

Weeping Before Working

BY DR. JERRY VINES

By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study Series from **Jerry Vines Ministries**
2295 Towne Lake Parkway • Suite 116 #249 • Woodstock, GA 30189

Let's Begin

In every church there are three kinds of people.

There are the destructionists who tear down the work of God. Next are the obstructionists or those who get in the way and hinder the work. Then there are the constructionists. They help do the work of God; they are the builders. The man Nehemiah is a classic illustration on how to be a constructionist. The Lord uses him to do His work in a masterful way.

As we begin our study of the book that bears Nehemiah's name, we will see his leadership abounds in timeless applications we can follow as we live for the Lord. These principles can be applied not only to the work of the church but also in our own personal lives.

One of the very first principles is the truth that prayer is the key to success in any great work for God. Ten different times throughout this short book, Nehemiah prays. Using the outline below, let's look at the lessons his prayer life can teach us today.

I. Nehemiah's Preface (v. 1)

II. Nehemiah's Problem (vv. 2-3)

III. Nehemiah's Prayer (vv. 4-11)

I. Nehemiah's Preface (v. 1)

The book of Nehemiah begins with, "The words of Nehemiah ..." (v. 1). One translation states, "The autobiography of Nehemiah ..." Nehemiah is giving us his memoirs. He would have made an excellent journalist because he begins by answering three important questions. When we read an article in the newspaper, for instance, the first paragraph is very important. If it is written correctly, it answers several fundamental questions. That is exactly what Nehemiah does. He begins by answering

the question "who?" He is the writer, and he tells us his father was a man named Hachaliah.

We don't know a lot about Nehemiah, but we do know two of his contemporaries were Ezra the priest and Esther who became the queen of Persia. As far as we know Nehemiah was not a priest or prophet. He seems to have been a layman, but he was definitely God's man for the hour. As we will see, he was a man of prayer and he knew the Word of God.

The last verse of chapter 1 gives us an added detail about Nehemiah. He was the king's cupbearer (v. 11c). This means he was a person of considerable position and influence. In those days it was not unusual for kings to be assassinated. One way was to poison their food or wine. The role of the cupbearer was to taste the food and wine to make sure they were safe. Nehemiah had to be a man who was totally trusted by the king.

The second question Nehemiah answers in verse 1 is "when?" When did the events he was writing about take place? "... And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year ..."



The month Chisleu was the ninth month of the Jewish calendar. It is the same as the latter part of November and the beginning of December for our calendar. The twentieth year is a reference to the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes, which would have been 446/445 B.C. This is confirmed in chapter 2 (cp. 2:1).

A brief review of history will help us better understand when Nehemiah is writing. In 586 B.C. Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, captured and destroyed Jerusalem. Many of the Jews were taken to Babylon. Only a small remnant remained in Jerusalem. Later the Persians conquered Babylon. Persia became the new world power. Cyrus, the Persian king, gave permission for a number of the Jews to go back to Jerusalem in 536 B.C. to rebuild the temple. That took place under a man named Zerubbabel (cp. Ezra 1-6). Then Ezra led another remnant of Jews back to Jerusalem around 458 B.C. (cp. Ezra 7-10). Now in 446/445 B.C. God is getting ready to use Nehemiah to lead another group back to Jerusalem. This time it

is for the purpose of rebuilding the walls around the city of Jerusalem. This is where the book of Nehemiah picks up.

Nehemiah's days were definitely difficult days for many of the children of Israel. But this reminds us that even in hard times God has His people. And the more

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difficult the times, the more definite will be their testimony. We should never get the idea that because we are living in difficult days God can't get His work done. The work of God does not depend upon favorable times. The work of God depends upon the power of God.

The third question Nehemiah answers is where he was. "... I was in Shushan the palace" (v. 1c). This is a reference to the winter residence of the Persian kings in that day. Shushan was about 250 miles east of the city of Babylon. It's located in what we call today modern Iraq. Just like our presidents go to Camp David, the kings in Nehemiah's day had their retreat areas. Nehemiah was in the palace of the king. This is another lesson for us. Not only can God do His work in difficult times, but He has His servants in some very unlikely places. There are people today in Washington D.C. and other world capitals who are praying and reading their Bibles just like we are. God has His men in some unlikely places, and God can do His work in difficult places.

