

NEHEMIAH: BUILDING A LIFE OF SERVICE



Anything worth doing is worth doing right.

Serving God is more than a Sunday morning activity; it's an all-encompassing lifestyle. But what exactly does that look like?

In the Old Testament, Nehemiah provides a great example of the struggles and rewards of serving God. He was called to lead the Jewish people to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. They served together in this great task, even as they encountered opposition and ridicule from enemies. They did far more than build a wall. As they served and rebuilt the wall, God rebuilt them!

We can serve God and others in a variety of ways, but in Nehemiah we see the principles by which we can serve—no matter what our work entails. Our work for God will have its ups and downs, but we gain so much as we serve. A lifestyle of service includes the work of God in us. Read on and let the example of Nehemiah help you build a life of service.



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Nehemiah: Building a Life of Service

Session 1 **Pray** *Nehemiah 1:1-11*

Session 2 **Plan** *Nehemiah 2:1-8,17-18*

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PRAY



When have you been stopped in your tracks by a news story?

QUESTION #1

THE POINT

Pour out your heart to God in prayer.



THE BIBLE MEETS LIFE

The phone that was previously in my office had a red light that blinked with every new voicemail. It was annoying, but I had no idea how to turn it off. My solution? I put a piece of tape over the light. That phone has long since been replaced with a cell phone, but now I'm bombarded with constant notifications about messages, texts, and tweets.

Heaven doesn't have a message machine with a blinking red light. Sometimes we may wonder if God hears our prayers, but we have no "message read" notification on our phones when it comes to prayer. Neither does prayer usually offer the same "instant gratification" we often get from social media notifications—but what it accomplishes is phenomenal!

Prayer can be a mysterious spiritual discipline, but God invites us to talk to Him! Nehemiah was a man who saw the need for prayer and realized its benefits. When Nehemiah received bad news, his first reaction was to pray. He knew prayer is more than just simply sending messages to God. Prayer is a spiritual endeavor that brings us into communion with God, focusing on His truth and leading us into action.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY?

Nehemiah 1:1-3

¹ The words of Nehemiah the son of Hacaliah. Now it happened in the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, as I was in Susa the citadel, ² that Hanani, one of my brothers, came with certain men from Judah. And I asked them concerning the Jews who escaped, who had survived the exile, and concerning Jerusalem. ³ And they said to me, “The remnant there in the province who had survived the exile is in great trouble and shame. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.”

The Book of Nehemiah begins with bad news. Hanani, either a close friend or likely Nehemiah’s biological brother, brought Nehemiah a message he didn’t want to hear. The few people left in Jerusalem were in trouble; the city was in ruins. This update was devastating because of the history leading up to this point.

About three hundred years earlier, the Assyrians destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and deported the Jewish people to various areas all over their empire. The Southern Kingdom of Judah was spared conquest by the Assyrians, but because of their own disobedience, God allowed the Babylonians to invade and conquer Judah in 586 BC. Thus, the great empires of David and Solomon crumbled. The people of the Northern Kingdom had disappeared as they were scattered everywhere, but the people of the Southern Kingdom were exiled as a group. They were not in their homeland, but they were still together.

Babylon eventually fell to the Persians, and a new ruler emerged who was more benevolent to the Jews. The new Persian king, Cyrus, issued a decree in 538 BC that allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and rebuild the city of Jerusalem. A relatively small band of people returned and began to work, but opposition caused the initial work of rebuilding to be halted. The hope of rebuilding the city faded, and the ruins remained.

What helps you become aware of the needs around you?

QUESTION #2

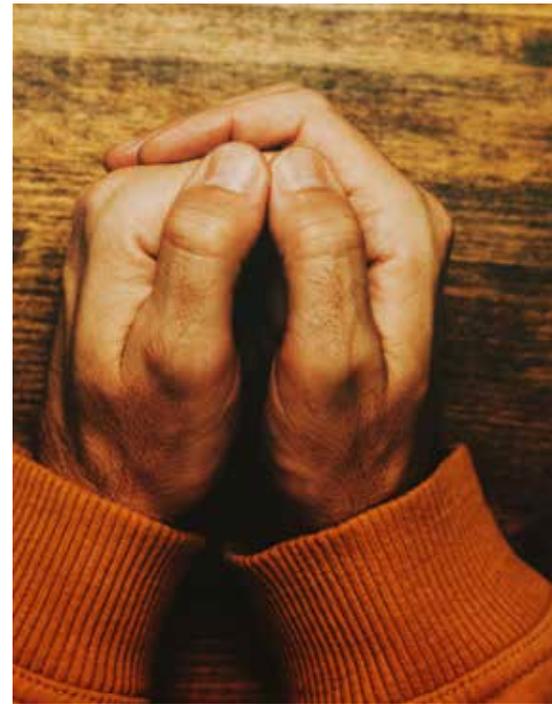
The news consumed Nehemiah. He was living in comfort in a place of safety. But what could Nehemiah do? He visualized the damage, and then he internalized it. Surely the words in verse 3 echoed as he heard them: “great trouble and shame ... broken down ... destroyed.” Nehemiah responded by praying. How can we pray like Nehemiah?

