

Journey Into Renewal

LESSON 1 . . . Knowing When You Need Renewal (Nehemiah 1:1-11)

NOTES

From time to time we all need spiritual renewal. The problem is realizing when. No book in the Bible can better help us know when and how to be renewed than the book of Nehemiah. It is the last of the historical books in the Old Testament and records the renewal of the Israelites (see chart on page 12). The ten tribes of the Northern Kingdom of Israel fall to the Assyrians in 722 B.C. Consequently, they intermarry, assimilate into pagan cultures, and become known as the ten lost tribes. More than 100 years later, in 587 B.C., the Southern Kingdom of Judah falls to the Babylonians. What does 2 Chronicles 36:18-19 record the Babylonians do to the temple and Jerusalem?

The Jews of the Southern Kingdom do not lose their racial identity because they do not intermarry. The Babylonians eventually fall to the Persians, resulting in a decree from the Persian king Cyrus in 538 B.C., allowing the first group of Jews to return to Jerusalem under Zerubbabel (zuh-rub'-uh-bel), heir to the throne of Israel. This first group rebuilds the temple but falls into a state of spiritual decline. Then, about 80 years later, Ezra comes with a second group, bringing reform and reinstating the Passover. What results are recorded in Ezra 6:21?

Almost 100 years has passed since the first exiles returned to Jerusalem, and although the temple has been rebuilt, the wall and the city are still in ruins, and the people are discouraged. Therefore, God raises up Nehemiah to rebuild the wall so His people can be renewed and secure. In the first chapter of the book of Nehemiah we find how to know when we need renewal. First, we must . . .

Recognize the problem (1:1-4).

The phrase *the words of Nehemiah* (1:1a) and the fact much of this book is written in first person shows this is the personal record of Nehemiah. During the *twentieth year* (1:1) of the reign of Artaxerxes (ar-tuh-zurk'-seez) in Persia, Nehemiah is serving as cupbearer (1:11c) for the king. A cupbearer was a member of the royal court and safeguarded the king's wine

from poisoning. Thus, Nehemiah has personal access to the king. While he is in the Persian winter palace in Susa (which is in modern southwestern Iran, see map on page 12), some men come from Judah, and Nehemiah questions them about the Jewish remnant and Jerusalem (1:2).



In Nehemiah's secure position how easy it would have been not to ask questions! One way to know if we need spiritual renewal is our interest in the spiritual condition of others. Do you ask your relatives, friends, and co-workers about their spiritual lives? Do you ask them if they go to church or other non-threatening questions that would help you ascertain their spiritual condition? When we are so consumed with our own lives that we are not interested in the spiritual state of others, we need spiritual renewal.

Nehemiah is told those *that are left of the captivity . . . are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire* (1:3). When Nehemiah hears these things, what is his response in verse 4?

Nehemiah doesn't act "holier-than-thou" and say, "What that 'bunch' in Jerusalem needs is . . ." He doesn't complain or condemn. Therefore, Nehemiah is an excellent example of what we should do when we need renewal or when we want to help people who need renewal. Instead of complaining and saying, "What our church needs is . . ." or "If our pastor would just . . .," we should do as Nehemiah does. He weeps. Why does he weep? Nehemiah knows his people are known as the children of Jehovah God. The temple and the city of Jerusalem represent the blessing and protection of their God.

The enemies of Israel could now say, "What kind of God do you serve? Look at the mess of your holy city." The condition of Jerusalem is a terrible witness and cause for reproach by non-believers. This causes Nehemiah to weep. Does your spiritual life look like a pile of rubble to non-believers? In 2 Corinthians 12:20b, what kind of spiritual rubble does Paul mention as being a dishonorable witness to God?

We should not let any of this "rubble" be present in our lives to shame the God we are supposed to serve. So, the first step in renewal is to **recognize the problem**. Then, we should . . .

Respond in prayer (1:5-11).

Nehemiah's prayer to God on behalf of this situation is recorded in the rest of this chapter. When God uses space in His Holy Word to elaborate on something, He has an important reason. God records what Nehemiah prays so we can have a wonderful model to follow.