Reflection Connection

Discuss if it is important for believers to be men and women of the Word and of prayer in order for God to use them for His purposes.

II. Nehemiah's Problem (vv. 2-3)

Hanani, who was a relative of Nehemiah, and some other Jews return from Jerusalem (v. 2). Nehemiah asks them about the condition of Jerusalem. Keep in

mind he was probably living very comfortably. He was certainly in a position of trust and influence. He, no doubt, was living in official quarters somewhere in or

near the palace. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for him not to care or be interested in what was taking place in Jerusalem. He was



nearly a thousand miles away, but he cares enough to ask. The problem with so many believers today is that we are not burdened because we do not know there is a situation which requires a burdened heart. The media has desensitized us so nothing seems to trouble us anymore. Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 15:5, “For who shall have pity upon thee, O Jerusalem, or who shall bemoan thee? or who shall go aside to ask how thou doest?” Nehemiah was one who was willing to care about Jerusalem. We need to ask ourselves if we are willing to care about the spiritual condition of America.

The report Hanani gives is not very pleasant (v. 3). It was actually disturbing and distressing. His report concerns the remnant, the wall, and the gates. He first talks about the remnant. This included the Jews who were never carried away into captivity, as well as those who had returned. He says they are in “great affliction and reproach.” This means they had problems on the inside as well as the outside.

Do you ever wonder what God would say to us about the condition of His people today? If we will be honest, we will have to agree things are not well within the walls of the Christian faith. We are experiencing a moral decay inside the family of faith. Things are broken down morally and spiritually. We also have reproach on the outside. We are living in a day when the new minority group in America is the

Christian community. Christians are under attack like they have never been before. The tragedy is a lot of the reproach we are getting from the outside is caused by the decay and immorality within the body of Christ.

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Hanani continues and shares “the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down” (v. 3b). That doesn’t mean much to us today because we don’t build walls around our cities. But to hear that news in Nehemiah’s day was a big deal. A wall meant several things to a city. First, it meant protection. People protected themselves by their city walls. They even had watchmen on the walls to guard against hostile attacks. Walls also meant separation. A city was made special by the identity of its walls. The strength of its walls indicated the strength of its god.

For the Jews the walls of Jerusalem also meant anticipation. They knew one day their Messiah was to sit on David’s throne in Jerusalem and rule (2 Sam. 7:8-16). Psalm 48:2 calls Jerusalem the city of “the great King.” And in Psalm 50:2, Zion or the city of Jerusalem is called “the perfection of beauty.” When Hanani gave his report, Jerusalem didn’t look anything like that. It definitely didn’t look like it belonged to any king, let alone “the great King.” It was in shambles and was a poor testimony of what it was supposed to be. Jerusalem’s neighbors had to wonder what kind of God Israel’s God was when they looked at the city’s broken-down walls. The third report is “the gates thereof are burned with fire” (v. 3c). Gates are for the purpose of entrance. This can be a spiritual application for us. Our witness and testimony are so important to a lost world. Do our lives give us an “entrance” to share Jesus with the lost, or do our lives keep us from sharing?

Reflection Connection

Discuss how our Christian lives can be a negative testimony of the power of the Lord just like the Jerusalem walls were. What can we do to keep this from happening?



III. Nehemiah's Prayer (vv. 4-11)

Verse 4 tells us the effect the news of Jerusalem had on Nehemiah. He “sat down and wept, and mourned ... and fasted, and prayed.” He is a picture of a man with a burden. And he is showing us the prerequisite for all effective service for the Lord. We have to see the problem and then be moved to prayer because of it. Nehemiah's weeping was his reaction to what he heard. Prayer was his counteraction to what he heard. His prayer is one of the greatest prayers in the Bible. And he shows us how to pray when we have a problem.

