

# Nehemiah, Lesson #1

## Good Questions have groups talking

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I love Nehemiah. It is my favorite Old Testament book. There have been a number of books—like Andy Stanley's *Visioneering* that are based on this book. You might pick up a copy of one or more of these books for supplemental reading. Or, you might ask some of the readers in the group to do the same and come to the group even more informed.

### Creative element

Purchase some Lego blocks and pass out one for each person. Put this Lego block in your pocket with your keys and change to remind you of Nehemiah whose calling was to build a wall. Let it remind you to think of your calling.

### Nehemiah 1<sup>1</sup>

#### ACCOUNTABILITY

- What three fellowships do we have schedule for the next three months? Who will invite every member? Who will help invite every prospect? Who will help plan the party?

#### OPEN

- Let's each share your name and how many brothers or sisters you have.

#### DIG

1. Let's preview / overview. Who knows the story of Nehemiah? Could someone summarize it for us?<sup>1</sup>
2. Again, as an overview—what do you know about Nehemiah the man?<sup>2</sup>
3. Skip down to the last verse. What was a cupbearer?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>For seven decades, the Temple had been left in disrepair. The spiritual condition of the Jews was not much better. When this came to the attention of Nehemiah, a Jew serving as a trusted confidant of King Artaxerxes, it pierced his heart. He wept about the deterioration of God's people and sought direction from the Lord through an extended period of prayer and fasting. He sought a vision from God for how to serve his true King most appropriately. God answered by imparting a vision that would change the lives of millions of people forever.  
— Turning Vision into Action, George Barna.

<sup>2</sup>The worst sin toward our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that's the essence of inhumanity." George Bernard Shaw put those words into the mouth of the Rev. Anthony Anderson in the second act of his play *The Devil's Disciple*. The statement certainly summarizes what Jesus taught in the Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37); and it rebukes all those who fold their arms complacently, smile benignly, and say somewhat sarcastically, "Ask me if I care!"

Nehemiah was the kind of person who cared. He cared about the traditions of the past and the needs of the present. He cared about the hopes for the future. He cared about his heritage, his ancestral city, and the glory of his God. — Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

<sup>3</sup>A cupbearer was much more than our modern "butler" (see Gen. 40). It was a position of great responsibility and privilege. At each meal, he tested the king's wine to make sure it

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4. Verse 2. Why did Nehemiah question them?<sup>4</sup>
5. What did Nehemiah learn?<sup>5</sup>
6. How did the news make Nehemiah feel?<sup>6</sup>
7. Nehemiah wept. If we were more like God, would we weep more, or less than we do?<sup>7</sup>
8. Should we, like Nehemiah, seek our situations that make our heart break?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>(...continued)

wasn't poisoned. A man who stood that close to the king in public had to be handsome, cultured, knowledgeable in court procedures, and able to converse with the king and advise him if asked (see 41:1-13). Because he had access to the king, the cupbearer was a man of great influence, which he could use for good or for evil. – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

<sup>4</sup>Nehemiah didn't have to. He was comfortable in this position. We read in Esther where the king there did not let any troubling word come to him. Godly people, at times, look for trouble. They look for problems that God can use them to solve. They don't bury their heads in the sand. They expose themselves to the pain that is in the world.

<sup>5</sup>That is not a very pretty picture. What a pitiful spectacle was God's cause and His people! The Jews were in disrepute because they had failed, and God could not afford to let that happen. Unfortunately, we cannot afford to let it happen today either. Nehemiah became extremely concerned about this report, and there are several things he could have said in reply. He could have said, "It's too bad, brethren. Sorry to hear it. I'll put you on my prayer list. God bless you." There are other pious platitudes and Christian clichés he could have given, but he probably did not know about them. The important thing is that Nehemiah was concerned. – Thru The Bible with J. Vernon McGee.

