

# Nehemiah

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How God Renews His People

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# Contents

1. By Sharing His Burden Nehemiah 1	1
2. By Awakening Hope Nehemiah 2	15
3. By Inviting Them into the Work Nehemiah 3	15
4. By Helping Them Face Opposition Nehemiah 4	15
5. By Confronting Them Nehemiah 5	15
6. By Helping Them Endure Nehemiah 6-7	15
7. With the Word Nehemiah 8	15
8. By Reminding Them of Their Story Nehemiah 9	15
9. With a Path to Flourishing Nehemiah 10	15

10. With Joyful Dedication	15
Nehemiah 11–12	
11. Continually	15
Nehemiah 13	
About Nate	15
Books	15

# 1

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## By Sharing His Burden

### Nehemiah 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, 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. 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.” 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. (Nehemiah 1:1–4)

As much as Nehemiah is the central character of the book that bears his name, the book itself is about God—another instance of God working hard to renew his people.

God loves his people. He had called Abraham centuries earlier to establish a people who would broadcast God's goodness and glory to the world—one nation for the nations. And, eventually, this nation was meant to bring forth the Savior, the Messiah who would save his people from their sins.

After their exodus from Egypt and establishment in the promised land, however, Israel struggled constantly to follow God. He had covenanted himself with them, but though they said they would keep that covenant, they did not. Israel's light was dimmed, and the nations could not see God's glory.

So, because of Israel's disobedience, God brought his disciplinary judgment upon them by scattering them among the nations. For seventy years, God said, the Israelites would inhabit Babylon.

But God had promised a king named Cyrus would arise to send them back to the land of promise. And, many generations before the events in Nehemiah, Cyrus came. He commissioned the return of God's people and the rebuilding of God's temple.

Though Israel tried here and there, the city that housed God's temple was never rebuilt. Threats from enemies and letters from foreign kings stopped them in their tracks. Rather than push courageously through the difficulties to get the job accomplished, the Israelites settled for a meager temple inside a broken-down city on a hill. The city that was meant to be a lighthouse to penetrate the darkness with God's glory was reduced to a crumbled and uninhabitable wasteland. Some could have even concluded falsely that the God of Israel was like Jerusalem—weak and unable to thrive in their modern times. So God began doing

what God always does—he renewed his people. He stirred up and sent Nehemiah to get the job done.

Later, in the New Testament, Jesus would tell Peter and his other disciples that he would build his church, and the gates of hell would not prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). And that’s what the book of Nehemiah is about: God’s church in that era—the people of Israel—needed to be built. And God would do the building. He would do whatever was needed to renew them.

In its broken-down state—without gates and walls—God’s city and people could not be what God intended—broadcasters of his glory to the world. The city and the people went hand in hand.

In a similar way, when God’s church and people are not who we are meant to be, God’s glory is not broadcast to the world. So he works hard, as he has in every generation, to renew his people. Each chapter and episode in Nehemiah will reveal a new facet to God’s work of renewing his people—of renewing us!

Do you feel a need for God’s renewal? In our times many of us need personal renewal. Many relationships, experiences, or places where we used to frequent for life and comfort have been altered. The din of division pervades every part of life. We might not be able to identify the problem, but we know we could use God’s renewal.

I am convinced the church needs renewal as well. As individuals we come together to form the church. And as much as we need renewal individually, we need it corporately! I believe God wants to take his church into a renewal of his presence and purpose. Nothing and no one can satisfy us as God can, and it is his renewal that excites me as I plunge into Nehemiah’s story.

In the first chapter God begins his process of renewal by placing a burden on Nehemiah's heart. As we follow the text, we will think about how God renews us by sharing his burden with us. This is a mandatory first step. How so?

## **God Shares His Burden by Revealing the Gap (vv. 1–4, 6–7)**

Nehemiah introduces the story by telling us that it was the winter month of Chislev; it was the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign; and Nehemiah was with Artaxerxes at the winter palace of Susa. This means that a book all about rebuilding Jerusalem and renewing Jerusalem's people begins about a thousand miles away! Nehemiah was living in (and serving) the Persian Empire. He will become the governor of Jerusalem during this book, but the story starts in a land far, far away.

