was able to exert influence in the royal court.

# RENEWAL

## THROUGH PRAYER

*Setting the Stage, continued >*

The book of Ezra (the book right before Nehemiah), records two expeditions to rebuild Jerusalem under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Ezra, documenting the oppositions they face each time.

The process remains difficult without the protection of a national wall.

**Nehemiah prays and pleads to God on behalf of his people. In the process, Nehemiah shows us two remarkable truths: our place in God's story, and that exile is never the end for God's chosen people.<sup>2</sup>**

One day while Nehemiah is serving in the royal palace, some of his friends relay to him that an Israelite remnant still in Jerusalem is under great danger and duress. There is no protection for them, and it seems as if it is only a matter of time before they lose their lives. Moved by both grief and compassion, Nehemiah prays and pleads to God on behalf of his people. In the process, Nehemiah shows us two remarkable truths: our place in God's story, and that exile is never the end for God's chosen people.<sup>2</sup>

In Nehemiah 1, we will look at Nehemiah's prayer after hearing of the Israelites' suffering and danger. In his prayer, we will see three different dimensions of prayer and why they are important: positional, propositional, and personal. By looking at Nehemiah's prayer of renewal, we can find renewal for our daily lives.

Let's start reading in chapter 1:

**NEHEMIAH 1:1-11** *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,<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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."*

*<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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,<sup>6</sup> 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 your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against You. Even I and my father's house have sinned.<sup>7</sup> We have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that You commanded Your servant Moses.*

*<sup>8</sup> Remember the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples,<sup>9</sup> 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*

<sup>1</sup> See Jeremiah 25:1-38, where God promises only 70 years of exile, and then Babylon's punishment and desolation.

<sup>2</sup> The Bible Project, "Overview: Ezra-Nehemiah." via youtube.com.



*them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make My name dwell there.’<sup>10</sup> They are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.<sup>11</sup> 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.*

## 1. THE POSITIONAL DIMENSION OF PRAYER

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In chapter 1, we see that Nehemiah receives word from his brother that the remnant of Israelites were in grave danger and suffering greatly (v. 1-3). Their last strongholds of support and refuge had been demolished, and they were vulnerable to attack. In addition, their national identity as God’s chosen people looked gloomy and hopeless. The Israelites were wading through disarray and distress, wondering from where God’s protection and provision would come.

The news of the Israelites’ suffering and sadness shakes Nehemiah to his core. By rejecting God’s good authority, the nation of Israelites plummeted into darkness, injustice, and chaos, resulting in being conquered by the Babylonian Empire. To be sure, not all suffering comes as a result of sin. Jesus was perfect, yet suffered greatly. However, in this situation, Jerusalem’s demise and their plight came as a result of their willful rebellion against God.

And so, Nehemiah comes to God in prayer, expressing his grief for Israel, uttering his brokenness over the situation, and confessing his sin in repentance. Interestingly, even though Nehemiah is not ‘present’ in Jerusalem, is not ‘broken’ like they are, and is not even ‘guilty’ in the same way as his Israelite kin, he nevertheless acquaints himself with them deeply in every way.

Nehemiah associates himself with them to such a degree that he feels the depth of their own emotional sorrow; he wrestles with the complexity of their own societal stresses, and he even assesses himself as just as guilty for their sin. This is a grand picture of what a covenant community looks like. When one part suffers, the whole entity suffers and longs for restoration. And as a Jew himself, Nehemiah cannot help but feel the pain and estrangement of his people and plead with God for restoration because their restoration is his, and his is theirs.

Nehemiah knows, however, that God *keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments* (v. 5), and God never turns His face away from those who come to Him. In fact, as we saw in last week’s lesson, God gave Israel this beautiful promise through the prophet Jeremiah just years earlier.

**JEREMIAH 29:10-14** *This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill My good promise to bring you back to this place.<sup>11</sup> For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD, “plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.<sup>12</sup> Then you will call on Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you.<sup>13</sup> You will seek Me and find Me when you seek Me with all your heart.<sup>14</sup> I will be found by you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you,” declares the LORD, “and will bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.” (NIV)*

As believers, we also have inherited this promise of repentance. Whenever we turn to God in repentance, He will never turn us away, no matter what we have done or where we have gone.

Psalm 9:10 tells us: *Those who know Your name trust in You, for You, LORD, have never forsaken those who seek You. (NIV)*

In these two passages, we see something foundational about the nature of prayer. All true, restorative and effective prayer begins on the bedrock of God's promise of our repentance. Prayer first and foremost begins as recognition of our position and God's position. Namely, that God is holy and we are not.

Nehemiah realizes his own spiritual position and the spiritual position of his people. They are broken and sinful. He also recognizes the gap that stands between the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. The only opportunity for sinful man to have a relationship with a holy God is through the position of repentance, and trust in His grace.

