

# Discovery of Calling: Prayer and Purpose

Nehemiah 1



Week One

## inTro



Read This Week's Passage:  
Nehemiah 1

### STAYING BEHIND

The Babylonian army had conquered Judah as well as the majority of the then-known world, bringing captives to its capital city. After the death of its king Nebuchadnezzar, Babylon fell to the rising Medo-Persian Empire. Their more lenient government allowed exiles to return to their homelands. The book of Ezra (which was once bound together with the book of Nehemiah) recalls this edict and describes the progression of the Judean reconstruction. At this time, we find Nehemiah did not return back to his homeland. Instead, he served in the royal courts of Susa.

The books of Ezra, Esther, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, and possibly others, also called post-exilic, take place after the Babylonian invasion of Judah and the Babylonian Exile. Be mindful that these books do not appear in chronological order. By the time of Nehemiah, reconstruction and rebuilding had already occurred in Jerusalem, but due to opposition and internal conflicts, the work was not finished.

In the opening of the account of the book, Nehemiah is found to be in the Medo-Persian winter citadel palace of Shushan, or Susa (the same place as the Ahasuerus's great feast in Esther 1 and the vision of Daniel 8). The year is the twentieth into the reign of King Artaxerxes and the month is Chisleu, around November-December. Though these background details seem unimportant, they are crucial in understanding the narrative and extracting principles of leadership for our individual spheres.



## **inScribe**

Write out Nehemiah 1 from the translation of your choice. If you're pressed for time, write out Nehemiah 1:4–11. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, outline it, or mind map the chapter.



Go back to your scribed text and study the passage.

**Circle** repeated words/phrases/ideas

**Underline** words/phrases that are important and have meaning to you



Draw **Arrows** to connect words/phrases to other associated or related words/phrases



Memorize your favorite verse. Write it out multiple times to help memorization.

What is your prayer life like?  
What promises can you claim for situations in your life? Do you have a vision for your role in God's work?



Read more at [www.inverseible.org/neh1-3](http://www.inverseible.org/neh1-3)

## RECONSTRUCTING THE RECONSTRUCTION

While the majority of the Jews had returned to their homeland, Nehemiah remained in the courts of Medo-Persia. Being content in his position and place in life, he could have ignored the men of Judah. Instead, with personal investment, he asks his brethren about two things: (1) the status of his people: “the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity” and (2) the condition of Jerusalem: the capital of his people as well as the city where God had chosen to place His presence in the past.

The report is negative: (1) the status of the people: “in great affliction and reproach” and (2) the condition of Jerusalem: “wall...is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.”

Biblical leadership is not only concerned with achieving an objective, goal, or project, but also considers the state of the people. When it comes to people, we have issues that are internal (“great affliction,” or troubles) and/or external (“reproach,” or shame). Nehemiah adeptly ministers by using the task at hand (the broken infrastructure and protective barrier of the wall) to minister to deeper social and spiritual problems associated with it (the burned visage of their entrance, embarrassment, dishonor, humiliation, indignity, God’s seeming silence).

Leaders today have much to glean from this passage. Problems range not only in political, intellectual, philosophical, economic, and/or structural spheres, but it could be argued that the most important area is spiritual. This is where the most amount of light, compassion, and grace are needed. This is where Christians are called, ultimately, to impact.

As soon as Nehemiah heard the report, he wept, mourned, fasted, and prayed. More than an impersonal project, Nehemiah had emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual energy invested. A biblical leader is not one who starts their task with glory in mind, but rather with a burden placed upon the heart.

The work of Jerusalem’s reconstruction started before, but was not completed due to political maneuvers (Ezra 4:4–24). Upon hearing the discouraging report, Nehemiah saw the larger picture. Not only was the reputation of God’s people at stake, but God’s reputation was at stake. The walls provided a defensive barrier against enemies. If these walls were inferior, not only did it reflect upon the engineering capabilities of the Jews, but also the protective ability of their God.

We must ask questions about the spiritual condition of individuals around us as well as larger organizations like the church. Sloppy results and the lack of excellence reflect our ideas about, as well as relationship, with God. When His reputation and people are at stake, we may very well be called to repair these “walls” for His glory.

## NEHEMIAH'S PRAYER

The secret to Nehemiah's leadership and courage was his dependence on prayer. The first chapter's prayer has four components: adoration, confession, promises, and vision.

