

Chapter 9

Meet Nehemiah

(Nehemiah 1:1–2:9)

We have met Ezra, the priest, who led some of the people of God back to Jerusalem in 458 BC, the seventh year of the reign of Artaxerxes, King of Persia ([Ezra 7:8](#)). We now meet Nehemiah, who came to Jerusalem in 445 BC, in the 20th year of Artaxerxes' reign. Although he arrived 13 years after Ezra, they worked together to care for God's people, with Nehemiah as the governor, and Ezra as the priest and teacher. It is likely that Nehemiah wrote his memoirs, as a lot of this book includes his own accounts of what happened, how it happened, what he thought, and what he prayed. What do we learn about Nehemiah from this chapter?

THE LORD COMFORTS

We learn something about his parents from his name. Nehemiah means, 'The LORD comforts' ('nehem' = comfort, and 'iah' = LORD). Parents often name their children with hopes in their hearts. Mary and Joseph named their child 'Jesus', 'saviour', as they were instructed by the angel, because he would save his people from their sins ([Matthew 1:21, 25](#)). [George Whitefield](#) was one of the great evangelists in Britain and North America in the 18th Century. He and his wife Elizabeth named their first child John, because they felt that God had assured them that the young baby would grow up to be a great evangelist, like John the Baptist. Sadly, the young baby died a few months later. I was named Peter, in the hope that I would have the helpful character of my uncle Peter, who died in the Second World War, just before I was born. I am still working on that!

When Hakaliah and his wife named their son 'The LORD comforts', they were expressing this deep hope in God, and perhaps also some desire that the LORD would use their son in some small way to bring comfort. Nehemiah's name was a reminder of the character and promise of God. 'The LORD comforts' does not just mean that God makes people feel better. The comfort of God will mean the restoration and reformation of his people. Think of [Isaiah 40:1](#): 'Comfort, comfort my people says your God'. Or of God's

words in [Isaiah 51:12](#): ‘I, even I, am he who comforts you’. Or again in [Isaiah 66:13](#):

As a mother comforts her child,
so will I comfort you;
and you will be comforted over Jerusalem.

They would be comforted as God brought them back from exile in Babylon to live in Jerusalem again, and restored and strengthened them to know and serve him for his glory.

In the New Testament we meet Simeon in the temple, ‘waiting for the consolation [or comfort] of Israel’, and waiting to see the coming Messiah ([Luke 2:25–26](#)). We know God’s comfort and consolation in our lives too, as we see God’s gospel plan being fulfilled in our day. For we can join in Paul’s words:

Praise be to the God and Father of our [Lord Jesus Christ](#), the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God. ([2 Corinthians 1:3–4](#))

In the New Testament we also meet Barnabas, that able Bible teacher, whose name means ‘son of consolation’ or ‘son of comfort’ ([Acts 4:36](#)). He was with Paul when he brought a ‘word of exhortation’ or ‘comfort’ to the people in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch ([Acts 13:15](#)), as he told them the good news of the coming of the [Lord Jesus](#). God has done his big work of comfort by sending his Son as Messiah and Saviour. For [Jesus Christ](#) is the comforter, and he sent the [Holy Spirit](#), the ‘other comforter’⁴⁵, to teach his disciples so that they could teach the early church and ourselves about God’s great act of comfort in [Jesus Christ](#).

We will see how Nehemiah fulfilled his parents’ hopes, as he brought the practical comfort of God to his people. God did comfort his people: he used Nehemiah to comfort his people. I hope that in God’s kindness Nehemiah’s parents saw how God answered their hopes and their prayers.

Notice that the book begins with, ‘the words of Nehemiah’ ([1:1](#)). While Nehemiah is not called a prophet, this phrase often introduces a book of a prophet in the Old Testament, as in [Jeremiah 1:1](#), and [Amos 1:1](#). Nehemiah did fulfil a prophetic role, as he

⁴⁵ [John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 13](#). ‘Comforter’ is sometimes translated as ‘Counsellor’ or ‘Advocate’.

applied the Law of Moses in a new situation, and urged the people to obey that law. And certainly his words became part of Scripture, like the words of those other prophets. Nehemiah was like a prophet, and he was also like a judge—those who ruled God’s people before they had kings like Saul, David and Solomon. Nehemiah’s role as judge was exercised as a governor within the Persian Empire.