In verse 2 Nehemiah's brother Hanani shows up with some men from Judah (where Jerusalem was the capital city). Nehemiah asked them about the remnant of Israelites in the land and the condition of Jerusalem. Hanani's reply broke Nehemiah's heart: "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" (v. 3).

I believe this encounter, and Nehemiah's question, were the outworking of God's providence. *God* brought Hanani to Nehemiah. *God* stirred Nehemiah to ask this question. *God* worked in Nehemiah to care and show concern for the city and the people.

For God to renew us, we must see the need for renewal. So he designs ways to share his burden with us, to show us what he sees.



And, with Hanani's reply, Nehemiah was hit with the truth. The glorious city of Jerusalem, a city he had read about in the Scriptures and daydreamed about while in a foreign land, was nothing but rubble and ruin. And the people there—the ones who could do something about it—were doing nothing! The city David captured and Solomon glorified was an ash heap of crushed dreams.

How good and gracious of God to reveal the gap between what can be and what is! Consider a doctor who runs lab work on a patient's blood. Afterward, a report is given, complete with normal ranges stated next to the patient's numbers. The normal range helps the patient understand where his or her numbers stand in relation to where they should be. The lab results demonstrate the gap between the ideal and reality.

God also diagnoses our condition and shows us the gap between his ideal and our reality. The Bible describes God as “he who searches hearts” (Rom. 8:27). If you are in Christ, the Spirit of God resides within you, searching and knowing you. According to Romans, the Spirit brings his informed intercessory petitions to the Father—and Father God is primed to respond to the Spirit's requests. Sometimes, the Spirit will try to wake us from slumber just as he woke Nehemiah. He will show us the broken walls and burned gates.

God might reveal the gap between what can be and what is by allowing you to fail. He might reveal the gap by allowing emptiness. He might reveal the gap by exposing sins that you've quietly justified; but once others see and know them, you become mortified. He might reveal the gap with a still, small voice. He might reveal the gap by snapping you into a vision of his holiness, giving you a better perspective than you get when you measure yourself by others. But, one way or another, God will reveal the

gap when one exists. And his mercy and grace awakens us from The Matrix of numbed self-congratulatory existence and into reality.

God never reveals the gap in order to decimate us but to give us life. He wanted Saul and Judas and Micaiah and Demas and Samson to respond well once they realized the gap. He wanted them to respond the way Peter, Mark, Isaiah, and David did when they realized the gap in their own lives.

Part of receiving God's renewal is living with the joy of his pleasure on your life because you are in Christ—along with the knowledge that a gap exists between who you are and who God is remaking you to be.

We should not be comfortable *with* the gap (“I am who I am”), but we should be comfortable *in* the gap (“God is remaking me”)—comfortable with a continual discovery of our limitations, weaknesses, frailties, failures, and sins. Comfortable with the Spirit bringing specific convictions into our lives.

Nehemiah was not driven from God when he heard the condition of the city; instead, he owned the disrepair and ran directly to God. He “sat down and wept and mourned for days.” He fasted and prayed before God (v. 4). And when Nehemiah prayed, a part of his prayer was confession. He “confess[ed] the sins of the people of Israel” (v. 6). But he went a step further; he said Israel's sins were sins: “We have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses” (vv. 6–7). When Nehemiah saw the gap between God's ideal and Israel's reality, he confessed their sins to God.

The city didn't *need* to be lying there in ruins. Initially, it had to be destroyed; God's prophets had foretold that King Nebuchadnezzar from Babylon would destroy the city. But they had also said that seventy years later another king named Cyrus would arise to send the Israelites back for a rebuilding effort. It all happened just as God had said.

Small efforts to rebuild had been thwarted, as documented in the book of Ezra. Nehemiah is more than a century and a half removed from the original destruction, and still, God's people had not gotten their priorities together and rebuilt the city. Nehemiah was negligent right along with everyone else, and he was ashamed. So when he saw the gap, he confessed his (and the nation's) sin to God.

I want to stress the importance of developing a community that sees the need for and possibility of ongoing confession. *Need* in that none of us is yet fully reshaped into Christ's perfect image. *Possibility* in that the gospel message teaches us to acknowledge and bring our sins to God that he might deal with them. Part of this is through confession. James said: "Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working" (James 5:16). John said: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). And the psalmist sang: "I confess my iniquity; / I am sorry for my sin" (Ps. 38:18).