<sup>6</sup>Nehemiah displays here his profound concern, his sensitivity and his intense feeling. Certainly it is easier to pray about something when one feels deep concern for it; however, one should pray even when the feeling is not profound. More concern about God's honor and more time in communion with God in prayer will result in more intense concern about prayer needs. – New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

<sup>7</sup>What makes people laugh or weep is often an indication of character. People who laugh at others' mistakes or misfortunes, or who weep over trivial personal disappointments, are lacking either in culture or character, and possibly both. Sometimes weeping is a sign of weakness; but with Nehemiah, it was a sign of strength, as it was with Jeremiah (Jer. 9:1), Paul (Acts 20:19), and the Lord Jesus (Luke 19:41). In fact, Nehemiah was like the Lord Jesus in that he willingly shared the burden that was crushing others. "The reproaches of them that reproached Thee are fallen upon Me" (Ps. 69:9; Rom. 15:3).

When God puts a burden on your heart, don't try to escape it; for if you do, you may miss the blessing He has planned for you. The Book of Nehemiah begins with "great affliction" (Neh. 1:3), but before it closes, there is great joy (8:12, 17). "Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Ps. 30:5). Our tears water the "seeds of providence" that God has planted on our path; and without our tears, those seeds could never grow and produce fruit. –Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

<sup>8</sup>In his excellent book, *Holy Discontent*, Bill Hybels suggests we should. We should intentionally expose ourselves to need related to our holy discontent. Great read.

9. What kind of situations move you as the situation in Jerusalem moved Nehemiah?<sup>9</sup>
10. How is the think that breaks our heart related to God's calling on our lives?<sup>10</sup>
11. What did the news cause Nehemiah to do—or, what did he do first?<sup>11</sup>
12. Look at the prayer that begins in verse 5. How does Nehemiah's prayer differ from your average church prayer?<sup>12</sup>
13. How is God addressed in Nehemiah's prayer?<sup>13</sup>
14. What are some ways that praise can be a bigger part of our prayer life?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>For me, it is all about doubling groups. It is so possible to grow a class. A group of ten that doubles every eighteen months will reach a thousand people for God in ten years. Why are we not all doing this?

<sup>10</sup>We cannot work on every problem in the world. We do well to concentrate on those things that break our heart.

<sup>11</sup>This prayer is the first of twelve instances of prayer recorded in this book. (See 2:4; 4:4, 9; 5:19; 6:9, 14; 9:5ff; 13:14, 22, 29, 31.) The Book of Nehemiah opens and closes with prayer. It is obvious that Nehemiah was a man of faith who depended wholly on the Lord to help him accomplish the work He had called him to do. The Scottish novelist George MacDonald said, "In whatever man does without God, he must fail miserably, or succeed more miserably." Nehemiah succeeded because he depended on God. Speaking about the church's ministry today, the late Alan Redpath said, "There is too much working before men and too little waiting before God." – Old Testament - The Bible Exposition Commentary – History.

<sup>12</sup>It is true of most Bible prayers: they don't sound much like Baptist prayers.

<sup>13</sup>"Lord" is the Tetragrammaton (Yahweh), which carries the ideas of love and personal relationship. The phrase "God of heaven" was commonly used in the Persian Empire even by the Persians in speaking of their god. This prayer shows it had been accepted in the religious language of the Jews. However, it was not altogether new since it is used in Gen 24:7.

"The great and awesome God" indicates Nehemiah's appreciation of who God is: the one whom Nehemiah feared and the source and object of his deep faith. God's awesomeness is the impression his total character and person leaves on all who encounter him. Those who know and trust God are those who fear him (cf. Mal 1:14; 4:5; Exod 15:11; Deut 28:58; Ezra 9:4). The order of the prayer is significant: praise then petition.

One central theme of the Old Testament is God's special covenant relation with his people. The word *hesed* (translated here "love" in "covenant of love") is used frequently in the Old Testament. It is closely related to the covenant and contains the idea of loyalty. It emphasizes God's mercy and love to his people. "With those who love him and obey his commands" shows that covenant love or loyalty was to be reciprocal. God's people are to obey God's commands, which express his will. The mention of the covenant should always cause us to recognize God's faithfulness and our responsibility. As Fensham says, "Love and the Law are the two pillars on which the covenant rests." – New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

<sup>14</sup>Here are three ideas: through music, through the names of God, and through the attributes of God.

