

CRAWFORD BIBLE COMMENTARY

BIBLE STUDY

Nehemiah Chapter 1 — When God Gives You a Burden

A Verse-by-Verse Bible Study from the Crawford American English Reference Bible

Introduction

Nehemiah 1 is the beginning of a remarkable story of spiritual burden, prayer, repentance, leadership, and restoration. Nehemiah was not a prophet standing in a temple, a priest serving at an altar, or a king sitting on a throne. He was the cupbearer to King Artaxerxes of Persia.

Yet God was preparing an ordinary servant for an extraordinary assignment.

Jerusalem had been devastated. The people who had returned from exile were living in difficult circumstances, and the city walls remained broken and its gates burned. When Nehemiah heard the report, he did not immediately organize a construction project. He first broke down before God.

That is one of the great principles of this chapter:

Before God uses a person to rebuild something outwardly, He often begins by doing a work inwardly.

Nehemiah's burden became prayer. His prayer became repentance. His repentance became faith. His faith eventually became action.

Nehemiah 1 teaches us that spiritual leadership begins not with a position, but with a heart that cares about what concerns God.

I. THE MAN WHO CARED ABOUT GOD'S PEOPLE

Nehemiah 1:1 — A Servant in the Palace

“These are the words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Kislev, during the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes’ reign, I was in the fortress of Susa.”

Nehemiah introduces himself simply.

He was in **Susa**, the royal fortress of the Persian Empire.

Cross References

Esther 1:2 — At that time, King Ahasuerus was seated on his royal throne in the fortress of Susa.

Daniel 8:2 — In my vision I found myself at the fortress of Susa, in the province of Elam. In the vision I was standing beside the Ulai River.

Nehemiah 2:1 —In the month of Nisan, during the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, wine was brought before the king. I took the wine and gave it to him. I had never before looked sad in his presence.

Nehemiah was living in a place of influence and privilege, but his heart was connected to people who were suffering.

That is significant.

God had placed Nehemiah in the Persian palace before He sent him to Jerusalem.

Spiritual Principle

Where God has placed you today may be preparation for what He wants you to do tomorrow.

Nehemiah may have thought of himself simply as a cupbearer, but God saw him as a future leader and rebuilders.

Sometimes our present position is God's preparation ground.

II. A QUESTION THAT REVEALED HIS HEART

Nehemiah 1:2 — “How Are the People?”

“One of my brothers, Hanani, came with some men from Judah. I asked them about the Jews who had returned from exile and about the condition of Jerusalem.”

Nehemiah asked questions.

But notice what he asked about.

He wanted to know about:

- The people.
- Those who had survived exile.
- Jerusalem.
- Their condition.

He was not consumed only with his own comfort.

Cross References

Nehemiah 7:2 — “I put my brother Hanani and Hananiah, the commander of the fortress, in charge of Jerusalem. Hananiah was a trustworthy man who feared God more than most people.”

Ezra 8:1 — “These are the family leaders and the family records of the people who returned from Babylon with me during the reign of King Artaxerxes.”

Jeremiah 40:11 — “The Jews living in Moab, Ammon, Edom, and other nearby lands heard that the king of Babylon had allowed some people to remain in Judah and had appointed Gedaliah, son of Ahikam, to govern them.”

Nehemiah's question reveals something about his character.

He cared about people he was not currently living among.

A godly heart is never completely satisfied with personal prosperity while God's people are suffering.

This does not mean that Christians must carry every problem in the world. It means that we should remain sensitive to the needs of others.

Application

Ask yourself:

What am I concerned about?

What occupies your prayers?

What causes you to grieve?

What causes you to become passionate?

Sometimes God reveals our calling by revealing what burdens our hearts.

III. THE REPORT OF A BROKEN CITY

Nehemiah 1:3 — Jerusalem in Trouble

“They said to me, ‘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.’”

The report was devastating.

The people were experiencing:

- Trouble.
- Disgrace.
- Insecurity.
- Brokenness.