### Adoration

Nehemiah addresses God with many titles ("LORD God of heaven," "the great and terrible God," the One "that keepeth covenant and mercy"). These titles contextualize the greatness of God for us and the smallness of our own problems.

Throughout the prayer, the second-person pronouns you/thee and your/thy overshadow the first-person pronouns I, we, and my. The prayer is theocentric (God-centered), not anthropocentric (or "prayer-centric"). In fact, the only time Nehemiah uses the first person is in confessing sins.

### Confession

Sin is a barrier to God (Isaiah 59:1, 2). Nehemiah makes sure to confess his and all of Israel's sins. Though Jesus will not arrive for hundreds of years, his faith stands upon this future contingency.

Confession can be general as well as specific. Nehemiah could have been confessing his sins of indifference, personal disregard of God's commandments, or perhaps ignoring the call to return to Jerusalem and remaining in the courts of Susa. Regardless, Nehemiah seeks pure motives and identifies personally with the corporate sin of Israel. Other Bible greats have also taken on the spiritual liability of the people.

### Promises

Believing that God would be faithful to His Word, Nehemiah repeats to God what He stated in the past (Nehemiah 1:8). Jesus did likewise, quoting the Old Testament during His temptations. With assurance in God's faithfulness, one can be bold with God regarding His promises.

In verses 8 and 9, Nehemiah summarizes the blessings and curses of the promises found in Deuteronomy 30 and Leviticus 26. They articulate the fact that obedience is the basis for God's blessings. Paul later emphasizes that Christ's obedience is in fact the basis for God's promises of blessing and that "in Him" we can partake in the same blessings while enjoying the removal of the curses. Whether looking forward as did Nehemiah or as we look backward today, the point is to look toward Christ as the Promise Keeper.

### Vision

Through prayer, priorities are reestablished and a purpose forms in Nehemiah's heart. He realizes that God has sent him to the palace for this purpose. Through prayer, Nehemiah understood his role as cup-bearer to the king, and he began to develop a vision to meet the need.

The Medes and Persians had a very high view of law—once a law was passed, changing it was impossible (Daniel 6:15). With laws that prevented the restoration of Jerusalem (Ezra 4:17–24), reconstruction seemed impossible. However, rather than focusing on impossibilities, Nehemiah looked to God for answers. Nehemiah prayed (Nehemiah 1:4) until something happened. It was four months before he received an answer (from Chisleu [November–December in the Gregorian calendar] to Nisan [March–April in the Gregorian calendar] in chapter 2).



**in**Terpret

After looking at your scribed and annotated text, what special insights do your marks overall seem to point to?



What questions emerge after studying this passage? What parts are difficult?

What other principles and conclusions do you find?



Read more at  
[www.inversebible.org/neh1-4](http://www.inversebible.org/neh1-4)

Discovery of Calling: Prayer and Purpose



How do the following verses relate to the primary passage?

Ezra 4:4–24

Leviticus 26:27–45

2 Chronicles 6:26–39



What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Nehemiah 1?

Review your memorized verse from Nehemiah 1.

## CONTORTION OF REALITY

What God says, comes to be; this is the nature of God's Word and the basis for creation, salvation, and redemption—it is foundational to Scripture. What God says becomes a reality (Psalm 33:6, 9). The sound waves that came out of God's mouth became light particles, energy, and matter. Philosophers have debated from antiquity the nature of being. The Bible clearly points to the Word of God as the basis for reality. This is why God cannot lie (Hebrews 6:18; Titus 1:2). If He were to attempt a lie, reality would contort itself to comply with or obey God's Word.

And yet God gives humanity the freedom to choose whether or not they will align themselves with His Word. Unlike matter, which has to abide according to God's Word, humanity, through God-given choice based on God's love, does not have to. We can choose life, defined by the reality of God's Word, or death if we do not want to be part of God's reality. Every day we make decisions whether to obey God's Word or not. But when we choose to align ourselves with God's Word, amazing results occur.

God seeks to speak to us again. He did it in the past. He did in the incarnation and life of Christ. He became the living Word. When we have stored up the Word of God in our minds and then claim it, God's Word continues to speak to and through us.

