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**C1329 – August 28, 2013 – Nehemiah 1:1-11**  
**Nehemiah's Confession**

Last week we introduced the post-Exilic book of Nehemiah covering the themes, the purposes, the structure, the uniqueness, the background, etc. This week we want to start the first major section of the book, chapters 1-7, the Rebuilding of Jerusalem and in particular the walls. God worked through Nehemiah to put Jerusalem back on the map politically as a well-defined, defensible city. He did this so that the covenanted nation could be protected from the surrounding pagan nations and their religious and cultural heritage could be preserved against assimilation with the surrounding pagan nations. The nation had to maintain its distinctiveness in order to fulfill her covenant destiny. Thus the book begins with the introduction of Nehemiah, God's man, his position in the Persian kingdom, the report concerning the vulnerability of Jerusalem and his consequent prayer of confession on behalf of himself and his nation.

In Neh 1:1 **The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.** I take it Ezra wrote this portion of the book straight from Nehemiah's personal memoirs. Much of the book is written in the 1<sup>st</sup> person, "I asked..." "I sat down," "I wept..." "I said..." and these expressions are accounted for by the fact they were drawn from Nehemiah's own personal memoirs. The Jewish Talmud said, "Ezra wrote his book" (*b. Bava Batra 15a*). The Gemara then asks and answers, "And who finished it? Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah."<sup>1</sup> So in effect **Nehemiah** did write the book but it was put together by Ezra. Verse 1, these are **The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah.**

Now **Hacaliah** was his father and we know nothing beyond that about him. The rest of the verse then gives us the timing of this event and the location, **it happened in the month Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capitol.** Chislev was the month, it's pronounced Kislev, **in the**

**twentieth year**, that is the twentieth year of the reign of King Artaxerxes which was 445BC. **Chislev** corresponds to our Nov/Dec so it was winter time at the end of our calendar year, 445BC. Therefore the location of these events was **in Susa**. **Susa** was the location of the winter palace, whereas the main palace was at Persepolis and the summer palace was at Ecbatana. Persian kings had several palaces to accommodate their luxurious lifestyle. **Susa** was the winter palace. Esther's husband, King Ahasuerus had greatly elaborated this palace a few decades earlier (Est 1:2ff). Daniel had found himself in vision at Susa a century later (Dan 8:2). Since it was winter Nehemiah found himself serving the King at this luxurious palace in 445BC. While it says he was at the **capitol** the **capitol** is technically a fortified palace. Nehemiah served in the palace of the king in close association with the king.

1:2 it happened **that Hanani, one of my brothers, and some men from Judah came**; they may have been residents of **Judah** or they may have been on a journey to **Judah** and were now returning. In any case **Hanani** was one of Nehemiah's brothers, he had others, and later when Nehemiah returns to Jerusalem he is going to appoint this brother to a high administrative position in Jerusalem. So these two brothers had camaraderie about them, unanimity on the issue of Jerusalem. And with this brother came **some men from Judah**. These men had seen first-hand the situation in Jerusalem and Nehemiah is anxious to get the report. Just a year earlier the king had stopped Ezra from rebuilding the wall by force of arms (Ezra 4:23) and so Nehemiah is concerned about the state of affairs.

He says, **and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped and had survived the captivity, and about Jerusalem**. He had two concerns. First, the Jewish people; how are the Jewish people? In particular how are those **who had escaped and had survived the captivity**? This is not all the Jews in the kingdom but the remnant of Jews who had returned to the Promised Land. These Jews **had escaped** in a very real sense, since they had been taken against their wills into **captivity** some 150 years before by the Babylonians and they **had survived**. Now that they had **escaped captivity** and were back in the Promised Land Nehemiah wanted to know how they were doing. Second, the Jewish city; how was the Jewish city, **Jerusalem**? In particular what was the condition of the walls of Jerusalem? Ezra had recently been rebuilding the walls but this activity was halted by the king's decree. So what was the condition of the walls now?