Before we take any action in the area of spiritual renewal, we should first go to the Lord in prayer, following the principles of Nehemiah's prayer. Someone has used the word "A-C-T-S" as an acrostic for the elements of effective prayer. "A" stands for **adoration**, "C" for **confession**, "T" for **thanksgiving**, and "S" for **supplication**. This acrostic must have been developed from this prayer of Nehemiah's. Rather than trying to "reinvent the wheel," let's follow this acrostic as we look at the four elements of Nehemiah's prayer, beginning with . . .

Adoration (1:5). This is simply praising or worshipping God for who He is. Nehemiah begins his prayer, *O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible [awesome] God . . .* (1:5). Reminding ourselves of the greatness and awesomeness of God builds our faith in His ability to answer our prayers. How does Jesus teach us to follow this pattern of prayer in Matthew 6:9?

What we believe about God will determine what we believe about prayer. If we don't believe in a *great* and awesome God, we will not believe what promise found in Jeremiah 33:3?

While we should praise God for who He is, we should also praise Him for what He does. Therefore, Nehemiah also praises God for keeping his *covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments* (1:5b). This doesn't refer to sinless perfection; for all of us stumble from time to time in our spiritual lives and need renewal (see Isa. 6:5). Rather, it is a desire to live for God. In the presence of a holy and awesome God we become very sensitive to any sin in our lives. **Adoration** will naturally lead to the second element of effective prayer, which is . . .

Confession (1:6-7). Nehemiah confesses that the Israelites, including his father's house and himself, have all sinned against God by not obeying God's *commandments, statutes, and judgments* given through Moses (1:6-7). Although he has certainly remained more faithful to God than most of Israel, Nehemiah does not rationalize away his sin by comparing himself



to others. To experience renewal, we must always be sensitive to sin in our own lives and not be guilty of judging others.

If we are always comparing ourselves to those who appear less faithful, we need renewal. Like the words of the old song, we need to pray, “It’s not my brother, nor my sister, but it’s me, O Lord, standing in the need of prayer.” To be renewed, we must humbly and honestly confess our sins. Why, according to James 4:6c?

When we fail to confess and forsake our sin, we can no longer be used of God. Few believers are guilty of adultery, drunkenness, or bank robbery. However, according to James 4:17, what kind of sin must we be careful to include if we are to confess all our sins?



Sin is not just doing evil; it is also the absence of doing good. To know if we need renewal, we should ask, “What good things have I done this week that I would not have done if I were not a Christian?” If the answer is “nothing,” we must pray for renewal, which requires **adoration** and **confession**, followed by . . .

Thanksgiving (1:8-10). Nehemiah thanks God for promising His people can return to Him if they repent. Nehemiah knows because his people have been unfaithful to God, they are scattered among the nations (1:8). However, he thanks God for the promise . . . *if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments . . . will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there* (1:9). What does God also promise in Psalm 32:1 to believers who repent of sin?

The word *blessed* means “happy.” The happiest believers are those who know their sins are forgiven. Nehemiah also thanks God for salvation by praying, . . . *whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand* (1:10). Only one thing can keep you from being happy and experiencing God’s blessings—sin—and only one kind of sin. Not your brother’s, nor your sister’s, only whose? Yours!

After **adoration**, **confession**, and **thanksgiving**, there should be . . .

Supplication (1:11). This means “a humble request, or petition.” Nehemiah requests God give him success in persuading the king to let him return to Jerusalem (1:11). Going to Jerusalem means Nehemiah will have to leave the luxury and security of the royal court and go where his life will be at risk. Prayer that brings renewal causes us to want to do God’s will, even at great cost. God grants Nehemiah’s petition. How does 1 John 5:14-15 teach we can be confident God will grant ours?



Nehemiah’s prayer gives us a simple way to see if our prayers are in God’s will. . .

- Does my prayer contain an unselfish request?
- Does my prayer seek an answer that will bring glory to God?
- Have I confessed all my sins, both of commission and omission?
- Am I willing to do my part to bring about my requests?

If the answer to all these questions is “yes,” we can be confident our prayer is in God’s will.

At various times in our Christian lives we all need spiritual renewal. When we do, what prayer found in Psalm 51:10 should we pray?

Knowing when you need renewal means you **recognize the problem** and **respond in prayer**. Based on this lesson, what symptoms in your life reveal the need for spiritual renewal, and what will you do when you need spiritual renewal?

OLD TESTAMENT HISTORY

