

## **How to Begin A Ministry**

### **Nehemiah 1 & 2**

**In chapter four of the Book of Ezra: The province of Samaria and the surrounding areas sent a strong warning letter to King Artaxerxes, explaining that Jerusalem had been a well-defended city in the past and that its people had a reputation for being rebellious. As a result, the King halts the rebuilding of Jerusalem.**

### **What Does The Bible Say?**

In late autumn, in the month of Kislev, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was at the fortress of Susa. 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came to visit me with some other men who had just arrived from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned there from captivity and about how things were going in Jerusalem.

3 They said to me, “Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire.”

4 When I heard this, I sat down and wept. In fact, for days I mourned, fasted, and prayed to the God of heaven. (Nehemiah 1:1–4 NLT)

**Nehemiah’s body is Susa, but his heart is in Jerusalem. The city is in shambles.**

**Nehemiah's heart is broken.**

**Ministries begin when you have a passion for someone or some issue.**

**He fasts and prays.**

**Let God develop your passion.**

**This prayer is the first of twelve instances of prayer recorded in this book.**

**Nehemiah's prayer is impressive and tells us much about him:**

**It addresses God with three statements informed by Scripture.**

**He confesses his sin.**

**He recounts Bible history.**

**And then Nehemiah asks for God's compassion in the heart of the King.**

**And it is only at the end of chapter one we learn that Nehemiah was a cupbearer to the great "Artaxerxes Longimanus," who ruled Persia from 464 to 423 B.C.**

## **How Can We Obey**

Early the following spring, in the month of Nisan, during the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes' reign, I was serving the king his wine. I had never before appeared sad in his presence.

(Nehemiah 2:1 NLT)

**Since the Jewish month of Nisan would be our mid-March to mid-April, it would indicate that four months have passed since Nehemiah received the bad news about the plight of Jerusalem.**

**Have the courage to wait while you fast and pray.**

4 The king asked, "Well, how can I help you?" With a prayer to the God of heaven, 5 I replied, "If it please the king, and if you are pleased with me, your servant, send me to Judah to rebuild the city where my ancestors are buried." 6 The king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked, "How long will you be gone?"

When will you return?” After I told him how long I would be gone, the king agreed to my request.

7 I also said to the king, “If it please the king, let me have letters addressed to the governors of the province west of the Euphrates River, instructing them to let me travel safely through their territories on my way to Judah. 8 And please give me a letter addressed to Asaph, the manager of the king’s forest, instructing him to give me timber. I will need it to make beams for the gates of the Temple fortress, for the city walls, and for a house for myself.” And the king granted these requests, because the gracious hand of God was on me. (Nehemiah 2:4–8 NLT)

**Have the courage to ask others to join you.**

16 The city officials did not know I had been out there or what I was doing, for I had not yet said anything to anyone about my

plans. I had not yet spoken to the Jewish leaders—the priests, the nobles, the officials, or anyone else in the administration.

17 But now I said to them, “You know very well what trouble we are in. Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire. Let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem and end this disgrace!” 18 Then I told them about how the gracious hand of God had been on me, and about my conversation with the king. (Nehemiah 2:16–18 NLT)

**Have the courage to challenge others.**

**Additional Notes:**

If you would like to use your home to disciple others, check out our training at [www.crosswaveschurch.com/host](http://www.crosswaveschurch.com/host). Cross Waves

has produced short videos to train you how to use your home to reach others for Christ. So please check it out.

**Explore:**

**KEY TRUTHS:**

- 1. God Places His People in Positions to Meet Needs**  
(Nehemiah 1:1-3, 11b; 2:1)
- 2. Believers Should Respond to Needs With Compassion and Action** (Nehemiah 1:4-11a)
- 3. For Believers, Leading Is Serving** (Nehemiah 2:2-20)

**HOW IT FITS: Where This Lesson Fits in the Story of the**

**Bible:** The events of the book of Nehemiah took place just after those of the book of Ezra (445 BC—431 BC) with Nehemiah arriving in Jerusalem in 444 BC, 13 years after Ezra arrived.

## **Explore:**

The book of Nehemiah is named after its lead character, who was not a priest, scribe, or prophet. He was like those in our churches who have jobs outside of full-time ministry. He was a regular church member. Like most leaders, Nehemiah observed a problem and considered how he could contribute to help solve it. Nehemiah was an average person God placed in a strategic position to be part of something big. He was a “foreigner” who worked his way up in a country that was not his own. He served the king much like a trusted personal butler to a president or prime minister. Nehemiah’s next role was more like a contractor, and finally, he would govern back in his homeland. We never know how God will build on each of our experiences to take us places and help us make a difference in ways we could never imagine.



## **God Places His People in Positions to Meet Needs (Nehemiah 1:1-3, 11b; 2:1)**

Nehemiah immediately established the setting and context in verses 1-3 (plus chapter 2:1). Nehemiah worked for the King of Persia, Artaxerxes I, in the capital city of Susa in what is now modern-day Iran. Nehemiah and his ancestors were from Judah. A group of his exiled relatives had recently returned from Jerusalem, where they discovered the deplorable condition of the city's walls.