Now from these two concerns we can see that Nehemiah understood what was important to God and he made his chief concerns align with God's chief concerns. The Jewish people and the Jewish city of Jerusalem are God's chief concerns. The Jewish people because they are the only nation of people God ever elected. Moses says, "the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. Amos says, "You only have I chosen among all the families of the earth." And Jeremiah says, "he who touches you, touches the apple of His eye." The Jewish people are God's elect nation. The Jewish city Jerusalem because this is the only city God ever elected to put His name. Moses says when the people come to dwell in the land that they "will seek the Lord at the place the LORD chooses...to establish His name." And the Lord says, "I have chosen Jerusalem that My name might be there." The Psalmist says, "If I forget you, O Jerusalem, May my right hand forget her skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth If I do not remember you, If I do not exalt Jerusalem Above my chief joy." The chief joy of a Jew was his wedding day. Jerusalem was more important than the wedding day. What I'm trying to communicate is that two of God's top concerns are the Jewish people and the Jewish city, Jerusalem. And what are Nehemiah's two top concerns? The Jewish people and the Jewish city, Jerusalem. What we find here is a man who has aligned his concerns with God's concerns. Not a common man, a rare man. A man who cares more about what God cares about than the common cares of this world; a man who has exalted the Jewish people and Jerusalem above his chief joy. Having asked about them...

**Verse 3, They said to me, "The remnant there in the province who survived the captivity are in great distress and reproach, and the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire."**

Now this report revealed more to Nehemiah than it reveals to you and I unless you are a good OT Bible student. This report revealed that they were under divine discipline. The report would sound to Nehemiah almost like a report that the city of Jerusalem was under siege and that would signal the foreboding fifth degree of divine discipline as outlined in Lev 26:27ff.

Whenever Jerusalem was under attack, which is obvious from the description of the walls being broken down and the gates burned, then they were coming under the fifth degree of divine discipline. So for Nehemiah the report is very concerning.

Let's take a look at the description of the **remnant**. I said in the prior verse those who had escaped and survived the captivity were the remnant who had returned and verse 3 confirms that interpretation. The report says that the **remnant there in the province...are in great distress and reproach**. The **great distress** refers to military distress. The walls and the gates were destroyed and therefore they had no protection against foreign enemies. And they certainly had enemies. The people in that region did not like the Jews. Why? Because 13 years before Ezra had returned with funds from the royal treasury to re-dedicate the Temple worship. That's all fine and dandy but he also came with authority to siphon off tax dollars from all the surrounding provinces to provide whatever else might be needed for the Temple. He was using gobs of money to fund these construction projects and needless to say the surrounding people didn't like it too much. They were taking money out of their pocketbook and the pocketbook is the most sensitive portion of the human anatomy if you haven't noticed. So they were the ones who wrote a letter to the king warning the king that if this city was rebuilt and the walls completed then the people of that evil city would lead a revolt against the king and then the king would lose that portion of his kingdom. This letter is recorded word-for-word in Ezra 4:11-16. The king replied with his own letter agreeing that this rebuilding was a threat and therefore the rebuilding should be stopped immediately by force of arms. This reply of the king is recorded word-for-word in Ezra 4:17-23. I take it from verse 3 here that they not only stopped the rebuilding by force of arms but they broke down the walls of Jerusalem and burned the gates. Therefore the people were **in great distress** because they were open to enemy attack. The second report concerning the **remnant** was that they were in **reproach**. This means their enemies were mocking them because the king had given them a victory over the Jews and they could no longer get their tax dollars to fund their building projects. So in a display of victory they were taunting and mocking the Jews. That was the **reproach**. So the two reports concerning the Jewish remnant were that they were **in great distress**, meaning open to enemy attack, and facing **reproach**, meaning the taunting of their enemies. These two things communicated to Nehemiah that they were under divine discipline.

The third part of the report concerns the city and we've already mentioned it, **the wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates are burned with fire**. Whatever progress had been made by Ezra and his colleagues had been

destroyed and so the bottom line is that both the people and the city were under divine discipline. This meant they were not keeping the Mosaic Law and though Nehemiah doesn't have any details on what aspects of the law they aren't keeping, the consequences are the same, divine discipline. And with Jerusalem itself in a defenseless state the fifth degree of divine discipline seems most apparent.