While His promises took place in biblical history, studying them in their context will help us know how to claim the same promises. The basis of these claims is rooted in faith—not a mere faith in His existence, for even the demons believe He exists (James 2:19). Our faith should be based on His goodness and His power (Hebrews 11:6). Crises of faith derive from believing in God's power but not His goodness, thereby resulting in believing in a cruel, indifferent, powerful, fearful God. The other extreme is to believe in a good God who lacks power. This results in a Santa Claus-type of benevolent watcher who desires to but cannot intervene in human affairs. Both are corruptions of our vision of God and damage our faith. History attests to complicated and complex philosophies and theologies that seek to portray and articulate these versions of God.

But God is both powerful and good. This God is accessible through the power of His Word. This is made most evident by Jesus Christ at Creation, at the Cross, through the church, and again through the crises and testimonies of our lives. What words of Jesus have you claimed today?



inVite

Meditate on Nehemiah 1 again  
and look for Jesus in the passage.



What parallels do you see  
between Nehemiah's intercession  
and Christ's intercession?

How do you see Jesus differently  
or see Him again?

Prayer: How do you respond to  
seeing Jesus in this way?



Read more at  
[www.inverseible.org/neh1-6](http://www.inverseible.org/neh1-6)

Discovery of Calling: Prayer and Purpose



Review your memory verse.  
How does it apply to your  
life this week?

—————→  
As you have studied this  
week, what personal  
applications have you been  
convicted of in your life?

What are practical applications  
you must make in your school,  
family, workplace, and church?



Read more inSight from the  
Spirit of Prophecy at  
[www.inverseible.org/neh1-7](http://www.inverseible.org/neh1-7)

## A HOLY PURPOSE TO RESTORE JERUSALEM

“Nehemiah, a Hebrew exile, occupied a position of influence and honor in the Persian court. As cup-bearer of the king, he was familiarly admitted to the royal presence; and by virtue of this intimacy, and his own high abilities and tried fidelity, he became the monarch’s counselor. Yet in that heathen land, surrounded by royal pomp and splendor, he did not forget the God of his fathers or the people who had been entrusted with the holy oracles. With deepest interest, his heart turned toward Jerusalem, and his hopes and joys were bound up with her prosperity. Days of peculiar trial and affliction had come to the chosen city. Messengers from Judah described to Nehemiah its condition. The second temple had been reared, and portions of the city rebuilt; but the work of restoration was imperiled, the temple services were disturbed, and the people were kept in constant alarm, by the fact that the walls of the city were in ruins, and the gates burned with fire. The capital of Judah was fast becoming a desolate place, and the few inhabitants remaining were daily embittered by the taunts of their idolatrous assailants, “Where is your God?”

“The soul of the Hebrew patriot was overwhelmed by these evil tidings. So great was his sorrow that he could not eat or drink. He ‘wept and mourned certain days, and fasted.’ But when the first outburst of grief was over, he turned to the sure Helper. ‘I prayed,’ he said, ‘before the God of heaven.’ He knew that all this ruin had come because of the transgression of Israel; and in deep humiliation he came before God for pardon of sin and a renewal of the divine favor. . . .

“. . . God had been faithful to his threatenings when his people separated from him; he had scattered them abroad among the nations, according to his word. And Nehemiah found in this very fact an assurance that he would be equally faithful in fulfilling his promises. His people had now returned in penitence and faith to keep his commandments: and God himself had said that if they would do this, even though they were cast out into the uttermost part of the earth, he would gather them thence, and would cause the light of his countenance again to shine upon them. This promise had been given more than a thousand years before; but through all the centuries it stood unchanged. God’s word cannot fail. . . .

“Nehemiah had often poured out his soul thus before God in behalf of his people. And as he prayed, a holy purpose had been forming in his mind, that if he could obtain the consent of the king, and the necessary aid in procuring implements and material, he would himself undertake the arduous task of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, and seeking to restore the national strength. And now, in closing his prayer, he entreated the Lord to grant him favor in the sight of the king, that this cherished plan might be carried out.”<sup>1</sup>

1. Ellen G. White, “A Holy Purpose to Restore Jerusalem,” *Southern Watchman*, March 1, 1904.



Share insights from this week's memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.



**What are some burdens that God is putting on your heart?**

**What walls are breaking down around you now and need to be repaired?**

**What are some human needs around you that you are being called to serve?**

**How can we place more care, concern, and investment into humanity as Nehemiah did for his people who were so far away?**

**What palatial luxuries are we encompassed with?**

**What is your life burden?**

**What is your life passion?**

**What is your life calling?**

**Do these three intersect? Why, or why not?**