

Pillar Passage – Nehemiah 1 pt 1 (v. 1-4)  
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Hello and welcome to another Pillar Passage. Today we are looking at the book of Nehemiah, beginning in chapter 1.

A little background on Nehemiah before we get into the book itself. Nehemiah and Ezra lived at the same time, and they are located a little bit earlier in the Bible than what we would expect. They are, in the Hebrew Bible, considered one book. Ezra and Nehemiah are considered one book in the Hebrew version of the Old Testament. Nehemiah served, we will see, King Artaxerxes of Babylon and Nehemiah is *in* Babylon.

So the question is, why is he in Babylon. That's because, over the years, there were many deportations of the tribes of Israel to various places around the known world. After Solomon's death the nation of Israel broke into two kings. The northern kingdom, called Israel, and a southern kingdom named Judah where Jerusalem was. The ten tribes of Israel were deported in the 700's BC, so that was way back here. Again, notice that we are in the BCs so the numbers of the years are going down as we approach Christ; as we approach year zero; as we approach the Messiah.

In the 700's those 10 tribes essentially cease to exist. You read about that at the end of Second Kings. Then in the late 500s ... I believe the first one was in 591. The second one was in 587, and the third was in 582. In three different deportations the tribes of Judah and Benjamin were deported.

Just as a side note, you can remember who did this by the letters A, B, C. First, Assyrians who took away the 10 tribes of Israel. Then it was the Babylonians, and, still under the Babylonian flag, it was the Chaldeans who finally took the last Israelites, in the last deportation, away. And this happened—again let's put a date on it of 585.

Then, as prophesied long before in the book of Isaiah, God raised up His servant Cyrus—though Cyrus did not know Him. Cyrus decreed the Jews may return back to Judah from their exile. This happened in 538 BC. Then finally as the prophets—one prophet for instance Haggai—encouraged the people to rebuild the temple. This happened in 515 BC. In this period of time here this 70 years (*between 585 and 515*) is generally considered the time of the exile.

But ... Just because the temple is rebuilt does not mean that everything is okay. Nehemiah receives news, as we will see today, that things are not okay in Judah. So Nehemiah returns in 444 BC and then again in 430 BC. We will find out why in just a moment.

But first ... I share all this because; One, it's interesting background knowledge. But two, because the book of Nehemiah is often considered an manual on leadership. It's often taught this way, as if God wanted to give us a manual on leadership in the Bible. And while there are many good lessons on leadership in the book, that is not why God had it preserved and kept as inspired scripture for us.

One of His purposes must be to give us a record of real people, real believers in God who had gone before us and at great expense; at great risk; at great danger, had returned from the comforts they had acquired in Babylon and had returned to Judah; had returned to the homeland to rebuild. To rebuild that which had been torn down, and burned, and was wasting away.

This is a historical record of brothers and sisters who have gone before us. And because of their risk; because of their courage; because of their love for God, the people of God continued and would one day bring to *us* a Messiah—a Savior. So we should not read this book with just our own flippant desires of how do I be a better leader in my department at work.

This is a historical record of people who have gone before us and because of their efforts; because of their sacrifice; because of their courageousness, brought us the Messiah.

So, with that background, we see here what was going on. Again, Nehemiah is in Babylon. Some men come for Judah—particularly a brother of his, Hanai. Their news is that things are not okay in Jerusalem. In fact, things are bad. The people who had survived the exile, who had gone off into the countryside and those that had returned; they are in great trouble and in shame.

Yes, the temple is being rebuilt, but “the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.” The place is in shambles. The city of *God* is in shambles. “As soon as I heard these words,” Nehemiah said, “I sat down and wept.” Nehemiah wept and mourned for days. Then he did the next best thing, the thing that was most constructive and productive—he fasted and he prayed.

Fasting is the ancient discipline the people of God, that withhold food from ourselves in order to hear God. Not to beat ourselves up. Not to pay penance. But in order to hear God more clearly as we are praying. Fasting and prayer always go together.

We also see here something fascinating about Nehemiah’s language. He continually call—in this book—God, the God of heaven. And why is that? Because, though he is far away—he is hundreds of miles from Jerusalem—this is nothing to God. He is the God of all power who reigns over all things. He is the God of heaven. Nehemiah takes strength from that, and fasts before Him; and prays before Him; mourning and weeping before Him.

I want to pause here. We will, in another lesson, get to the actual next step that Nehemiah takes beyond this. His prayer and then his next step. But I want to say here—and I’m going to stop here for this lesson because the point is so important.

If you read any other leadership book, maybe in the whole world, that leadership book has everything to do with tactics, techniques, even character sometimes. But no leadership book deals with character like this. This is a heart that when it hears of the city of God in shambles, it weeps and it mourns.

Nehemiah is a man who in his heart is filled with 3 things. A love for God. A fear of God. And a jealousy for God.

Without these things, nothing else—nothing else that is going to happen in this letter—nothing else would have occurred without God giving Nehemiah with heart of love, fear, and jealousy for Him. Everything springs forth from this.

Nehemiah is, we can say, a patriot. He loves his country. He loves his people. Yet, his patriotism is pure and good and constructive only because he first had this love, this fear, the jealousy of his God. The vertical love, and fear, and jealous first, which then overflows into a horizontal love to his neighbor,; to his people; to his tribe; to his nation.

Today many people pride themselves in being patriotic—and to be patriotic is a good thing. But the question is, what is the heart that is driving that patriotism?

I would say there is only one way to have a pure constructive patriotism. It is with this heart.

All the other leadership principles; all the other leadership tactics; all the other moments of courage in this book, the all spring forth from this kind of heart.

Before we go any further into the book of Nehemiah, what I would like to do for myself, and what I would like you to do, dear listener, is to pray. To pray that God would give you this kind of heart. Only this kind of heart is useful and constructive in the hands of God.