Now his response in verse 4, **When I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days**; the Hebrew **sat down** indicates he immediately fell to the ground due to the shock of the news. If you've ever received bad news, news that just absolutely crushes you, you might melt on the spot. That's what happened to Nehemiah when he heard this report, he just collapsed and he **wept and mourned for days**. Does this response convey how aligned Nehemiah's concerns were with God's concerns? Absolutely! He **wept and mourned for days**. This isn't a little crybaby session. God elected the Jewish people and Jerusalem and both are in a terrible state so **he wept and mourned for days**, several days.

Middle of verse 4, **and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven**. Again, this must be serious because you don't fast unless you're facing a crisis. We've mentioned fasting before in Daniel, Esther and Ezra. Here we see it again in Nehemiah. It seems great saints fasted. Esther we might question because it only says she fasted whereas Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah all mention fasting in connection with prayer. I pointed out that the absence of prayer in Esther is intentional because the point is not to highlight Esther's great spirituality but God's covenant love for His people. Esther was courageous but she was not a spiritual woman, she voluntarily married a polytheistic hedonist king just to move her and her uncle up the political ladder. The fasting there was nothing more than ritual. Ritual fasting is just going through religious motion, it's not accompanied by prayer, it's the idea that if I go through this motion, if I pull the strings just right I can manipulate God. God is my puppet. That's probably what was going on with Esther. It was some religious gymnastics to try and get God's support. She got God's support but it wasn't because of her religious gymnastics, it was because God's covenants were at stake with the threat of annihilation against His covenanted nation! But Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah connected prayer with fasting, that's true fasting. But true fasting is bringing prayer in alongside the fasting and that is what was going on with Daniel, Ezra and

Nehemiah. All three of them fasted with prayer. We said there are three kinds of fasts in the Bible; the normal fast, the partial fast and the absolute fast. The normal fast is where you abstain from food but not water. These fasts may last just a few days or they may last up to 40 days. The partial fast is where you don't eat certain foods for a period of time but you do drink water. The absolute fast is where you eat no food and drink no water. This fast lasts for maximum of three days.

There are reasons for fasting and I think the church has erred on both sides with respect to fasting. On one hand some take the extreme point of view that turns it into religious ritual and the idea that we can manipulate God; on the other hand some take the opposite extreme and disregard it altogether as if it's wrong. I think there is a balance you want to strike on the question of fasting today. I see the early church fasting and I think it does serve valid purposes in the church. Let me explain again the place of fasting. First, fasting gives more time to pray and study the word of God. If you don't have to prepare meals and eat think of how much time that saves. You can use this time to pray and study the word of God. Second, fasting gives you greater focus and concentration on God. Physically you are weakened when you don't eat food and this makes you more conscious of your dependence upon God. It also physiologically allows your blood supply to be dedicated to your brain rather than digestion meaning you can concentrate and think more clearly. So with greater recognition of your dependence and better concentration you can really focus on God. Third, fasting is appropriate in a time of crisis. Every time we find fasting in the Bible there is a crisis. It's not just doing it every Friday because it's Friday, that's all religious ritual. Fourth, fasting should be done privately or without making a show of it. That's what we see here, Nehemiah is praying and fasting before God. God was his audience. He interpreted this report concerning the Jewish remnant and Jerusalem's walls as a crisis and so he's in fasting and prayer.

The other side of fasting is prayer and prayer is a major part of Nehemiah's book. "Of the 406 verses in the book, the prayers fill 46 verses (11%)."<sup>ii</sup> Tonight we'll see the first prayer. This man was in politics and he was a prayer warrior. No separation of church and state here; this man didn't leave his religious beliefs on the palace porch; this man didn't compartmentalize and put religion in a box separate from politics. God is the one who gave human politics to begin with. It came with the fourth divine institution of

human government and here is a man serving in government. And you're going to see in the next chapter this man takes his religious beliefs right into the throne room of the Persian king, right into the Oval Office so to speak. There's no compartmentalization, all of life is connected to God and if you are in politics you follow the politics of Daniel and Ezra and Nehemiah. These were great statesmen who knew the word of God and applied the word of God to their governing.