- The consequences of Jerusalem's destruction.

The walls were broken.

The gates were burned.

Cross References

2 Kings 25:10 — “All the Babylonian soldiers who were with the commander of the guard tore down the walls surrounding Jerusalem.”

2 Chronicles 36:19 — “They burned God’s Temple, tore down Jerusalem’s wall, set all its palaces on fire, and destroyed everything valuable in the city.”

Psalms 79:1 — “O God, foreign nations have invaded the land that belongs to You. They have defiled Your holy Temple and left Jerusalem in ruins.”

The broken walls represented more than damaged stone.

They represented vulnerability.

A city without walls was exposed to enemies.

Spiritual Application

There are times when the walls around our spiritual lives become broken.

Prayer becomes neglected.

Scripture becomes ignored.

Sin becomes tolerated.

Fellowship becomes abandoned.

Faith becomes weak.

And eventually the damage becomes visible.

Nehemiah teaches us not to ignore spiritual ruins.

What is broken must eventually be confronted.

IV. BROKENNESS PRECEDES VISION

Nehemiah 1:4 — Nehemiah Weeps

“When I heard these words, I sat down and wept. I mourned for several days, fasting and praying to the God of heaven.”

This may be one of the most important verses in the chapter.

Nehemiah heard about Jerusalem—and he wept.

He did not immediately criticize the people.

He did not blame someone else.

He did not say, “Somebody ought to fix this.”

He went before God.

Cross References

Ezra 9:3 — “When I heard this, I was deeply upset. I tore my clothing and pulled hair from my head and beard. Then I sat down in shock and sorrow.”

Daniel 9:3 — “I turned to the Lord God and earnestly sought Him through prayer and pleading. I fasted and showed my sorrow by wearing rough cloth and putting ashes on myself.”

Psalms 137:1 — “Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and cried when we remembered Zion—Jerusalem, our home.”

Nehemiah's response involved three things:

1. He wept.

His heart was broken.

2. He fasted.

He deliberately set aside physical satisfaction to seek God.

3. He prayed.

He brought his burden before the Lord.

This gives us an important leadership principle:

God often gives vision to people who are first willing to carry a burden.

Nehemiah's burden was not merely emotional. It became spiritual.

V. NEHEMIAH RECOGNIZED WHO GOD IS

Nehemiah 1:5 — The Great and Awesome God

“O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of love with those who love Him and obey His commands.”

Nehemiah begins his prayer by focusing on God.

This is important because prayer should begin with God's character rather than our circumstances.

He recognized God as:

- Lord.

- God of heaven.
- Great.
- Awesome.
- Faithful.
- A covenant-keeping God.

Cross References

Daniel 9:4

"I prayed to the Lord my God and confessed: 'O Lord, the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant of faithful love with those who love Him and keep His commandments.'"

Deuteronomy 7:9

"Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who keeps His covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commandments."

Exodus 20:6

"But showing faithful love to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments."

Nehemiah's confidence was not based upon the strength of Jerusalem.

It was based upon the character of God.

Key Truth

Faith does not deny the size of the problem; faith remembers the size of God.

Jerusalem was broken.

God was not.

The people were weak.

God was not.

The walls had fallen.

God's promises had not.

VI. CONFESSION BEGINS WITH “WE”

Nehemiah 1:6 — “I and My Father’s Family Have Sinned”

“Please listen to my prayer! Look down and see me praying night and day for your people Israel. I confess that we have sinned against You. Yes, even I and my father’s family have sinned.”

Nehemiah makes a remarkable confession.

He does not merely say:

“They sinned.”

He says:

“We have sinned.”

And then he goes even further:

“I and my father’s family have sinned.”

Cross References

1 Kings 8:29

"May your eyes be open toward this temple night and day, the place where you said, 'My Name will be there,' so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays toward this place."

Daniel 9:20

"While I was still speaking and praying, confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel, and presenting my request before the Lord my God for his holy mountain..."