NEHEMIAH PRAYED

We often think of Nehemiah as a leader, or a builder of walls. However in his book we first see him as a man who prayed. This must have been because he knew the truth reflected in his name: ‘The LORD comforts’. We learn from Nehemiah that leaders of people must be leaders in prayer. Why do we value leadership exercised in public, and neglect this vital leadership exercised in private, before our gracious God? We have already seen Ezra in this role of leadership in prayer in [Ezra 9](#).

Weeping, mourning, fasting and praying

Nehemiah lived in Susa, one of the major cities of the Persian Empire (see map on page 16).⁴⁶ We find him there in the 20th year of the reign of Artaxerxes (1:1).

Hanani, one of his brothers (7:2) arrived in Susa from Jerusalem, so Nehemiah asked him for news about his fellow Jews living in Jerusalem. The news was not good:

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. (1:3)

The original destruction of the city was caused by Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. But more recently, in the reign of Artaxerxes, the work of rebuilding the city, temple and walls had been stopped ([Ezra 4:7–24](#)). Nehemiah was rightly distressed at the bad situation of the people of God. The broken walls of Jerusalem were a sign that Artaxerxes had acted against the Jews on the advice of their neighbours, and perhaps

⁴⁶ Susa, one of the three capitals of the Persian Empire, and the winter residence of the king, was where Daniel had his vision ([Daniel 8](#)). It was also the setting of Esther, during the reign of Xerxes (or Ahasueurus) 486–465 BC, the father of King Artaxerxes. The reign of Xerxes is briefly mentioned in [Ezra 4:6](#).

also a sign that God had abandoned his people. So he sat down and wept—a serious outpouring of grief—and then for some days he mourned and fasted and prayed. Notice that Nehemiah asked about God’s people, the Jews, before he asked about Jerusalem, the city (1:2). The main source of his grief was the bad condition of the people. The bad state of the wall contributed to that bad condition (1:3). As we will see, repairing the wall must be done in order to repair the people.⁴⁷ His main interest was the people, not the wall. The wall was a means to an end, not an end itself.

Nehemiah was not a priest or, at that time, a leader. He was an ordinary believer, but a person of prayer! His prayerful and humble grief was intensive (he sat down to weep), and extensive (for some days), and expressive (he mourned and fasted). He grieved over the bad situation of God’s people, and their sin. He knew that it was because of their sin that God had sent his people into exile, and they were still bearing the consequences of that sin. Grief for sin is the sign of a great leader, as is sorrow for the situation of the people of God. Jesus showed the same grief for God’s people and their sin when he wept over Jerusalem, just before his death on the cross: ‘As he approached Jerusalem and saw the city, he wept over it’ (Luke 19:41). Paul likewise felt deep grief for his own people, the Jews:

I speak the truth in Christ—I am not lying, my conscience confirms it through the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my people, those of my own race, the people of Israel. (Romans 9:1–4)

Nehemiah, Jesus and Paul shared God’s grief for his people, so clearly expressed in Hosea 11:1–9. Deep grief is essential to leadership; from deep grief comes effective sacrificial service. We sometimes feel anger or despair rather than grief at the sin of God’s people. Our anger or despair is often a way of coping with our grief, but not the best way. We must learn to feel grief before we express anger. It is better to pour out our grief to God, as Nehemiah did. Notice the order in Chapters 1 and 2: first grief, then prayer, then action! This was not disabling grief, but enabling grief; it was not self-indulgent grief, but grief that resulted in sacrificial and productive action.

What a great insight into the inner life of Nehemiah. As Matthew Henry wrote, ‘he

⁴⁷ Nehemiah repaired the wall, Chapters 2–7, and then reformed the people, Chapters 8–13.

records not only the works of his hands, but the workings of his heart'.⁴⁸

NEHEMIAH'S GREAT PRAYER (1:5-11)

This is a great prayer—a good prayer to learn from. We can learn from the people who pray great prayers, and we can learn from what they pray. We should learn most of all from the great prayers of the Bible, and make them our own.

What makes this a great prayer?

1. It was the culmination of much prayer

It came out of days of praying, fasting, mourning, and so this focused and intentional prayer was the product of all the prayer that had gone before it. It was 'the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night' (1:6). What happens when we pray intensively, extensively and expressively is that we finally come to form the prayer we really want to pray, that is deep within us, and needs time and energy to come to the surface. This great prayer is the result of much praying. Prayer is a great preparation for prayer, and sustained prayer is a great preparation for great prayer. Without sustained praying, we will not learn to pray.