Here's his prayer in verse 5, **I said, "I beseech You, O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments, 6let your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned.** It's basically a prayer of confession but it combines other elements of prayer like praise and petition. He begins with the words of verse 5, **I beseech You.** It's not the "Dear heavenly Father" approach." This is along the lines of the "Oh please God" approach, it's a begging plea. What does that indicate right away? What would starting your prayer this way signify? That you have no claim on God's attention. He doesn't have any requirement to listen to you; He doesn't have any requirement to listen to me! You can see why at the end of verse 6, **I and my father's house have sinned.** If you have sin God has no necessity laid on Him to listen to your prayer. None whatsoever. So to appeal to Him requires something along the lines of, "Oh please God, listen!" You're asking for mercy and the Hebrew is *anna* means mercy, it's a plea for mercy. God didn't owe Nehemiah His attention; therefore if he's going to get it it's got to be based on mercy.

He addresses him as **LORD God of heaven**, clearly recognizing God as the One who rules in heaven over all. Then starts the praise. Praise is an excellent starting point in prayer because praise is extolling God's attributes. It's putting who and what God is up front. We say God is sovereign, righteous, just, loving, omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, immutable and eternal. How do you praise God? By extolling those attributes, by citing them, by calling up His mighty works accomplished by His attributes. So we can praise Him by citing His attributes or by citing His works accomplished by

those attributes. Nehemiah does some of both, **the great and awesome God, who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness**. He starts with citing two attributes. God is **great** and God is **awesome**. First, God is **great**. What does this mean? The Hebrew is *gadol* and usually refers to size; it's a reference to the immensity of God. You may never have heard of God's attribute of immensity or you may think it is the same as omnipresence. It's related but it's not the same. To explain this attribute would take the rest of our time, suffice it to say now that it refers to "God's infinity in relation to space...we are thinking of him as a person who cannot be measured." We are saying that He is aspatial, that is, He transcends space, He can't be put in a box, He can't be put in creation, He is Spirit and you can't confine Him. This is what Nehemiah is referred to when he says God is **great**, it refers to His immensity and that is a wonderful attribute that we should study in detail someday. Second, God is **awesome**. What does this mean? The Hebrew is *yare* and refers to fear or terror; it's a reference to the omnipotence of God, particularly as He manifests awe-inspiring exhibitions of His power in creation. For example when He came down on Mt Sinai in a storm and the people were shaking. These exhibitions produce fear in the onlookers because they are so extra-ordinary. They cause people to shake in their boots. Nehemiah praises Him by citing that He is **the great and awesome God**.

Then in verse 5 he praises Him by citing His works. He is the One **who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness**. Or better translated, "covenant loyalty." He is the one who keeps "covenant loyalty." This of course refers to His unique relationship with the nation Israel through the covenants. God is the one who implemented the covenant program in history. After the Flood the nations went apostate and so God implemented a covenant program with Abraham in Gen 12. It was the Abrahamic Covenant given in Gen 12, 13, founded on blood sacrifice in Gen 15, and it was repeated to Isaac and later to Jacob. The Abrahamic covenant promised Jacob and his descendants a land, a seed and a worldwide blessing. The covenant is unconditional in that its final fulfillment depends solely upon God's faithfulness to His covenant. The three aspects of land, seed and worldwide blessing then were elaborated upon in the Land Covenant of Deut 29-30, the Davidic Covenant of 2 Sam 7 and the New Covenant of Jer 31. So these three covenants are also unconditional since they grow out of the three aspects of the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant and what this all means is that the ultimate fulfillment of these four covenants depends solely upon God.



