

Nehemiah's Burden for Jerusalem

Nehemiah, cupbearer to the Persian king, receives devastating news about Jerusalem's ruined walls and gates. He weeps, fasts, and prays for his people.

Nehemiah 1:1-11

CHARACTERS: Nehemiah, Hanani, God

THEMES: Prayer, Burden for God's work, Intercession, Confession, Preparation

IN THE MONTH of Kislev in the twentieth year, while Nehemiah was in the citadel of Susa, his brother Hanani came from Judah with some other men. Nehemiah questioned them about the Jewish remnant that had survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

The report was devastating: '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.'

When Nehemiah heard these things, he sat down and wept. For some days he mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. The walls represented more than stone and mortar—they symbolized God's protection, the city's dignity, and Israel's testimony to the nations. A city without walls was defenseless and ashamed.

Nehemiah's prayer became a model of intercession. He began with worship: '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.' He identified with his people's sin: 'I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you.'

He reminded God of His promises: 'Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses: "If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 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."'

Then came his petition: 'Lord, 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.' The man was Artaxerxes, king of Persia, the most powerful ruler on earth.

Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer—a position of great trust and influence. He tasted the king's wine to protect against poison, had regular access to the throne, and enjoyed royal favor. But he knew that asking for leave to rebuild a foreign city's walls could be dangerous. Persian kings were suspicious of fortified cities that might rebel.

So Nehemiah prayed. He didn't rush to action. He combined genuine grief with patient preparation. His prayer lasted days, perhaps weeks. He was preparing both his heart and his approach. Great works for God begin not with activity but with burdened hearts and believing prayer.

Nehemiah's tears revealed his character. Though comfortable in the Persian palace, his heart remained with God's people and God's city. Though far from Jerusalem geographically, he was close to it spiritually. The ruins that troubled God troubled him. That's the mark of a true leader—someone whose comfort is disrupted by the brokenness of what matters to God.