What is interesting is that we can see glimpses of Jesus Christ and His salvation for us in the person of Nehemiah and in his intercession for the Israelites. For instance, as Nehemiah inhabited the world's greatest palace nearly a thousand miles away from his people, so also did Jesus occupy the greatest courts and highest grandeurs of heaven, millions of miles away from us. Nehemiah heard the cries and felt the pains of his people from far away, and he associated himself with them in every degree. Similarly, Jesus heard our cries and sensed our distress on earth and acquainted Himself with us in every way, even to the point of bearing our own sin (*Hebrews 4:15; Romans 5:8*).

In Nehemiah 1:5, we see that God *keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments*. But interestingly, Nehemiah has not kept God's commandments, nor have any of the Israelites. So, what is their hope of reconciliation; and likewise, what is ours? It is the promise of One who would come and fulfill the Law perfectly, Jesus. Therefore, it is only by faith in Him and repentance from sin that God will, in fact, never forsake us, regardless of any exile we shall walk through, whether spiritual or circumstantial.

The Israelites' salvation and their pleas for help could be traced back to the one interceding on their behalf. Likewise, our salvation and pleas come to God solely because of our connection in repentance and faith to the One interceding on our behalf.

**Prayer begins with an understanding of our position before God and His heart towards us.**

How would you describe your own prayer life? Would you say that you approach God with your pleas and requests upon your own terms and conditions? Or do you approach God on His terms and conditions, in light of His holiness and our sinfulness and His grace in Christ?

Understanding our position before Him changes us so that we do not approach God with our own terms and conditions attached. Rather, we approach Him with deep surrender and humility in light of who He is and what He has done for us in Jesus. Instead of being people whose prayer is characterized by self-entitlement and brashness; the Gospel changes us to be people whose prayer is characterized by humility and dependence.

Praying in line with the holiness of God, the grace of Christ, and your dependence upon Him will not only usher spiritual renewal into your soul personally, but it will also usher renewal into the lives for whom you are interceding. Prayer begins with an understanding of our position before God and His heart towards us.

## 2. THE PROPOSITIONAL DIMENSION OF PRAYER

Through the first seven verses, we observed the foundation of prayer (our position in light of God's holiness) and the bedrock of God's promise to us in prayer (that He will hear us if we repent from

sin and depend on His grace). Because of Jesus' saving work on our behalf, we are redeemed from sin and brought in as children who have access to a relationship with God. Through Nehemiah's prayer, we can see the **positional** dimension of prayer, in general, for how to approach God.

In the latter half of the passage (verses 8-11), we can begin to see the **propositional** dimension of prayer. In other words, through Nehemiah's prayer, what do we see about how Nehemiah approaches God with his petitions, pleas, and supplications?

One clue is by looking at the repetitive statements, phrases, and words in his prayer. If you read closely, there is one recurring word over and over and over again in the prayer. What is it?

The words 'You' and 'Your' as referents to God and His ownership appear a total of 20 different times in Nehemiah's prayer. When Nehemiah prays, he is stamping his petitions and concerns with the seal of God's authority and ownership, not his own.

Nehemiah ascribes authority, ownership, and kingship solely to God as he looks out over the domain of his perspective and experience. Look at the following verses:

*Your ear attentive ... Your eyes open* (v. 6)

*Your servant [Nehemiah] ...* (v. 6)

*Your servant Moses ...* (v. 7)

*Your people whom You have redeemed ...* (v. 10)

Nehemiah is already praying for the right things and in the right way because he is finally seeing reality rightly. Nehemiah realizes that Israel is not primarily his own people; the Israelites sin is not simply their own problem; and Jerusalem is not their rightful inheritance, city, or home. Nehemiah recognizes that the ownership belongs to God because He is the King and because it is His people to whom He has covenanted Himself.

As such, Nehemiah's prayer filled with the words 'You' and 'Your,' ascribing responsibility to God, and therefore, putting his concerns, his pleas, and his anxieties into God's hands.

What about you? In your prayers, what word is repeated most?

If we are honest, most of us would probably admit that the predominant word in our prayers is not 'You' and 'Your' referring to God and His kingdom, but rather, 'me' and 'my' referring to ourselves.

How we 'label' and 'tag' our prayer requests with the pronoun of ownership says more about our hearts than it does about the prayer request itself.

Labeling and tagging our prayer requests appropriately with the ownership of God can change everything. Why? Because we are finally surrendering them into God's hands for Him to help us.

When we put our requests into the domain of *Your great power and by Your strong hand* (v. 10) instead of our own, we will finally start experiencing relief and renewal in our prayer life and in our relationship with God.

When we trust that God truly reigns with complete wisdom, ultimate power, and absolute love, we can cast our cares upon Him, and rest in His care for us. (*1 Peter 5:7*)

I have once heard it said, "The prayers that start in heaven are heard by heaven." God is incredibly and eagerly willing to take our requests when we have finally surrendered our requests to Him. When we play tug-of-war with God by giving Him partial ownership, we get in the way of His work.