Now pay close attention here because this sets up the structure of world history and it's the structure that is embedded in Nehemiah's prayer. We've got these unconditional covenants and we've explained what this means but observe carefully this statement; an unconditional covenant may have conditions added to it that must be met in order to enjoy the promised blessings. Think about that. An unconditional covenant may add conditions in order to get the blessings. That may sound like it's nullifying the unconditional nature of the covenants but it's not. For example, the Abrahamic Covenant was unconditional but as early as Genesis 17 God said that every male descendant of Abraham was to be circumcised to enter into the bond of the covenant. It was an act of obedience on the part of the parents, and if the little boys were not circumcised they were not eligible for the blessings. So there were blessings within the unconditional covenant that were conditioned on obedience but the ultimate blessing is certain. That's not the only one because later a whole slew of conditions were added in the Mosaic Covenant given at Sinai. Basically this covenant sets forth the conditions for blessing. The Mosaic Covenant was a conditional covenant that was added within the Abrahamic Covenant as a means of attaining the blessing. It was added to define the obedience that God required as a prerequisite to the nation receiving the blessings promised in the Abrahamic Covenant. The way I imagine this is to draw a solid outer circle depicting the Abrahamic Covenant and its three amplification covenants, the Land, the Davidic and the New. Within this outer circle I depict the Mosaic Covenant with an inner dashed circle. In other words, the nation Israel is the only nation within this outer circle and they cannot get out of it, but they also have an inner circle and this circle they can get out of. The outer circle defines their position; the inner circle defines their experience. If they keep the Law then they stay in this inner circle where they enjoy the blessing of God in the land and in being a blessing to the world; if they disobey then they are outside the inner circle but still inside the outer circle and out here they face the cursing of God, divine discipline.

The problem then in the end is that the nation couldn't obey the Mosaic Law. They kept blowing it. And if that's the case then how is the nation ever going to get to the ultimate blessing promised in the Abrahamic Covenant as long as the nation is in disobedience? Obedience is the only way to enjoy the promised blessing. How does the nation become obedient? They can confess

and that's what we see Nehemiah doing here in this prayer; confessing his sin and the sin of his nation, he wants to be restored to the inner circle so they can enjoy blessing in the land. He sees Jerusalem in a state of extreme distress. He can confess, other godly Israelites can confess but what about the nation? You've got to get a national confession to get national blessing. That's the story of the New Covenant. God promised that He would establish a new covenant that was not like the Mosaic Covenant. The Mosaic Covenant just made demands and the nation sinned and found themselves out under divine discipline but the New Covenant promised a new heart with the law inscribed upon their heart that would obey and the indwelling Spirit. So then ultimately God is faithful because He will make certain that Israel will meet the demands for Him to fulfill the unconditional covenants so they can enjoy the land, the seed and the worldwide blessing.

In any case, it's that covenant structure that Nehemiah is praising God for here in verse 5 with the simple statement, He **who preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments**. You see both elements; you see unconditional preservation of the covenant and you see that it's ultimately enjoyed by those who love Him and keep His commandments. Were the people loving and keeping His commandments? No way! Nehemiah knew that if the people were a reproach and the city of Jerusalem was in disrepair then the people were not in the inner circle but under divine discipline in the outer circle. So of course they needed to confess. The nation needs to confess and start loving Him and keeping His commandments.

Verse 6, Nehemiah is leading the way, **let your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant which I am praying before You now, day and night, on behalf of the sons of Israel Your servants, confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned**. Several things here. First, he prayed that God would open His eyes to hear. That's an interesting expression, I thought you opened your ears to hear. Nehemiah says "open your eyes to hear." Why would you say that? To get someone's full attention! People aren't really listening unless they are listening with their eyes. Listen with Your eyes God! I want your full attention. Second, he prayed an intercessory prayer since he says **I am praying...on behalf of the sons of Israel**. Nehemiah is following the

example of Job who interceded on behalf of his sons and daughters, of Moses who interceded on behalf of the nation Israel at Sinai, of Daniel who interceded on behalf of the nation Israel at the close of the seventy years in Babylonian and of Ezra who interceded on behalf of Judah who had intermarried pagan girls. All the great saints of the OT interceded on behalf of their people. Third, he identified with his nation in sin. He says, **confessing the sins of the sons of Israel which we have sinned against You; I and my father's house have sinned.** He doesn't elevate himself above the rest of the nation as if he's not part of the problem. He may not have been a large part of the problem but he's not without sin! His family added their own sin to the pile. This follows the example of someone like Daniel who identified himself with the sin of Israel and Ezra who identified himself with the sin of his people even though these men were standout believers. Fourth, his prayer continued **day and night**. How many of us can say we prayed day and night? The man knew how to pray, meaning he knew how to really devote himself to prayer. Not many of us can do this. The disciples asked Jesus, "Teach us to pray," by which they meant, teach us how to really attend to this ministry. It's just hard, it takes self-discipline. There are so many distractions that we tend to get carried away by. Lord, teach us how to really attend to this ministry of prayer. Teach us like you taught Nehemiah, a man who had obviously learned how to pray.