The first aspect of Nehemiah's prayer is adoration. He begins, “... I beseech thee, O Lord God of heaven ...” (v. 5a). Nehemiah did not run to his earthly king to ask for a solution to his problem. Instead, he went into the presence of the King of kings, the God of heaven. Though this earth may have its kings, there is a King in heaven who is in charge. When we have a problem on the earth, we need to understand the solution is to get God's will from heaven done on the earth. Then we are on the way to solving the problem. Nehemiah continues his adoration with calling the Lord, “the great and terrible (or awesome) God” (v. 5b). He understands there is no god like Israel's God. He also praises Him because He is

a merciful God who keeps His word.

Nehemiah asks the Lord to be attentive to his prayer (v. 6a). He has something very serious to share with Him. In the middle of verse 6 he says, “... I pray before

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thee now, day and night ...” The Scripture says to pray without ceasing (cp. 1 Thess. 5:17). That doesn't mean we need to be down on our knees all the time. It means we are to be in an atmosphere of prayer. Nehemiah had a very responsible position as the king's official cupbearer, but everywhere he went he was talking to God about his problem.

The second ingredient of Nehemiah's prayer is confession. He confesses his sins as well as the people's and his family's sins (v. 6b). It's much easier for us

to see sin in the lives of others than it is to see the sin in our own lives. And it's easier for us to confess the sins of others than it is to confess our own sins. We need to remember the spiritual, “Not my brother, not my sister, but it's me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” We will never really do a work for God until we are willing to come before Him and confess our own sins.

Nehemiah continues to say the children of Israel had disobeyed God's Word (v. 7). The real root of all sin is disobedience to what God has said. We see it in the Garden of Eden. God gave Adam and Eve one commandment to obey. When they disobeyed His revealed word to them, sin came into their lives. That's the main problem in America. America has departed from the Word of God. It would be wonderful to see revival in America. But it will never come until we confess the fact that we have disobeyed the Word of God.

Nehemiah next calls on God to remember His promises to Israel (vv. 8-9). He reaches back into the Old Testament and puts together several passages of Scripture (cp. Lev. 26:33-45; Deut. 30:1-5). He knows God said He would scatter Israel if they sinned. But he also knows God said He would gather them if Israel turned to Him. Note



“scatter” in verse 8 and “gather” in verse 9. Scatter is exactly what sin does. Sin always scatters and tears apart. But Jesus Christ can take the broken pieces of our lives and put them back together. Nehemiah is showing us it is useless to bemoan the broken down walls of our lives until we are willing to confess the sins that caused the ruin in the first place. After adoration and confession, Nehemiah is ready to make his petition to the Lord. He first asks on behalf of the children of Israel (v. 10). He reminds the Lord they belong to Him. He redeemed them by His great power and strong arm (cp. Deut. 9:29). Nehemiah is asking on the basis of the redeeming power of God. As a child of God, each of us has been redeemed because of the precious blood of Jesus Christ (cp. 1 Pet. 1:19). That means

today we too can pray on the basis of the redeeming power of God. As His child, we have access to His throne of grace to ask for His mercy and help in time of need (Heb. 4:16).

Nehemiah continues and tells the Lord he wants to do something to bring glory to His name (v. 11a). When our only interest is for the Lord to get the glory in what we want to do, we can be sure He will answer from heaven. Nehemiah next asks the Lord to give him success and mercy in the sight of “this man” (v. 11b). “This man” was the king Artaxerxes. Nehemiah was his cupbearer.

Humanly speaking, Artaxerxes was the only person who could make it possible for Nehemiah to go to Jerusalem to rebuild the

broken down walls and city gates. This was because Artaxerxes was the very king who had issued an edict years earlier to make the work in Jerusalem cease (cp. Ezra 4:21). He was a Persian, and the laws of the Medes and the Persians were irreversible. We even use that figure of speech today. When we say, “It’s written in the laws of the Medes and the Persians,” we are saying something can’t be changed. Nehemiah is praying for a miracle. He knows God can reverse the laws of the Medes and the Persians.

Reflection Connection

Read Proverbs 16:9 and 19:21 and discuss who is really in control in the affairs of men. Why should that encourage us?

Wrap Up

When we are ready to care and then truly mourn over the problems we see within the church and in this world, we are then ready to use our mighty weapon of prayer. When we do, we will find the bigger our God will become and the smaller our problems will be.