- 1. Ask specific questions; don’t assume.** Nehemiah asked about the people and city he loved. In order to understand the problems around us, we must first ask. Making assumptions does not reveal the true needs around us.
- 2. Listen carefully; don’t jump to conclusions.** After asking the question, listen. Don’t jump to conclusions. Drawing conclusions before listening is just as dangerous as making assumptions before asking. Nehemiah listened carefully as his brother shared the news.

Awareness is a critical first step in pouring out our hearts to God in prayer. But simply being aware of needs is not enough. As we will see in the next verses, we need to go to the source of our strength.

Nehemiah 1:4-7

⁴ As soon as I heard these words I sat down and wept and mourned for days, and I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. ⁵ And I said, “O LORD God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, ⁶ let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father’s house have sinned. ⁷ We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.



What do we learn about Nehemiah from his prayer?

QUESTION #3

Unexpected news has a way of hitting us hard. When Nehemiah heard the report about Jerusalem, he “sat down and wept.” Nehemiah’s mourning was not momentary; it led him to fast and pray “for days.” His grief over Jerusalem led him to the right place: he went to God in prayer. Nehemiah’s prayer speaks to our own approach to prayer.

- ▶ **Prayer is all about God, not us.** Nehemiah began his prayer in the same way Jesus taught us to begin our prayers: looking to the Father in heaven. (See Matt. 6:9.) Nehemiah’s prayer was saturated with the character and nature of God. Prayer is not trying to get God to do our will on earth. Prayer is seeking God’s will on earth.
- ▶ **Confession realigns our priorities.** Nehemiah was hundreds of miles from the problem, but he did not distance himself from it. He included himself in the confession. Rather than lament about what others had done wrong, Nehemiah associated with his people, making confession his priority. Nehemiah understood that for Jerusalem to be restored as a city, the heart of the people first must be restored.
- ▶ **Life should be an ongoing conversation with God.** In order to pursue what is right and good, we must pray constantly. Nehemiah didn’t pray once and move on; he prayed for days. The Book of Nehemiah records nine different prayers Nehemiah prayed.

Nehemiah 1:8-11

⁸ Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, saying, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples, ⁹ but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven, from there I will gather them and bring them to the place that I have chosen, to make my name dwell there.’ ¹⁰ They are your servants and your people, whom you have redeemed by your great power and by your strong hand. ¹¹ O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight to fear your name, and give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man.’ Now I was cupbearer to the king.

It should naturally follow that, when we confess our sins in prayer, we will turn to God in obedience—and that obedience calls for guidance. This is the exact pattern we see in Nehemiah’s prayer to God.

In his prayer, Nehemiah included a commitment to God’s Word and reassurance of God’s promises. Nehemiah recognized people cannot follow God without carefully observing His commands in Scripture. In order for God to guide us, we must consistently immerse ourselves in His Word, and when we’re committed to God’s Word, we also have an assurance of His promises.

Why did Nehemiah need guidance? He wanted to act on his concern for Jerusalem, but he wanted to do it the right way—God’s way. And he had an incredible opportunity in front of him. The opportunity came through Nehemiah’s job. As the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes, Nehemiah was tasked with protecting Persia’s most powerful leader, making sure his food and drink were not poisoned. He constantly watched for danger. The king was powerful, but he was also vulnerable. So Nehemiah was in a position of honor, with constant access to power.

Nehemiah served the king, but more importantly, he saw himself as God’s servant. The king could open a lot of doors for Nehemiah, but it was God who would grant success. The king’s heart was in God’s hand.

When has prayer prepared you for something important in your life?

QUESTION #4

What principles can we learn from Nehemiah about making requests of God?

QUESTION #5

A-C-T-S

Sometimes having a guide to prayer can be helpful. The A-C-T-S acrostic is a simple way to guide your prayer time. For each of the headings, write one or two sentences of a prayer.

A: Adoration (praising God for who He is; His character traits).

C: Confession (confessing sin, specifically, to God).

T: Thanksgiving (thanking God for things He has done in your life).

S: Supplication (praying for your needs and the needs of others).

"Pray then like this: 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name.'"

— MATTHEW 6:9

LIVE IT OUT

God wants you to pour out yourself to Him. Below are some ways you can do this.

- ▶ **Pray.** Follow Nehemiah's example in your prayers. Surrender to Christ's lordship and in obedience to His will. Confess your sin. Ask God to give you the guidance to do His will.
- ▶ **Read.** Prayer is never detached from God's Word. You can't pray well without reading the Word. You can't read the Bible well without praying. Pray about what you read. Ask God to open your eyes to the wonderful truths in His Word. Then commit in prayer to follow what He shows you in His Word.
- ▶ **Write.** Write a handwritten encouraging note to someone after praying for him or her. Ask God to make His name great through this prayerful interaction.



God doesn't have an in-box that gets full. Your prayers do not annoy Him the way a phone's blinking red message light might annoy us. You can't tire God with your prayers. He is always there for you.

My thoughts