Now verse 7 we come to a general confession of sin, it had to be general because Nehemiah didn't get details in the report. So he says, **we have acted very corruptly against You and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.** He's summarizing the whole Law, he just says, we broke the whole Law and indeed to break the Law at one point was to break it at every point. They had **acted very corruptly**. God was therefore completely justified in disciplining them just as He said He would do in the Law.

Verse 8 he quotes the Law, **Remember the word which You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples.'** That's a quote, can anyone looking in their margin and tell me where it comes from? Lev 26:33. Remember Lev 26 is one of the key chapters for understanding the OT. It marks out the five degrees of divine discipline under the Mosaic Covenant that God would put the nation through

if they disobeyed. The discipline was designed to bring them to confession and subsequent obedience so they could enjoy the blessing. But if they did not confess and obey then God would turn up the discipline. What degree of discipline is Lev 26:33? The fifth degree of divine discipline, the worst degree. What was the fifth degree of divine discipline? Military defeat and exile to foreign powers. There are further details but that's essentially what he points out here, **'If you are unfaithful I will scatter you among the peoples.'** Nehemiah interpreted the reproach against the Jews and the destruction of the walls as a foreboding sign that Israel was about to come under the fifth degree of divine discipline.

In verse 9 he shifts to another covenant the Lord had spoken, **but if you return to Me and keep My commandments and do them, though those of you who have been scattered were in the most remote part of the heavens, I will gather them from there and will bring them to the place where I have chosen to cause My name to dwell.'** This is a quote from where? Check your margin again? This is Deut 30:2-4. What covenant is in view here. Another key chapter in the Bible, the Land Covenant. The condition is set forth that they have to return and keep the commandments in order to enjoy the final regathering of the nation. It's that covenant structure again around which he is building his prayer. Of course, later we learn that God will make sure this condition of returning and keeping the commandments is met by the New Covenant. Nehemiah is looking forward to the time when the scattered nation would repent and return and obey.

So again we see that ultimate blessing can only be enjoyed when the nation repents and obeys. Nehemiah understood this perfectly, that's why he's confessing his sin and the sin of his nation. He wants the discipline to end and the final regathering of the nation and restoration of Jerusalem. This is a man whose concerns are right on with God's concerns.

He reminds God, in verse 10, **They are Your servants and Your people whom You redeemed by Your great power and by Your strong hand.** Notice the 2<sup>nd</sup> person pronouns. These people belong to You God, they're yours so do something about it. **You redeemed them by Your power and Your hand.** What event is he referring to there? The Exodus from Egypt. Who authored the Exodus? God authored the Exodus. God singlehandedly

defeated the greatest superpower of the world and set His people free. If He were to now abandon them what would that say about God's reputation? Nehemiah is staking God's reputation to the Jew's reputation. And God if you don't do what you've said you will do for this people then your reputation is going to be tarnished. It's the same card Moses played in his intercessory prayer in Exod 32. These are Your people God whom You redeemed with an outstretched hand so if you don't do something about it it's going to be Your reputation. So do something about it! Make Your name great! This is a man concerned with God!

Verse 11, **O Lord, I beseech You.** Again, as in verse 5 he says, "O Lord, please!" It's a cry for mercy in a life or death situation. The nation was on the brink of destruction! So he says "Please Lord!" **May Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant and the prayer of Your servants who delight to revere Your name,** evidently anyone who was a spiritual man in Israel knew that they were in a bad way and therefore it was time to confess. And further he says, **make Your servant successful today and grant him compassion before this man.**" What man? Apparently it's the king because of the next parenthetical remark. **Now I was cupbearer to the king.** So the man he was requesting success and compassion before was **the king.** We understand then that Nehemiah was intending to go in before the king and this looks ahead to the events of chapter 2.