2 Chronicles 6:40

"Now, my God, please let your eyes be open and your ears attentive to the prayers offered in this place."

Nehemiah understood corporate responsibility.

He was not personally responsible for every sin committed by every Israelite, but he identified himself with God's people.

True Repentance Is Humble

Pride says:

“They are the problem.”

Humility says:

“Lord, search me too.”

This is one reason Nehemiah's prayer is so powerful.

He was not standing above the people.

He was standing among them.

VII. SIN HAD CONSEQUENCES

Nehemiah 1:7 — Disobedience to God's Law

“We have acted very wickedly toward You. We have not obeyed the commands, statutes, and laws You gave Your servant Moses.”

Nehemiah does not minimize Israel's failure.

He calls it wickedness.

Cross References

Deuteronomy 28:15

"If you do not listen to the Lord your God and do not carefully follow all His commands and decrees I am giving you today, all these curses will come on you and overtake you."

Daniel 9:5

"We have sinned and done wrong. We have been wicked and rebelled; we have turned away from your commands and laws."

Leviticus 26:14

"But if you will not listen to me and carry out all these commands..."

The condition of Jerusalem was connected to Israel's long history of rebellion and judgment.

This does not mean every individual hardship is the direct result of a particular personal sin.

But Scripture clearly teaches that sin has consequences.

Spiritual Principle

We cannot properly rebuild what we refuse to honestly diagnose.

Nehemiah began with confession.

Before rebuilding walls, there had to be spiritual rebuilding.

VIII. NEHEMIAH REMEMBERED GOD'S WORD

Nehemiah 1:8 — The Warning of Moses

“Please remember what You told Your servant Moses: ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations.’”

Nehemiah knew Scripture.

He understood that Israel's exile had not surprised God.

God had warned His people generations earlier.

Cross References

Deuteronomy 4:27

"The Lord will scatter you among the peoples, and only a few of you will survive among the nations where the Lord drives you."

Leviticus 26:33

"I will scatter you among the nations and will draw out my sword against you; your land will lie waste and your cities will be deserted."

Deuteronomy 28:64

"Then the Lord will scatter you among all nations, from one end of the earth to the other, where you will worship other gods—gods of wood and stone, which neither you nor your ancestors have known."

Nehemiah's prayer was built upon God's Word.

He wasn't trying to convince God to invent a new promise.

He was reminding himself of what God had already said.

Application

One of the strongest ways to pray is to pray Scripture.

When God has spoken, faith can stand upon His Word.

IX. REPENTANCE OPENS THE DOOR TO RESTORATION

Nehemiah 1:9 — “If You Return to Me”

“But if you return to Me and obey My commands, then even if your exiles are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them and bring them back to the place I have chosen for My name to dwell.”

The story does not end with judgment.

God's Word contained a promise of restoration.

Cross References

Deuteronomy 30:4

"Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the Lord your God will gather you and bring you back."

Deuteronomy 12:11

"Then to the place the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for His Name—there you are to bring everything I command you: your burnt offerings and sacrifices, your tithes and special gifts, and all the choice possessions you have vowed to the Lord."

1 Kings 8:48

"If they turn back to you with all their heart and soul in the land of their enemies who took them captive, and pray to you toward the land you gave their ancestors, toward the city you have chosen and the temple I have built for your Name..."

Notice the progression:

Unfaithfulness → Scattering → Returning → Obedience → Gathering

God is a God of restoration.

Repentance does not mean merely feeling bad.

Biblical repentance involves turning back toward God.

Important Truth

Failure does not have to be the final chapter of your story.

Where there is genuine repentance, there can be restoration.

X. NEHEMIAH REMEMBERED WHO THE PEOPLE BELONGED TO

Nehemiah 1:10 — “These Are Your Servants”

“These are Your servants and Your people, whom You redeemed by Your great power and strong hand.”

Nehemiah appeals to God's relationship with Israel.