15. How confident do you think Nehemiah was that God would answer?<sup>15</sup>
16. How specific was Nehemiah in his confession of sin? What do we learn from this?<sup>16</sup>
17. Why do you think Nehemiah quoted the Bible in his prayer?<sup>17</sup>
18. Verse 11, "Give your servant success." Would you feel comfortable praying that prayer? Would you ask God, "make me successful"? Why or why not?<sup>18</sup>
19. How does the biblical view of success differ from the world's view?<sup>19</sup>
20. Are success principles that you read about in secular success books—things like goal setting and hard work and people skills—are these biblical concepts?<sup>20</sup>
21. What can we learn about following God from this chapter?<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Nehemiah knew that God would hear; he was asking God to take action. One of the utterly astounding characteristics of biblical psalms is that the psalmist never doubted that God heard his prayer. How great is God that he can pay attention to each of our prayers, millions of them around the world, individually and simultaneously! Our minds cannot comprehend it, but God is beyond our comprehension. – New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

<sup>16</sup>Nehemiah identified with the people by confessing both their sins and his own before the Lord (vv.6-7). He became an intercessor for the people before God, asking God to forgive the sins of Israel and of his own family. Note that Nehemiah did not make this request only once. He sought God's forgiveness day and night (v.6).

Yet Nehemiah did not ask God to forgive his and Israel's sins in general. Rather, he spelled out their sins (v.7). They had lived extremely wicked and corrupt lives, defiantly disobeying God's Word, His Holy Commandments, His statutes and laws. –Preacher's Outline and Sermon Bible - Commentary - Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

<sup>17</sup>Nehemiah's prayer was based on God's Word. As Kidner notes, even though Nehemiah, like all of us, had to come before God empty-handed, with nothing deserving the Lord's favor or even attention (indeed, just the opposite), he nevertheless did not come uninvited. Most of this prayer is based on Deuteronomy, many phrases of which are practically the same. Nehemiah realized that God justly punished Israel, but he reminded God that this very situation had been anticipated in Deut 4:25–31 and of his promise of mercy, faithfulness, and forgiveness. – New American Commentary – Volume 10: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther.

<sup>18</sup>Ge 24:12 Then he prayed, "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham.  
 Jos 1:7 - 8 Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.  
 Ps 118:25 O Lord, save us; O Lord, grant us success.

<sup>19</sup>As I see it, the Bible's view is more holistic. It is not just about work and money, but about all of life.

<sup>20</sup>Not every one in every book, to be sure, but many of them are. Truth is truth no matter where you find it.

<sup>21</sup>Once you understand these principles of application, you can think of unlimited ways in  
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22. How can we support one another in prayer this week?<sup>22</sup>

1.1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah:

In the month of Kislev in the twentieth year, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem.

3 They 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.”

4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. 5 Then I said:

“O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and obey his commands, 6 let 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 house, have committed against you. 7 We 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, 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.’

10 “They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 O 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.”

I was cupbearer to the king. Neh 1:1-11 (NIV)

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<sup>21</sup>(...continued)

which God’s Word applies today. You can ask such questions as:

- \* Is there a command for me to obey?
- \* Is there a promise to claim?
- \* Is there an example to follow?
- \* Is there a sin to avoid or confess?
- \* Is there a reason for thanksgiving or praise?
- \* What does this passage teach me about God, Jesus, myself, others?

—LifeGuide Small Group Leaders Kit

<sup>22</sup>The three main disciplines of small group ministry are face-to-face conversation, Bible study and prayer. These three are universal and deeply interrelated. The group’s launching ministry discipline is to hold itself accountable to practice these three key ministry disciplines. Mutual accountability and empowerment are the group’s way of saying “Amen” to the regular practice of key disciplines.—Biblical Foundations for Small Group Ministry