2. It began with God

It began by stating and claiming the great truths about God: his character, power, covenant love and actions. As Raymond Brown wrote, 'he is exalting a God who is sovereign, mighty, holy, loving, faithful, vocal, attentive and merciful'.⁴⁹

LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments ... (1:5)

It did not begin with Nehemiah, it began with God. It was a God-centred prayer, not a needs-centred prayer, nor a Nehemiah-centred prayer. Nehemiah knew God, and

⁴⁸ Henry, M 1960, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Church, LF (ed) Marshall, Morgan & Scott, London, p. 491.

⁴⁹ Brown, R 1998, *The Message of Nehemiah: God's Servant in a Time of Change*, The Bible Speaks Today, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, p. 34.

acknowledged the God he knew. And Nehemiah knew the true and living God, the LORD, the powerful God, the God to be feared⁵⁰, the God of covenant love, the God revealed in the Bible.

3. It was a biblical prayer

Nehemiah had allowed God to teach him who God is by means of the Bible, his historic revelation to his people. How did Nehemiah know that God is indeed the ‘LORD, the God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps his covenant of love with those who love him and keep his commandments’? Answer: he knew his Bible (see [Deuteronomy 7:9, 21](#); [Psalm 136:26](#)). It was a responsive prayer, a prayer informed by God’s self-revelation in the Bible. Nehemiah claimed what God had revealed about his identity, his character, his actions, his power, his love, his plans and his promises. His prayer shows how deeply he was walking in the words of God. As he lived, so he prayed; as he prayed, so he lived.

4. It was a pleading prayer

Nehemiah knew that he did not deserve the grace of God, and, even more to the point, God’s people did not deserve his grace and favour:

Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night. ([1:6](#))

He asked God to hear his prayer. He did not assume that God would do so. He did not assume that what was on his heart was God’s big concern. Nehemiah asked God to be attentive to his prayer, using the vivid language of God’s ear being attentive, and his eyes open. This is a similar way of speaking to referring to God’s hand ([1:10](#)). We have already met the idea that God’s hand was over Ezra ([Ezra 7:6, 9, 28](#); [8:18, 22, 31](#)), and his hand was over Nehemiah as well ([2:8, 18](#)). God’s ‘ear’ means that God listens, God’s ‘eye’ means that God sees, and God’s ‘hand’ (or ‘arm’) means that God acts. Nehemiah interceded for God’s people as did Moses, Daniel and Ezra.⁵¹ And this prayer foreshadows the great prayer of [Nehemiah 9:5–38](#).

⁵⁰ ‘Great and awesome’, literally, ‘feared, and to be feared’. See [Deuteronomy 7:21](#), and [Daniel 9:4](#).

⁵¹ [Deuteronomy 9:26–29](#); [Daniel 9:4–19](#); and [Ezra 9:6–15](#).

5. Nehemiah prayed for God's people

He prayed for 'your servants, the people of Israel', and in the name of 'we Israelites' (1:6). The welfare of God's people was on Nehemiah's heart, as it was on God's heart. Nehemiah, like the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit, interceded for the people of God (Hebrews 7:25; John 17; Romans 8:27). It is right to pray for ourselves, our friends, our world, for those who are sick, and for those in trouble. But we should also pray for God's people, the bride of Christ, and the temple of his Holy Spirit, not only our local church, but all of God's people around the world.

6. Nehemiah's prayer recognised sin

He recognised that God's people were called to 'love him and keep his commandments' (1:5), and that failure to honour and obey God is at the heart of doing things against God. Sins of omission (things we fail to do), lead to sins of commission (things we do that are wrong). It is not enough to recognise difficult circumstances; we must also learn to recognise sin. It may be the sin of those in difficulty, or it may be that the sin of others has caused the difficulty, or it may be that the difficulties are just the result of living in a world distorted by sin and under God's judgement of futility (Romans 8:20–21). We should use the category of sin to understand our world and ourselves. We usually think in terms of 'unhappiness' or 'having a problem' as being our greatest 'problem'! But 'unhappiness' or 'problems' don't affect our relationship with God. We don't like them, but what really matters is what God thinks and feels. Our greatest problems are our sins, because God does not like them, because they damage us and do not honour and please him.

His prayer recognised that our deepest sin is against God. It is easier to see how our sins hurt others and how their sins hurt us than it is for us to see how our sins hurt God. It is a sign of our neglect of God that we fail to see our sins against him. We as individuals are called to love God with heart, mind, soul and strength; we as the people of God are called to love God with heart, mind, soul and strength. Too often we serve ourselves, not God. Too often we serve good things, not God. Too often we serve others, not God. Too often we desire anything and anyone except God.

