

# Session 1

## OVERCOME

*Nehemiah 1:1-2:9*

### Memory Verse

*When I heard these words, I sat down and wept. I mourned for a number of days, fasting and praying before the God of the heavens.*

– NEHEMIAH 1:4, CSB



## Overcome

**THEOLOGICAL THEME:** As Christians we should be heartbroken over the same things as God. If the church wants to make a difference for the kingdom of God, we must care enough about other people, countries, and cultures that we are moved to prayer and action like Nehemiah was.

Have you ever heard that the farther you get from home, the bigger your home gets? When you are in your hometown, you describe home as a specific address or neighborhood. If you are in a different state, home may be identified as a city or state. When you are overseas, you might claim the United States as home. Wherever you are, when the word home arises, certain feelings and emotions come with it. Home is special.

Plenty of classic books and popular movies include storylines with home at the center because this resonates with most audiences. In *The Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy's quest for home reminds us all of the powerful motivation "home" inspires.<sup>1</sup>

 What movie or book comes to your mind when you think about themes inspired by the idea of home?

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 What emotions does the concept of home stir up in you?

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Why do you think the idea of home strikes a chord in most people?

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## Session Summary

Nehemiah was a Jew born during the time of captivity. He had never lived in Jerusalem but had been raised with Jewish traditions and culture. He served as cupbearer to the king and received word from his brother about the condition of life in Jerusalem that broke his heart. Though he had not lived in the Holy City himself, he still understood the significant role Jerusalem played in the lives of his people.

A remnant of Jews had returned to Jerusalem and had done some rebuilding, but much destruction and ruin remained. Nehemiah was broken over what he heard, and it moved him to weep, fast, and pray. He cried out to God and then was moved to action himself. Nehemiah is a great example of how God's people should respond to the condition of the world around us. Unless we are willing to love deeply and invest ourselves as God directs, we will not be able to have much influence and effect as a worker in His kingdom.

### 1. Brokenhearted (Nehemiah 1:1-4)

The Babylonians had conquered Jerusalem and destroyed the city, its walls, and the temple. They deported most of the Jewish people, leaving Jerusalem as a virtual ghost town in ruins. After seventy years of captivity, the Jews were given the opportunity to return to the promised land. Only a small percentage of the Jewish people chose to go back to Jerusalem while the rest stayed in the homes they had built in Babylon.

Even though the Jews had built lives in Babylon or Persia, many of them continued with their faith and religious upbringing. They still followed God but were living in a foreign city with vastly different religious practices and beliefs. At the time of Nehemiah's book, it had been about 150 years since the original destruction of Jerusalem.

The book of Nehemiah begins by describing what he heard from a brother who had recently traveled back to Jerusalem. The men who had gone to Judah brought back details about the city and its condition that were concerning. Even though he had never lived in Jerusalem, it was still the home of the Jewish people and was very important. The Jews had an innate sense of devotion to and love for the city of Jerusalem that was passed from generation to generation.

The report was not good. Nehemiah heard about the suffering of the people and the state of the city. There had been some attempts at rebuilding various areas but because the walls were still in ruins, the people were continually vulnerable to attacks and opposition making progress was minimal. The poor state of the people was tied to the poor state of the walls because there was no defense or protection for them.



**What breaks your heart and moves you toward compassion and action? Are these the same things that break the heart of God? How can you know?**

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Without walls, the people were in a constant state of stress and tension. Walls were built to protect the people and things within. A city without walls was a place of constant fear and danger. Nehemiah could not stand the thought that God's people were living in such terrible conditions, and it affected him deeply. His reaction was extreme and comprehensive. His physical distress knocked him off his feet, and his mental and emotional distress caused weeping, fasting, and praying. Nehemiah mourned for people he did not know but loved because God loved them. When Nehemiah realized the situation, he did not waste time searching for answers anywhere else, he went straight to God.



**When was the last time you were so upset that your first response was to weep, pray, or fast?**

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 Application: How do you typically respond to heartbreak?

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## 2. Moved to Prayer (Nehemiah 1:5-11)

When Nehemiah experienced deep mourning over the situation in Jerusalem, he did the best thing he could. He went straight to God in prayer. He did not waste time with other solutions that would not be enough, he took his concerns and stress to the Lord and poured his heart out before Him. Too many times we can be tempted to numb our concerns or stresses with things of the world when what we really need is to lay our hearts before God and trust Him to show us what to do with our heartbreak.

 What are some places people turn to numb their stress or concerns instead of turning to God? What are some things you might turn to outside of God?