They were:

- God's servants.
- God's people.
- A redeemed people.

Cross References

Exodus 32:11

"Moses pleaded with the Lord his God and said, 'Lord, why does your anger burn against your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand?'"

Deuteronomy 9:29

"Yet they are your people and your inheritance, whom you brought out by your great power and your outstretched arm."

Deuteronomy 7:8

"It was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

Nehemiah understood something essential:

Israel's hope was not ultimately in Israel. Their hope was in God.

God had redeemed them before.

Therefore Nehemiah believed God could restore them again.

XI. PRAYER FOR FAVOR

Nehemiah 1:11 — “Make the King Favorable to Me”

“O Lord, please hear my prayer! Listen to the prayers of those of us who delight in honoring You. Please grant me success today by making the king favorable to me. Put it in his heart to be kind to me.”

Nehemiah's prayer finally becomes personal.

He has prayed for Jerusalem.

He has confessed sin.

He has remembered God's promises.

Now he asks God for favor before the king.

Cross References

Nehemiah 2:1

"In the month of Nisan, in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before..."

Proverbs 21:1

"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he wills."

Genesis 40:1

"Sometime later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt offended their master, the king of Egypt."

Nehemiah understood that he could not accomplish God's assignment through human strength alone.

He needed God to move the heart of the king.

XII. NEHEMIAH'S POSITION WAS PART OF GOD'S PREPARATION

The final statement of the chapter is simple:

“I was the king's cupbearer.”

The cupbearer held a position of significant trust.

He was close to the king and had responsibilities that required loyalty.

God had placed Nehemiah in the palace before sending him to Jerusalem.

This teaches us an important principle:

Your current assignment may be preparing you for your future assignment.

Nehemiah did not have the wall yet.

He did not have permission yet.

He did not have the resources yet.

He did not have the plan fully developed yet.

But he had something essential:

A burden from God and a heart committed to prayer.

XIII. FIVE GREAT LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH 1

1. Brokenness Precedes Vision

Nehemiah's ministry began with tears.

He saw what was wrong before he knew how to make it right.

A burden can become the beginning of a calling.

Ask Yourself:

What brokenness has God placed on my heart?

2. Prayer Is the Foundation of Leadership

Nehemiah did not begin with a construction plan.

He began with prayer.

Before he spoke to the king, he spoke to God.

Before he sought permission from the palace, he sought direction from heaven.

Principle:

Never allow the urgency of a problem to replace the necessity of prayer.

3. True Repentance Includes “We”

Nehemiah did not simply condemn the sins of others.

He included himself.

His prayer demonstrates humility.

Revival begins when God's people stop pointing fingers and start examining hearts.

Psalm 139:23–24

“Search me, O God, and know my heart...”

Before asking God to change everyone else, ask God to search you.

4. God Honors His Word

Nehemiah knew God's promises.

His prayer was saturated with Scripture.

He remembered what God had told Moses and based his request upon God's covenant faithfulness.

Principle:

Strong prayers are built upon strong confidence in God's Word.

The more we know Scripture, the more clearly we understand how to pray.

5. Preparation Happens in the Waiting

Nehemiah was still the cupbearer.

The assignment had not yet changed.

The walls had not yet been rebuilt.

The king had not yet granted permission.

But God was already preparing Nehemiah.

Remember:

Waiting does not mean God is doing nothing.

God can prepare you in the very place where He has currently positioned you.

XIV. THE SPIRITUAL PROGRESSION OF NEHEMIAH 1

Nehemiah 1 gives us a pattern that can be applied to our own lives.

1. He Heard

He became aware of the problem.

2. He Cared

The report touched his heart.

3. He Wept

He allowed himself to be broken by the situation.

4. He Fasted

He sought God seriously.

5. He Prayed

He brought the burden to God.

6. He Confessed

He acknowledged sin.

7. He Remembered

He stood upon God's Word.

8. He Believed

He trusted God's covenant faithfulness.