When we confess to God and one another, we are shaping our identity in line with the gospel. Rather than walk around in pharisaic self-approval, we can honestly share our weaknesses and imperfections with our friends in Christ. And this confessional community will help to keep us dependent upon Christ and free from the burnout so many persons experience in church. The

pressure to be perfect is impossible to bear; because many never discover a healthy gospel-oriented community, they burn out. Let us be like Nehemiah—see the gap and confess.

## **God Shares His Burden by Refreshing Us in His Nature and Promises (vv. 5, 8–9)**

If we have the wrong ideas about God, we will not turn to him when our gaps are revealed. Fortunately, Nehemiah knew God, and the fresh report he received from his brother somehow caused God's nature to leap off the pages of Scripture and into Nehemiah's experience. In Nehemiah's prayer he was conscious of God's power, love, and promises. He called God the "Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments" (v. 5). He appealed to God's promises by recalling how he had told Moses, a thousand years earlier, that if Israel was unfaithful he would scatter them among the nations but gather them back to his holy place, if they returned to him and kept his commandments again (vv. 8–9). Much of what Nehemiah said about God to God is a mash-up of selected passages from Deuteronomy. But there, at that moment, the things Nehemiah had read about God were coming to life.

And God reveals himself in this way today—for those who know him, there is something about seeing our gaps that reminds us of who God is. We know he is powerful; we've read all about it. We know he's love; we've read all about it. We know he is a promise keeper; we've read all about it. But when we come face-to-face with our gap—when God shows us his burden and vantage point—he also wants to refresh us in his nature and promises. He wants us to draw on his power so we can shore up the gaps. He wants us to lean on his love despite our sins. And he

wants us to expect him to fulfill his promise to help us close the gaps.

God seems to be most real to us when we are face-to-face with our limitations. When did Frodo most want Gandalf's presence? When did the Narnians most crave Aslan? When did Luke most miss Obi-Wan? In situations when their limitations were felt. The psalmist said: "When I thought, 'My foot slips,' / your steadfast love, O Lord, held me up" (Ps. 94:18).

Remember Peter? One night, Jesus walked on the Sea of Galilee past the boat that carried his disciples. When Peter recognized Jesus, he asked Jesus for permission to walk out to him, got out of the boat, and began to walk on water! But when Peter saw the wind and waves, he was afraid and started to sink. He cried out, "Lord, save me" (Matt. 14:28–30).

Peter's story is often our story. We cruise along, thinking pretty highly of ourselves; then we see the reality around us (and within us) and start to sink. But in that moment—when our foot slips—the Lord becomes big to us again. When Peter looked to Jesus, he saw the difference between himself and his Lord. And when we slip, we also have a chance to see the nature of our God.

Nehemiah had become conscious that the foot of the nation had slipped. They weren't the city on a hill, broadcasting the Light of the world to the nations. You might feel something similar today—that the church and its people have become known for things other than a deep commitment to Christ and a passion for obeying his Word. But in the slippage, there is God. No matter how far down his people tumble, he is unshaken and unchanged—and his love remains!

## God Shares His Burden by Reminding Us of Our Identity (vv. 10–11)

As much as the gap reminds us of who God is, it also reminds us of who we are. Yes, it shows us our weaknesses; but it also calls us to rise up to the new identity God has given to us in Christ. God uses even our failures to remind us of our identity.

Nehemiah became conscious of Israel's identity—and his own—once he heard about the broken walls and burned gates and was jolted to action. I am sure Nehemiah thought, *God has better plans and purposes and dreams for us than that!*

In his prayer Nehemiah referred to Israel as God's servants (v. 6). He knew they were part of God's household, meant to serve the world by serving God. He said, "They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand" (v. 10). Though the events of Exodus were ancient history at this point, Nehemiah was sure God had delivered Israel over and over again because they were his people. He even told God the scattered Israelites were his—"your outcasts" (v. 9).