Let's set the stage for it by explaining the role of the **cupbearer.** Last time I mentioned that the **cupbearer** was the one who tasted the wine before the king partook in order to protect him from any assassination attempts. I've since learned there is more to it than that. There are six characteristics Nehemiah would have had in order to be the cupbearer. First, he would have to be trained in royal court etiquette. The king wanted his court to be very high class and so Nehemiah would have been highly trained in customs and etiquette. Second, he would have to be a handsome man. The king didn't want ugly people in his court. That's why Nebuchadnezzar for example, chose only the best men to be indoctrinated and trained into administrative positions in his kingdom. They wanted the court to be an attractive place and that means filling your court with attractive people. Third, he would have to know a lot about wine. When the meal was served before the king he would need to know what wines went with what foods as well as the king's personal tastes. Fourth, he would have to be a man of good company. As a man in the

court the king would want to speak to him often and so he would have to be someone the king was fond of eating and drinking and talking with, good company. Fifth, he would be a man of great influence since he had such close access to the king. Sixth, above all he would be a highly trusted man since he was constantly in the presence of the king and was therefore initiated into kingdom affairs. <sup>iii</sup>

In summary, Nehemiah was serving as cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia in the winter of 445BC at the palace in Susa when his brother and other companions came from Judah with a report concerning the Jews and the city of Jerusalem. The people were facing military distress and mocking reproach due to their enemy's recent victory through the king's decree and subsequent destruction of the walls and burning of the gates. Nehemiah interpreted this as a foreboding warning of the fifth degree of divine discipline. Consequently he fell to the ground, weeping and mourning for days and he fasted in conjunction with prayer beseeching God on the basis of His mercy to hear. He began by praising God for who He was and what He had done through the covenants. He confessed his sin and the sin of his nation admitting that they had broken the entire Law. He also admitted that God was just in scattering them into Exile for their sins but that He had also promised to restore them if they returned and obeyed Him. Finally, he requested that God accomplish this great work for His nation that He had begun at the Exodus and that God give him success and compassion before the king when he went in before him.

In conclusion what can we learn from this chapter? There are many things about God, prayer and confession in this chapter but I only want to cite one application that I think is so important in this chapter. Do you have God's chief concerns as your chief concerns? Nehemiah had the Jewish people, God's only elect nation, and Jerusalem, God's only elect city, as His chief concerns. These were God's chief concerns. We are not Israel but the Church. What are God's chief concerns for the church and are these your chief concerns? Paul said, "I delivered to you as of first importance," meaning among the most important things, "that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures." Is the death and resurrection of Christ, that is, the gospel, of first importance in your life? It carries both a soteriology, forgiveness of sins and an eschatology, a resurrection unto life. Is this a chief

concern in your life? Do you love the gospel? Peter said, “Know this first of all,” meaning this is the chief thing Peter wants you to know, “that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the father’s fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.” What this is getting at, and we don’t have time to go through it all, but the heavenly focus we’re supposed to have. The world has an earthly focus and we tend to get drawn into that. Don’t! This is just temporal, this is not all there is, we are heading to eternity and to keep the right focus in life you have to keep that in mind as a chief concern. Am I living for the present or am I living for the future? It’s very easy to lose the focus. So those two things, the chief things we should be keeping in mind, the gospel and the eternal state. If you have those two things in place you’re thinking like God’s thinking, if you’re looking at our country, if you’re making that a chief priority, you’re looking at the wrong thing. Do not get carried into all that. It’s not primary.

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<sup>i</sup> Biblical Studies Press. (2006). *The NET Bible First Edition; Bible. English. NET Bible.; The NET Bible*. Biblical Studies Press.

<sup>ii</sup> Robert D. Bell, “The Theology of Nehemiah,” *Biblical Viewpoint* 20:2.

<sup>iii</sup> Constable, T. (2003). *Tom Constable’s Expository Notes on the Bible* (Ne 1:4). Galaxie Software.

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