The last phrase of Nehemiah chapter 1 indicates the position Nehemiah held in the palace. He was cupbearer to the king (verse 11b). The cupbearer selected wines and tasted them to prevent anyone from assassinating the king through poison. Because the king trusted his life with his cupbearer, he could also trust him overhearing sensitive, diplomatic, and personal conversations. Kings often seek opinions from such individuals

as a sounding board. God had placed Nehemiah in a unique and important position. Cupbearers of this era often functioned in dual roles, sometimes with signet power to carry out the king's orders (like in the story of Esther).

Oral tradition was common among God's people in this era.

Fathers and mothers regularly told their kids their family history through stories. The stories included God's provision and guidance for the family. They told these stories over and over until the kids could finish the stories and talk about the details just like they had been there.

Even when God's people were captives in foreign countries, the oral tradition continued. One generational story described the splendor of Jerusalem and the Temple and how each was built. Nehemiah and most fourth-and fifth-generation Jewish exiles had probably never seen Jerusalem. Still, the oral tradition and

stories painted a detailed picture in their minds as though they had seen it in person.

Then the visitors described a conquered Jerusalem that sounded nothing like the one Nehemiah's parents had described so many times (verses 2-3). Every vivid detail in Nehemiah's mind changed after hearing the negative reports on Jerusalem. He now pictured broken-down walls, piles of boulders, burned gates, and a vulnerable city in need of repair. In 587 BC, after two previous invasions (605 when Daniel was taken and 597 when Ezekiel was taken), Babylon sacked the city of Jerusalem and destroyed the Temple. From the city's destruction to when Nehemiah appeared on the scene was roughly four generations later. Even though he lived and worked in the king's palace and one of the world's most powerful countries, he still cared about what mattered to his parents and family.

**Explore:**

The Bible is filled with books that are sequels. Some are easier to spot, like 2 Thessalonians or 2 Kings. The book of Nehemiah is a sequel to the book of Ezra. In fact, the two books also cover some concurrent time periods. The Hebrew Scripture was arranged in three categories: the Law, Prophets, and Writings. In our Bibles, the Old Testament books are divided into five major categories: the Pentateuch, Books of History, Wisdom and Poetic Literature, Major Prophets, and Minor Prophets. They are arranged by category, not chronological order. Nehemiah is found in the historical books of the Old Testament among others that document the history of Israel and Judah. If you read the Old Testament straight through, you are sometimes skipping back and forth chronologically. To gain the most from reading the Bible, use a chronological guide such as the one found here, [bit.ly/Chrono-OT](http://bit.ly/Chrono-OT). The book of Nehemiah fits chronologically at the very end of the Old Testament, just before the book of Malachi. Likewise, Ezra precedes and somewhat overlays

portions of the book of Nehemiah but fits in the same time as Zechariah, Esther, and Haggai. Think about the timeline this way: the Babylonians captured Daniel (the man from the lion's den story) in 587 BC. Daniel served eight leaders, the last being Cyrus of Persia, who conquered Babylon. King Cyrus allowed the Hebrews to return to their homeland. As a result, Zerubbabel went back to rebuild the Temple (538 BC), Ezra returned to teach the Law (457 BC), and later Nehemiah arrived to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem (444 BC), 160 years after Daniel was taken into captivity (605 BC).

### **Explore:**

### **Believers Should Respond to Needs With Compassion and Action (Nehemiah 1:4-11a)**

In verse 4 we see that Nehemiah fasted and prayed before he acted on the need. He was a man of prayer. Most of chapter 1 is a prayer. Instead of focusing on prayer for himself, Nehemiah

referred to Scripture and history and sought God's forgiveness and help for his people (verses 5-11). He prayed like Moses for those he led and took his role as a biblical servant leader seriously. Nehemiah understood prayer comes before planning. It is worth emphasizing Nehemiah's (and others') prayers recorded throughout the book:

1:5-11 – He prayed before forming a plan

2:4 – He prayed before asking the king for help

4:4-5, 9 – He prayed when enemies opposed him

5:19 – He prayed over the burdens of leadership

6:14 – He prayed over those who opposed his

work

Chapter 9 – The people and Levites confessed sin

and praised God for His provision

13:14, 22, 29, 31 – He prayed for God's favor

because of obedience

More prayers were probably prayed than those recorded here.

Nehemiah was known for consulting God before acting. Would Nehemiah's plans to rebuild have been as good or effective had he not prayed before formulating them? Would the king have shown favor to let Nehemiah leave his court or provide so many building supplies? Would Nehemiah have fallen prey to his enemies' traps? Would Nehemiah's humility turn to egotism and self-service? Prayer grounds us and reminds us that God can do what we cannot, but He often invites us to be a part of His purpose or will so others will see His handiwork.