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There is much to be learned from Nehemiah's prayer. He started by addressing the Lord with awe and praise. He spoke to God with humility and complete dependence. When we recognize that God is all powerful, all present, and all knowing it helps us understand just how much we need Him. Nehemiah knew only God could help Jerusalem, and he sought that help on behalf of the Jewish people.

By confessing his sin alongside the sin of the nation of Israel, Nehemiah identified with the Israelites. Note that he did not offer excuses for how the people had sinned but humbly admitted they had done wrong before the Lord and asked for His mercy. He referred to Moses and the warnings given about the consequences of the people's rebellion then appealed to God's promise of restoration.

**?** What sticks out to you from Nehemiah's prayer? How might you learn to turn to God from Nehemiah's example?

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Holding to God's promises of restoration following repentance demonstrates an important approach to prayer. Nehemiah used God's character and His promises as the foundation for his request that God listen to his prayers and do something for His people. Though it was a conditional promise that Nehemiah quoted, and he could not ensure faithfulness from all the Jewish people, he personally turned from sin and toward God. He took responsibility for what he could and trusted God for the rest.

Nehemiah didn't just offer his words to God; he had a heart ready for action. He wasn't content to only mourn the situation and petition God about it. He didn't ask that someone else would step up and do something. He prayed with a readiness to do something himself. By asking God for favor when he approached the king, Nehemiah was willing to risk it all to be part of the work of God.

**?** Application: What is a common subject of prayer for you recently? How might you pray toward this with a heart ready for action?

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### 3. Moved to Action (Nehemiah 2:1-9)

The dates stated by Nehemiah were important because they showed the length of time that Nehemiah prayed and prepared before he had the opportunity to talk to the king was about four months. These dates also served to establish the occurrence of events that verify the accuracy of prophecies concerning Jerusalem and the coming Messiah.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer to the king, a position of honor and trust. He was often in the presence of the king and had to be careful about each detail of his appearance, even his countenance. As Nehemiah prayed and fasted for four months, it affected him

physically and the king noticed. This was a defining moment that could have gone a very different way. When the king responded favorably, Nehemiah knew it was time to speak up and make a significant request. After preparing for months, it was time to act on the burden he felt. Think about how different the world would be if more believers cared enough to pray and act. When the king asked for Nehemiah's request, he knew God had been working and his prayers were answered.

**?** What responsibility did Nehemiah have when given the opportunity to make his request? When was a time prayer led you to act?

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As Nehemiah laid out his request to go be part of the rebuilding, he did so with respect and humility. The king reacted reasonably, and God had been at work, so the request was received favorably. Once Nehemiah saw he was received well, he continued with his request.

Eventually, Nehemiah received permission to go and help in the building efforts, letters to help pave the way in his travels, military escorts, and resources to build the wall. This pagan king responded positively to all that Nehemiah asked and this could only be attributed to the power of God at work.

**?** When was the last time you saw an answer to prayer that could only be attributed to God?

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God provided for Nehemiah's needs in abundance. This began with a man of faith who trusted God enough to be bold and humble in his requests. Because his heart broke when he learned about the city of Jerusalem, Nehemiah was moved to pray and to get involved, and eventually the city of Jerusalem was rebuilt. As we align our hearts with the heart of God, praying and acting in accordance with His will, He will be faithful to work in our lives too.



Application: What does this text teach you about being bold in your faith? How is God calling you to respond to Him today?

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## Conclusion

Nehemiah is an excellent example of how we should care about the things God does. Are we willing to love people to the point that we mourn when they suffer? Too many Christians live in apathy toward others. We are so concerned about what affects us, we don't take the time to see how God might want to use us in His plan to help others.

If we want to be part of kingdom work, we must open our eyes to what is happening and be sensitive to what the Holy Spirit tells us. We can be committed to praying. We can be bold and willing to step out and get involved. We can encourage others to join us in the activity of God. We can step out in faith when we have the opportunities. Nehemiah is an example of what can happen when we boldly trust God and do what He calls us to do.





What situation breaks your heart in our world today? What have you been doing about it? What are you going to do about it now?

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How is God calling you to act on behalf of another today? How will you respond?

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Who might God be calling you to have a gospel conversation with? How do you need to act in obedience?

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# FOR NEXT WEEK

## When You Had No Idea How Bad It Was

### Main Passages

- Ezekiel 3:1-15

### Session Outline

1. Taking in the Word (Ezekiel 3:1-4)
2. Strong for the Call (Ezekiel 3:5-11)
3. Overwhelmed (Ezekiel 3:12-15)

### Memorize

*When I heard these words, I sat down and wept. I mourned for a number of days, fasting and praying before the God of the heavens.*

- Nehemiah 1:4, CSB

### References

<sup>1</sup>*The Wizard of Oz*, directed by Victor Fleming (1939; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2014), DVD.