Nehemiah's prayer was about the sin of God's people:

I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. (1:6–7)

It is not just individuals who can sin. Groups of people can sin together, and by their action allow and confirm each other in a sin. Churches can sin (see [Galatians 3:1](#); [Colossians 3:5](#); [Revelation 2–3](#)), and the nation/church of Israel had sinned; notice the repeated 'we' in these verses.

As the greatest problem for an individual is sin, so the greatest problem for a church is its sin. We find in [Nehemiah 1](#) a fine example of how an individual should pray when the church has sinned, as we find in [Nehemiah 9](#) a fine example of how a church should pray when it has sinned.

7. Nehemiah claimed the promises of God

As Derek Kidner writes, 'He came empty-handed, but not uninvited'.⁵² There are many prayers we can pray. The best prayers to pray are when we ask God to do what he has promised to do for us in the Bible: when we claim the promises of God. To use an extreme example, God has not promised to make us taller, so while God may grant that gift, he is not likely to do so! But God has promised to forgive our sins and to clean us up after we have confessed our sin (see [1 John 1:9](#)). 'Forgive us our sins' is one prayer which will always get a positive answer! When we confess our sins, God has promised that he will do so. As [John Calvin](#) wrote:

There is nothing more efficacious in our prayers than to set his own word before God, and then to found our supplications upon his promises, as if he dictated to us out of his own mouth what we are to ask.⁵³

So Nehemiah asked God to remember (to act on) what he told Moses:

Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 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

⁵² Kidner, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, p. 79.

⁵³ Calvin, J 1981, *Commentary on the Four Books of Moses*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Vol IV, p. 75.

there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name'.⁵⁴ (1:8–9)

God scatters those he judges, and gathers those he forgives. God's people had been unfaithful, so God had scattered them among the nations, including to exile in Babylon and its empire, which had now become the Persian Empire. But God, who had scattered his people, had also promised to gather them again, if they 'returned' or repented, and so determined to obey his commands. Nehemiah prayed that God would do what he had promised. This kind of prayer is also found in [Psalms 85](#) and [126](#).

8. Nehemiah based his prayer on the saving acts of God for his people

He prayed:

They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. (1:10)

Here Nehemiah referred to the exodus, when God brought his people out of captivity in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. As Moses and the Israelites sang at that time:

You stretch out your right hand,
and the earth swallows your enemies.
In your unfailing love you will lead
the people you have redeemed. ([Exodus 15:12–13](#))

God was the redeemer, the rescuer of his people from Egypt. They knew that he was the God who saved. So they could trust that he would rescue them again, this time from the power of Babylon, and bring them back safely to the holy land and to Jerusalem. God was still, in Isaiah's words, 'Israel's King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty' ([Isaiah 44:6](#)).

Nehemiah prayed with hope in God's 'covenant of love' (1:5); God's purpose in creating his own people—'your servants and your people' (1:10); and God's great saving power—'you redeemed by your great strength and mighty hand' (1:10). So the confidence of Nehemiah's prayer lay in what God had said and in what God had done.

We who believe in [Jesus Christ](#), the Son of God, can pray with even greater hope and

⁵⁴ See [Deuteronomy 4:25–31](#); [9:29](#); [12:2–14](#); [28:64](#); [30:1–5](#) and [Leviticus 26:14–45](#).

certainty. For in his death for our salvation, Jesus' blood was new covenant blood, 'poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins' ([Matthew 26:28](#)). Jesus' blood was 'the blood of the eternal covenant' ([Hebrews 13:20](#)), for he is the mediator of the new covenant ([Hebrews 9:15](#)).

Jesus loved and laid down his life in death for God's people, his church:

... Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ([Ephesians 5:25-27](#))

And God's mighty power is found in the death of Christ:

[W]e preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ([1 Corinthians 1:23-24](#))

No wonder we always conclude our prayers with words like 'through our Lord Jesus Christ', or 'through Jesus Christ our Saviour'. It is through Christ that we approach God; through Christ that we bring our prayers to our heavenly Father; through Christ's work of atonement and forgiveness that we can approach God; and through Christ that we can ask God with confidence to hear and answer our prayers. May Nehemiah's prayer inspire us to pray with confidence through Jesus Christ our Saviour.

9. Nehemiah asked God to hear his prayer and the prayer of his fellow believers

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. ([1:11](#))

He was aware as he prayed that he was part of a fellowship of believers, who were praying the same prayers because they knew the same God and had learned from the same Bible. We often feel when we pray on our own that we are alone in our prayers. We should remind ourselves that many brothers and sisters in Christ around the world are praying the same prayers with us.