9. He Asked

He requested favor and opportunity.

10. He Prepared

He waited for the door God would open.

This is the movement from **burden to calling**.

XV. WHAT NEHEMIAH 1 TEACHES US ABOUT PRAYER

Nehemiah's prayer contains several elements of effective biblical prayer.

Worship

He begins with who God is.

Confession

He acknowledges sin.

Scripture

He remembers God's promises.

Petition

He asks God for help.

Surrender

He trusts God to move the king's heart.

A healthy prayer life includes all of these.

Prayer is not merely asking God for what we want.

Prayer is coming into alignment with God and His purposes.

XVI. Answers for Personal Study

Question 1

What burden caused Nehemiah to weep?

Nehemiah wept because he learned that the remnant of Jews who had survived the exile were living in great trouble and disgrace, and that the walls of Jerusalem were broken down and its gates had been burned with fire (Nehemiah 1:3–4). His grief was not merely over damaged buildings; he was burdened by the condition of God's people and the dishonor surrounding Jerusalem, the city associated with God's covenant people.

Question 2

Why did Nehemiah respond to the report with fasting and prayer instead of immediate action?

Nehemiah understood that the problem was greater than human ability. Before attempting to rebuild the walls, he sought God's direction, forgiveness, favor, and provision. Prayer prepared Nehemiah spiritually before God prepared him practically. He did not allow his emotions to push him into impulsive action.

Question 3

What does Nehemiah's confession teach us about humility?

Nehemiah did not simply blame the people who had sinned. He confessed, **“I and my father's house have sinned”** (Nehemiah 1:6). This demonstrates humility because he identified himself with the failures of God's people. True spiritual leadership begins with personal repentance rather than pointing fingers at others.

Question 4

Why is it important that Nehemiah knew God's Word?

Nehemiah's prayer was grounded in what God had already spoken. He remembered God's covenant, His character, His warnings, and His promises (Nehemiah 1:5–9). Knowing Scripture gave Nehemiah confidence that he was not praying according to his own wishes but appealing to God's revealed will. God's Word gives believers a foundation upon which to pray.

Question 5

What promises of God can you stand upon when facing difficult circumstances?

Believers can stand upon promises such as God's presence, faithfulness, wisdom, provision, forgiveness, and strength. For example:

- **God is with us:** “I will never leave you nor forsake you” (Hebrews 13:5).
- **God gives wisdom:** “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God” (James 1:5).
- **God hears prayer:** “Call to me, and I will answer you” (Jeremiah 33:3).
- **God works through difficulties:** Romans 8:28.
- **God gives strength:** Isaiah 41:10.
- **God gives peace:** Philippians 4:6–7.

The important principle is that we should not merely hope that circumstances improve; we should anchor our faith in what God has promised.

Question 6

What broken areas of your life need to be brought before God?

This is a personal question that requires honest self-examination. Broken relationships, spiritual weakness, unforgiveness, sinful habits, family problems, discouragement, neglected responsibilities, and areas of disobedience may all need to be brought before God. Like Nehemiah, we should not hide the brokenness. We should bring it honestly before the Lord and ask Him to begin the work of restoration.

Question 7

Are you more likely to say “they have sinned” or “we have sinned”?

Nehemiah provides the better example: “**We have sinned against you**” (Nehemiah 1:6–7). It is easy to recognize the sins and failures of other people while overlooking our own. Humility asks, “**Lord, what must change in me?**” before demanding that everyone else change.

Question 8

What does Nehemiah's position as cupbearer teach us about God's preparation?

Nehemiah's position as cupbearer placed him close to King Artaxerxes. Although his job may initially have seemed unrelated to rebuilding Jerusalem, God had placed him in a position where he could eventually approach the king and request permission and resources for the work (Nehemiah 2:1–8).

This teaches us that **God can use our present circumstances to prepare us for future assignments**. A position, job, relationship, skill, or experience that seems ordinary today may become important to God's purpose tomorrow.