**When Nehemiah prays, he is stamping his petitions and concerns with the seal of God's authority and ownership, not his own.**

**When we trust that God truly reigns with complete wisdom, ultimate power, and absolute love, we can cast our cares upon Him, and rest in His care for us.**

When we affirm by faith God's heart and God's authority over every area in our life, God will bring spiritual renewal and restoration into the spaces that have been broken and are weak. He did this for Nehemiah and the Israelites; and as His children, God will do the same for us.

Prayer is **positional** in the sense that it orients us correctly with God, and prayer is **propositional** in the sense that God seeks to hear our prayers and answer them. But prayer is also highly **personal** as well.

### 3. THE PERSONAL DIMENSION OF PRAYER ---

At the very end of the chapter, we see something significant about the personal dimension of prayer. Look closely at the very end of chapter 1, the last line of verse 11:

*Now I was cupbearer to the king.*

Nehemiah recognizes that God had placed him in a strategic place for a specific purpose in light of his prayers and others' needs. God had sovereignly placed Nehemiah in a position with proximity and relationship to the King of Persia. As the cupbearer, Nehemiah was perhaps one of the few in the entire kingdom, who resided with the king for hours a day. Ironically, Nehemiah as a foreigner had greater access to the king than even the citizens in the king's own kingdom.

Nehemiah acknowledges that God has placed him, of all people, in a specific place at a specific time with specific connections in order to bring the goodness of God into the plight of others. By virtue of his job, he occupies a strategic position to be a personal influence towards the king and a political advocate for his own people.

In fact, Nehemiah is not unlike other characters of the Bible:

- Joseph was sold into slavery to Egypt's Captain of the Guard, which specifically placed him in the King's prison when he was accused, which then led him to the King's circle of influence—to serve as the second in command in the whole land.
- Moses grew up in the Egyptian palace and wandered the wilderness, which specifically equipped him with leverage in the Egyptian palace and wisdom in the wilderness to lead his people to the Promised Land.
- David learned the sling and staff and tended sheep, which equipped him to take down Goliath and then to shepherd God's people well.
- Esther was given favor by another King of Persia and lived in his palace, which strategically positioned her to appeal to the king for the salvation of God's people from a mass genocide.
- Our ultimate example, Jesus, descended into our worldly context, spoke our language, suffered our plight so that He might be able to save those who trust in Him (*Hebrews 7:25; Philippians 2:5-8*).

As Warren Wiersbe writes, "God put Nehemiah in Susa just as He had put Esther there a generation before, and just as He had put Joseph in Egypt and Daniel 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."<sup>3</sup>

In all these stories, and in many more, God sovereignly leads His people into specific places for

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<sup>3</sup> Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: The Complete Old Testament in One Volume* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2007), p. 752.

specific reasons to carry out specific callings for the good of others and the glory of God.

Gospel ministry is ultimately recognizing your place in God's world with the unique resources, status, talents, and personality that God has endowed upon you that perhaps no one else may have and leveraging them for the welfare of others and the sake of God's Kingdom.

Gospel ministry is certainly not less than sharing the Gospel with others. But it is ultimately more than that, too. It is a fundamental realigning of your entire life under the authority of God, with the mission of God, and for the glory of God.

Take a moment and evaluate your place in God's world. Reflect and think deeply about how God has blessed you, where He has placed you, and what He has brought you through. Where has God specifically and strategically positioned you so that you can make a difference in the lives of others that perhaps no one else can do? Where is your place in God's mission?

A pastor once told me that you can find your calling at the intersection of two main questions: **“What do you do best for the glory of God?”** and **“Where is the most strategic place for you to do that for the mission of God?”**

Consider these two questions and ask God to give you clarity about how they overlap in your life, and how that specifically empowers you to make a difference in the lives of others and in the Kingdom of God. Just like Nehemiah did for the people of Israel in their time of grave need.

**“God put Nehemiah in Susa just as He had put Esther there a generation before, and just as He had put Joseph in Egypt and Daniel 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.”<sup>3</sup>**

## HOW HIS PLAN SHAPES OUR PURPOSE

Where do you find yourself right now? Are you in need of God to renew your heart and life? Maybe you need a renewed sense of urgency to impact those around you. What are the unique giftings, seasons, and relationships God has given you right now to make a difference in the lives of others?

Renewal begins in our life through prayer. We pray, acknowledging God's position as holy and righteous. We pray, acknowledging our position as sinful and broken. We experience the renewing work of God in our lives when we come to God submitting to His lordship over our lives. Renewal occurs in our lives when we pray “Your will be done” and not “My will be done.”

When we are renewed through the power of prayer, we can spread that renewal to others in our sphere of influence. Imagine living a life where you constantly feel renewed through prayer. You find a renewed sense of God's love and grace in your life. You live a life that is renewed in the power of submitting to the Lordship of God. Imagine living a life with a renewed sense of purpose. The renewed life is deeply interested in renewing the lives of everyone around them.

A life that is committed to personal renewal and renewing the world, is a life that pleases God.