Notice too how Nehemiah referred to his fellow believers: 'your servants who delight in revering (fearing) your name' ([1:11](#)). The point is not that they were close to

Nehemiah; the point is that they were close to God, they served him, and revered or honoured God as he had revealed himself to his people.⁵⁵ And notice too that this is evidence that they were some who had obeyed God's invitation: 'if you return to me and obey my commands' (1:9). We never pray alone.

10. It was a relational prayer

Notice the deep sense of the relationship between God and his people in this prayer, and between Nehemiah and God. God 'keeps his covenant of love with those who love him' (1:5). The people of Israel belong to God—'your servants' (1:6). They have sinned against God—'against you' (1:6). 'We have acted very wickedly toward you' (1:7). Moses had been God's servant (1:7), as he had been God's human agent in mediating the covenant, handing on the law and building the tabernacle at Mt Sinai, and had led God's people from Egypt to the edge of the Promised Land. God would scatter his people in judgement, and gather them in mercy (1:8–9).

The sin that led to the exile was that of being 'unfaithful' (1:8), that is, of breaking covenant promise to their faithful God. Being unfaithful is a betrayal of trust, or relationship. (The same word is used in [Ezra 9](#) and [10](#) and [Nehemiah 13:27](#) of the particular faithlessness of marrying unbelievers.) The bad condition of the city and its wall was symbolic of the bad relationship between God and his people; the destruction of the city happened because the people had forsaken their God. Even though they had returned physically, they were still far from God in their hearts, minds and lives.

The people must return to God and obey his commands (1:9). God would bring them back to the place he had chosen 'as a dwelling for my Name' (1:9). Nehemiah told God the people were 'your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great strength' (1:10). Nehemiah asked God to hear the prayers of 'those who delight in revering (fearing) your name' (1:11), and asked for God's grace in making the king sympathetic to his request (1:11); that grace of God he later described as 'the gracious hand of my God' (2:8).

It is wonderful to see that for Nehemiah prayer was not a system, nor was it a mechanical process; rather, it expressed the relationship that God had established with his people, and that Nehemiah and God's people had with their God.

⁵⁵ We read in [Malachi 3:16](#) of 'those who feared the LORD and honoured his name'.

Those who believe in the Lord Jesus know even more of this relationship. God has blessed us in Christ, chosen us in Christ, predestined and adopted us in him, given us his grace in him, redeemed us and forgiven our sins in Christ, included us in him, and marked us with his Spirit ([Ephesians 1:3–14](#)). God has made an eternal covenant with us in Christ, and brought us into his presence through Christ our great high priest and through his blood, so that we have confidence to come before him with full assurance of faith ([Hebrews 13:20](#); [10:19–22](#)). God has adopted us into his family through Christ, and made us fellow heirs with him. He has put his Spirit into our hearts, to enable us to cry ‘Abba, Father’ ([Romans 8:14–17](#)). For there is one God, and one mediator between God and humankind: Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for us ([1 Timothy 2:5](#)).

11. His prayer concluded with a request that God would use him to answer his prayer

Nehemiah prayed: ‘Give your servant success today by granting him favour in the presence of this man’. He then explains: ‘I was cupbearer to the king’ ([1:11](#)).

We sometimes think of prayer as an escape from the world. We sometimes use prayer as a way of avoiding our responsibility for the world. Nehemiah prayed about the world and its problems. And his prayer made him alert to how he might play a part in God’s answer to his prayer.

We sometimes miss the strategic opportunities that God has provided. I often find that it is when I pray that I suddenly become aware of new ways to serve God. Of course Nehemiah did not know how this would work out in detail. But he trusted that God would indeed restore and strengthen his people, and he was willing to do anything that could be used by God to work his good purposes for his people.

Sometimes we find it hard to believe that it is worth praying. How often have you said to someone in need, ‘I am sorry, but all I can do is pray’? Prayer is as practical as what we think of as practical help! We must learn to evaluate the significance of what we do in the way God evaluates it. We must learn to value what God values, and to see as significant what God chooses to use for his glory. Prayer matters because God matters, and prayer matters because prayer matters to God.

Here is a great prayer preserved for us by God in the Bible for our instruction. Why not use some features of this prayer in your own prayers when you pray alone or with

your family? Why not use some features of this prayer in your home group or Bible study prayers, or when you next lead the intercessions in church? Why not learn how to turn the Bible into prayers to pray, both in your private and public prayers? Why not make it a habit every time you read the Bible, to turn it into a prayer?