

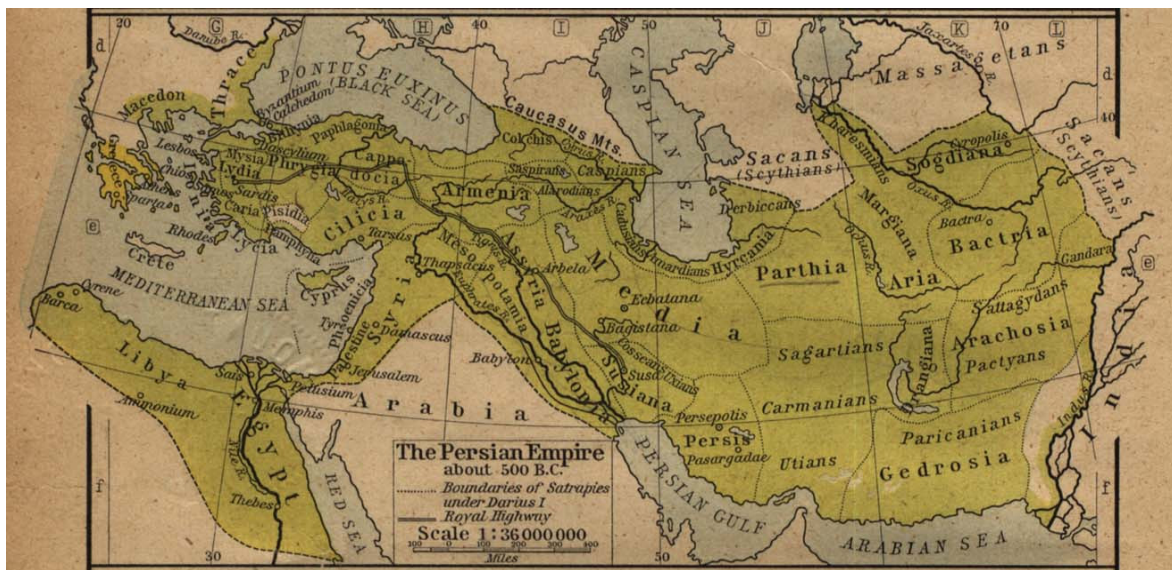
What Crisis is This?

Nehemiah 1:1-2:10

How did we get here?

The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar defeated Egypt in 605 BC, which gave him complete control of Jerusalem in Judah. The last reigning king of Judah, Zedekiah, was appointed by Nebuchadnezzar and then he rebelled against his new master in 601 (2 Kgs 25:1-2) and by 597, the royal family and many leading citizens went to Babylon as prisoners following the surrender of Jerusalem.

The Pharaoh of Egypt promised to support any rebellion against Babylon (Ezekiel 17), which came in 591, only to prompt swift retaliation by the Babylonians. They entered Jerusalem and destroyed the temple, the palace and razed a large portion of the city. They executed many leaders and led the rest of them into exile (2 Kgs 25:8-21), ending the Davidic dynasty in 587. This Jerusalem is one rebellious city!



Nebuchadnezzar's dynasty ended when the Persian king Cyrus II conquered Babylon in 539. The Persian king whom Nehemiah served must have been Artaxerxes I (464-424). Nehemiah was cupbearer to Artaxerxes and, like his earlier colleagues in Egypt, enjoyed royal trust and favor, and had access to the royal ear.

Bad news from Jerusalem

In December of 445, Nehemiah was in the "citadel" or the "capital" of Susa, the royal winter residence in southwest Iran. He heard from his brother Hanani that Jerusalem was in a terrible state. The walls had been destroyed and the remaining survivors were living in shameful conditions. Nehemiah was heartbroken.

Nehemiah's two-part response

His immediate response was a time of mourning and prayer. Notice the components of Nehemiah's prayer (1:5-11). He begins with an acknowledgement of God's greatness and then seeks "attentive ears" and "open eyes" from the Lord, recounting the covenant relationship, the steadfast mercy and from that context of understanding God's love and mercy, confessing the sins of unfaithfulness of the people of Israel and asks for success and mercy. In short, Nehemiah clearly states the situation: the place of these people in God's heart, the problems that led to the

current condition and the plea for God's blessing as Nehemiah responds to the bad news.

Consider a time you've prayed at a moment of crisis. What is similar between your prayer and Nehemiah's prayer? What is different? This is the first of Nehemiah's "remember" prayers, so named because Nehemiah consistently calls God, the Israelites (and himself) to remember who God is and remember the loving, steadfast relationship between God and the people of God. How would your prayer life change if your prayers put more emphasis on reconnecting to God relationally before (or even instead of) focusing on making a request to God?

It is not until the spring of the following year (443) that Nehemiah takes the next step to bring this topic up with King Artaxerxes. Nehemiah's approach to the king is a lesson in forthrightness and tact, clearly supported by the faith he has in God to provide:

- **Relationship:** Nehemiah has a relationship with the king that is close enough for the king to know when something is amiss. He continues to affirm the king, "May the king live forever!"
- **Common ground:** Nehemiah describes the problem, "Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my ancestors' graves, lies waste, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?" in a way that anyone could identify with. Who would want the graves of their ancestors to lie in waste?
- **Tact:** Nehemiah does not even refer to (that rebellious) Jerusalem by name. He connects the request to the work he's already done, "if your servant has found favor with you."
- **Clear request:** Nehemiah states clearly what he wants to do, how long it will take and how much financial support he requires. He has thought this through and asks in a way that builds trust in his competence to get the job done.
- **Keeps perspective:** Nehemiah kept in the forefront of his mind that the king's favor was a result of "the gracious hand of my God."

Nehemiah left not only with letters giving him access to the royal forest, but an armed escort keeping him safe under the protection of the king of the entire land.

The displeasure of Sanballat and Tobiah (1:10) previews some of the conflict that Nehemiah will experience. When we are on the move doing God's work, we should expect that we will face opposition and plan to address it. (More to come from Nehemiah on this topic.)

Considering the result of Nehemiah's request, we see that what Nehemiah prayed (1:10), "Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!" was clearly answered by God, "Yes!" No doubt God blessed him with an abundance of wisdom. Would that all our projects begin so smoothly!

Some Applications

- Use Nehemiah's prayer as a model for your prayer life this week. Let the emphasis of your time in prayer be on relationship over task.
- For what does your heart break? What issues have sufficient impact on your life that you are moved to heartbreak, prayer and a willingness to challenge the way things are? How could God use you right where you are?
- Consider an issue that is burning in your heart. What can you learn from Nehemiah's approach that you could apply to directly address the issue?