Question 9

What situation in your life requires you to pray before you act?

Any major decision should be brought before God before action is taken. This could include a career decision, family matter, ministry opportunity, financial decision, relationship, move, conflict, or difficult responsibility. Nehemiah demonstrates the principle of **prayer before action**. We should seek God's wisdom rather than allowing fear, anger, pressure, or impatience to make our decisions.

Question 10

What burden might God be using to reveal a future assignment?

Sometimes a persistent burden may reveal an area where God wants us to serve. Nehemiah's burden for Jerusalem eventually became his assignment to rebuild its walls. A burden for hurting people may lead to ministry; a burden for biblical truth may lead to teaching; a burden for the lost may lead to evangelism; and a burden for a struggling community may lead to service.

The key is to test the burden through **prayer, Scripture, wisdom, and God's providential direction**. Not every burden automatically constitutes a calling, but God can use a burden to awaken us to work He wants us to consider.

Personal Application

Nehemiah 1 teaches a powerful progression:

A burden led to weeping.

Weeping led to fasting.

Fasting led to prayer.

Prayer led to confession.

Confession led to preparation.

Preparation led to action.

Nehemiah did not ignore the brokenness around him, but neither did he rush ahead of God. **He took the brokenness to God before attempting to repair it.** That is one of the great lessons of Nehemiah 1 for every believer and every Christian leader.

XVII. A CRAWFORD BIBLE STUDY PRINCIPLE

“Before You Rebuild the Wall, Let God Rebuild the Heart”

Nehemiah wanted to rebuild Jerusalem's walls.

But God first worked on Nehemiah.

The physical wall was visible.

The spiritual work was invisible.

Yet the invisible work came first.

This principle applies to families, churches, ministries, communities, and individual lives.

We often want God to change our circumstances.

God may first want to change us.

We want God to fix the situation.

God may first want to fix our hearts.

We want God to open the door.

God may first want to prepare us to walk through it.

Nehemiah's story reminds us that **God's work often begins in the secret place of prayer before it becomes visible in the public place of ministry.**

XVIII. FINAL APPLICATION

Nehemiah 1 asks us a profound question:

What breaks your heart?

When Nehemiah heard about Jerusalem, he could have continued living comfortably in Susa.

Instead, he allowed the condition of God's people to become his burden.

His burden drove him to prayer.

His prayer led to repentance.

His repentance led to faith.

His faith eventually led to action.

That is the pattern of godly leadership.

Do not despise the burden God places upon your heart.

Bring it to Him.

Do not rush past brokenness.

Let it drive you toward prayer.

Do not blame everyone else.

Begin with yourself.

Do not forget God's promises.

Stand upon His Word.

And do not assume that waiting means nothing is happening.

God may be preparing you right now for something you cannot yet see.

Closing Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We come before You as Nehemiah came before You—with humility, dependence, and faith.

Give us hearts that care about what concerns You. When we see brokenness around us, keep us from becoming indifferent. Teach us to pray before we act and to seek Your wisdom before we make decisions.

Search our hearts and reveal anything that does not honor You. Forgive our sins and teach us to walk in obedience to Your Word.

Help us remember Your promises when circumstances appear hopeless. Give us faith to believe that You are still able to restore what has been broken.

Prepare us in the places where You have currently placed us. Give us patience while we wait, courage when You open doors, and wisdom to recognize the opportunities You provide.

If You have placed a burden upon our hearts, show us what to do with it. If that burden is connected to a calling, prepare us for the work ahead.

May our prayers become faith, may our faith become obedience, and may our obedience bring glory to Your name.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Key Verse

“When I heard these words, I sat down and wept. I mourned for several days, fasting and praying to the God of heaven.” — Nehemiah 1:4

Central Truth

God often begins the work of rebuilding through a burden that drives His people to their knees.

Nehemiah 1 in One Sentence

A broken heart, surrendered to God in prayer, can become the beginning of a God-given mission.

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