Nehemiah was jolted: *We are God's people! We are meant for more than this! We have a greater purpose and destiny! I want back in on God's plans for us!*

This reminder got at the heart of what God was doing through their exile. Once the Israelites were removed from the safety and comfort of their homes, they had to figure out who they were. In exile, far from home, in cultures that weren't conducive to their relationship with God, they had to be refreshed in their identity. *Who are we? How should we live?*

When we begin to see things the way God sees them—when we receive his burden, when we discover the gap between what should be and what actually is—we have an opportunity to get in touch again with the essentials of our faith.

In Acts 27 Paul and hundreds of others were shipwrecked. They spent many nights in a wild storm. They lightened the ship's load until only the people and broken boards from the ship remained. One of the results of exile is getting in touch again with what it means to be a Christian. Everything else that has attached itself unnecessarily to our Christianity can be thrown overboard until only the essentials remain.

Reconnection with identity in God is what happened to Nehemiah that day. *We are God's servants! We are his people! He has a plan for us! And a broken city with feeble worship is not it!* But notice that this sense of identity was rooted firmly in what Nehemiah understood about God. When God's children know him, we can begin to know and understand ourselves. Eugene Peterson said, "My identity does not begin when I begin to understand myself. There is something previous to what I think about myself, and it is what God thinks of me. That means that everything I think and feel is by nature a response, and the one to whom I respond is God."<sup>1</sup>

We live in a world that pursues self-achieved identity. But our identity as God's children is not something we can achieve—it is given to us through Christ. This is crucial to understand, because a self-achieved identity must also be self-sustained. If identity is earned, it must be maintained. But in Christ, our identity is secure. Even in the midst of Israel's folly, Nehemiah knew who he and the Israelite people were—they belonged to God.

A refreshed identity made Nehemiah's last action in this episode a fitting one. He prayed, "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" (v. 11).

In this closing moment of chapter 1, we become privy to Nehemiah's position in the royal court: "Now I was cupbearer to the king." At the very least, being King Artaxerxes' cupbearer meant Nehemiah was entrusted with keeping poison off the king's menu. But there are indications that in the ancient Near Eastern court, the cupbearer was a lofty position of great power and influence, and certainly wealth and ease.

Over the months Nehemiah prayed, he became so in touch with his identity as one of God's children that he prayed a prayer of volunteerism. In other words, Nehemiah's willingness to become uncomfortable, to sacrifice it all, to leave his position of prestige so he could help God's people flourish, is such a biblical attitude. Like Abraham, who left his position of comfort to launch out into the unknown with God; or Moses, who considered his position in Pharaoh's courts as nothing in comparison with having God; or Esther, who realized it would be better to perish for God than retain the throne without him, Nehemiah became willing to lay down his life.

But Nehemiah's attitude—and the attitude of Abraham, Moses, Esther, and many others—is not just a biblical attitude but a gospel attitude. All those figures from the Old Testament era prefigured Jesus, the One who truly left it all for the sake of God's people. And as Nehemiah got in touch with his identity as God's child, he began behaving like God's Son. He thought about the position God had given him—cupbearer to the king—and realized he was to use that position for God's glory.



The same ought to occur in us. As the Spirit reveals the gap in us between what can be and what is, we should consider God's love and promises. And as we turn to God in humble confession and adopt a daily posture of dependence on him, we will be reminded of who we are in Christ. With the identity God gives us fresh in our minds, we will realize that "the firstborn among many brothers"—Jesus!—laid down his life for us, and we will want to lay down our lives as well (Rom. 8:29). We will want to do what we can—in God's strength and power—to close up the gap.

## **Personal or Group Study Questions**

Head:

1. What were some of the key gaps that Nehemiah became aware of between God's ideal for Israel and the reality of their current situation?
2. How did Nehemiah's understanding of God's nature, promises, and Israel's identity shape his response to seeing the gaps?

Heart:

1. When have you experienced God revealing gaps in your own life between his ideals and your current reality? What emotions did this stir up in you?
2. How can remembering God's loving and faithful nature encourage us when he reveals areas we need to grow and change?

Hands:

1. What is one practical way you can respond to confess and

take ownership for any gaps God has revealed in your life recently?

2. How can you lean on God's strength and identity for you today as you take steps to close gaps he has revealed?

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1. Eugene H. Peterson, *Excellence: Run with the Horses* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 38.