When Nehemiah heard how Jerusalem lay in ruins, he was moved to tears because it crushed his mental image of his homeland. We only shed tears for things that mean a lot to us. The power of parents to tell of God's greatness had moved Nehemiah, and now he was mournful.

Bad news is never the final word in believers' lives or God's work. Devastation and pain create opportunities for God to demonstrate His power. Zerubbabel and other Jewish exiles had returned earlier to rebuild portions of the city, including homes, buildings, and the Temple. But no one had started on the walls yet. Nehemiah saw in the city walls a place he could make a difference. He wanted to do something for God and the community.

As cupbearer, Nehemiah probably heard some of the most influential and brilliant minds talking with the king. Education comes in various forms, and for Nehemiah, this came from paying attention and listening to real-world problem-solving and how to run a country. The king, by example, showed Nehemiah how to negotiate, plan, and lead.

Nehemiah would have known that Ezra was rebuilding the Temple and about the other progress occurring in Jerusalem. But



his position in the court of a conquering king reminded him how military minds think about vulnerable cities. Once Nehemiah heard about the condition of the walls and gates of Jerusalem, he knew God had given him knowledge and powerful connections to use for helping to meet this need. He saw the next logical building project should be the city walls and gates.

### **Explore:**

#### **For Believers, Leading Is Serving (Nehemiah 2:2-20)**

The last phrase of verse 2 shows Nehemiah was nervous about approaching the king with his ideas. Serving others often stretches us because our natural inclination is to stay within our routines. Thankfully, Nehemiah chose not to stay in his lane but waited for the right moment to approach the king and share his ideas (verses 2-4). Comparing the first verses of chapters 1 and 2, we know that from the month of Kislev to Nisan, four months

had passed since Nehemiah found out about the walls. While Scripture does not detail what went on during that time, we do know from verses 5-8 that Nehemiah worked out a detailed plan to present to the king. Leaders, like the king, trust people who come to them with well- thought-out ideas.

On the popular TV show, Shark Tank, wealthy entrepreneurs listen to ordinary people present business ideas to gain funding for their ventures. People who present great ideas without solid business plans rarely get financial support from the investors.

Nehemiah had watched his own version of Shark Tank for years as people constantly asked the king for favors, funding, or support in some manner. He knew how the king thought and how much to share about the strategy to make it work.

Leadership does more than issue directives to others; they see the big picture and know specific details that work best within the larger plan. Nehemiah had probably reworked his ideas and

strategy but also rehearsed how he would share his vision with the most important audience, the king.

When God gave him favor with the king, Nehemiah made the journey to Jerusalem (verses 9-11). He began by determining what needed to be done (verses 12-16). Then he called the people to join him in the important project God had laid on his heart (verses 17-20).

When God works with you to accomplish some- thing, sometimes the situation requires an immediate reaction to solve an urgent and timely need. Other times may require a more complex plan and ideas to become a reality. More significant ideas or projects often require more than your help alone, so you will need to invite others to join you. When you know who can help in the project God wants, then you recruit. To get people on board, share the vision of why their involvement can make a difference. The why becomes more powerful than what you are

ask- ing them to do. When leaders serve, they help other people adopt big ideas by caring for them and for the ideas.

**Explore:**

Christianity is about more than going to church and living a good moral life. Being a Christian is about having a vibrant personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Every Sunday School teacher or Bible study leader should want to see each of his or her learners enter into this relationship—their eternal destiny depends on it. As you work toward this goal, keep the following in mind:

Following Christ is about more than a mere decision; it is about a lifelong relationship. Jesus called us to make disciples, not mere decision-makers. Aim for long-term faith, not momentary emotion.

Salvation is a matter of grace, not works. Our works do not save us (Ephesians 2:8-9), nor do they keep us (Galatians 3:2-6).

Good works are a product of salvation, not a prerequisite to it.

Don't confuse sanctification with salvation. Holiness follows salvation; it doesn't precede it. Don't try to impose "Christian" expectations on men and women who don't know Christ.

- Keep it simple. Being born again is not complicated. Here's a simple way to explain it:

- Acknowledge your sinfulness and your need for a Savior (Romans 3:10, 23).

- Trust in Christ's sacrifice for your sins and in His resurrection (Romans 10:9-10).

Surrender your life to God's transforming power (Romans 12:1-2).

Most of all, remember that your job is to tell the truth in a way others can understand, answer their questions, and give them an

opportunity to respond. If you do that faithfully, some will respond and join the band of Christ- followers. When they do, Heaven will rejoice!

### **Question 1 of 4**

What are some of your favorite movie sequels?

### **Question 2 of 5**

How did the events of Ezra 1:1-3 prove God's Word and promises are reliable?

### **Question 3 of 5**

Do you worry too much about politics? How much do you pray for your political leaders?

### **Question 4 of 5**

How can you approach people you love with the gospel?

### **Question 5 of 5**

Why is it important to confess your sins daily and ask for forgiveness when praying?

