



# vision study

## Nehemiah's Vision Begins

### Introduction

Personal vision for Christ followers is biblically grounded. It is not just something used in the business world or to nurture one's personal success. In the story of Nehemiah, we witness a wealthy comfortable man who had a heart for God's Word and Kingdom, who is inspired by a God-breathed vision. He hears of Jerusalem's trouble and is deeply moved—moved internally to tears, fasting, repentant prayer, and externally to action. But why? Why does the cupbearer to the King who is surrounded by comfort and riches, power and influence, decide to forsake all these secure pleasures to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, a city he had never seen? How might our lives parallel his? How might his story inspire us to connect with God and our deepest heart? This is the question that we are going to explore today by studying Nehemiah 1.

Please spend 10-15 minutes studying the text below. You may want to read the background on cupbearers in the ancient world before you begin.

### Nehemiah 1

1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev<sup>1</sup> in the twentieth year<sup>2</sup>, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. 3 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." 4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. 5 Then I said: "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, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. 8 Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'"<sup>3</sup> 10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king.

1. What about Nehemiah 1 as a whole strikes you?
2. What is it about the news that Nehemiah receives that troubles him so deeply?
3. What is Nehemiah's first response? Second? Third?
4. Why is it significant that Nehemiah prays before acting, especially as his personal vision is still forming?
5. What does Nehemiah's prayer reveal about him and his faith and his hopes?

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<sup>1</sup> Kislev is the 3<sup>rd</sup> month in the Jewish calendar, November/December in our calendar.

<sup>2</sup> The twentieth year of Artaxerxes reign, 465 B.C., was about 75 years after the first Jews returned to the land to re-establish the nation of Israel and rebuild the temple. The lacks in Judah and the problems in Jerusalem were not new problems when Nehemiah comes on the scene.

<sup>3</sup> Dt. 30:1-10



# vision study

## Nehemiah's Vision Begins

In this text, we witness the beginning of Nehemiah's vision process. He is deeply troubled by the terrible news he received and he begins to connect deeply with a number of things — first, deep grief that Jerusalem and the citizens of Judah are in such a bad place still, 75 years after they were given permission to return; second, a repentant heart which seeks to be right with God according the God's covenant love and promises, third, a faith that he is in a place to help his people, that he cannot stay on the sidelines. And as we know, this motivated him to risk his life asking for the King's help to rebuild the defensive wall of a city known to have been a hotbed of rebellion, to leave the comforts of the palace to travel to the Persian empire's "Wild West" frontier – a very dangerous place – to actually lead out in rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem. Nehemiah, as a courtier, probably didn't have any engineering/construction training or background working with his hands or using weapons.

### **Questions to consider and then discuss in pairs or threes:**

1. When you consider this story how do you relate to Nehemiah? Is there something that you have yearned for like him? Is there some way you feel God's name is degraded or that his people are cast down that you feel connection to? Is there something that makes you feel alive to think about and excited about doing? When you consider all that Nehemiah left to live out his personal vision is there something that would motivate you to leave your comfort zone the way he did?
2. Where are you in your personal vision process? Have you identified something that you really want to go for? A set of values you feel called to live out? If you participated in the funeral exercise at Riverfest camp, or even if you didn't, is there something that you feel called or deeply desire to do or become before you die?
3. Just as Nehemiah needed to have been cupbearer to the king to live his personal vision, is there something about your past or current role in life that points to your personal vision?
4. Have you talked to God about the things you care about and how his vision for your life could be related to your deepest passions? Nehemiah connected his role as cupbearer to Jerusalem's condition and God's promise to restore his people if they repented and returned to him. Have you studied his Word for his promises and his work in the world that needs doing, to connect them to your gifts, role, and passions? How might you begin to connect to God in these ways? Is there a step he's inviting you to take?

There is way too much here for one night. You may want to ponder these questions in your quiet times the next couple weeks. We will continue to process these major themes and questions in our further studies, the Sunday messages, the vision seminars, and reading *Visioneering*, by Andy Stanley, together as a church.

### **For Next Week:**

Read *Visioneering* chapter 5, "Faith, The Central Ingredient". The chapters don't need to be read in order, but you may want to read chapters 2-4 as well. We won't come back to them specifically in the other studies, but they are very worth reading and pondering.



# vision study

## Nehemiah's Vision Begins

the river church community  
week 1

### What is a Cupbearer?



In Biblical times, the cupbearer was a high-ranking official in the royal court who was responsible for all the wine served to the King and his royal table. Because of his vicinity to the king, the cupbearer had to be trustworthy. This is why in some Egyptian texts the cupbearer is literally translated as “pure of hands.” The cupbearer’s most fundamental task was to taste the king’s drinks before serving them to make sure they were not poisoned. Yet, this was really just one task among many. Williamson in the Word Biblical Commentary writes, “Royal cupbearers in antiquity, in addition to their skill in selecting and serving wine and their duty in tasting it as proof against poison, were also expected to be convivial and tactful companions to the king. Being much in his confidence, they could thus wield considerable influence by way of informal counsel and discussion.” Nehemiah was not the only cupbearer in the Scriptures. The “butler” of Joseph’s pharaoh in Genesis 40:1, both in Hebrew and by function, was the king’s cupbearer and the cupbearers in Solomon’s court impressed the Queen of Sheba (1Kg. 10:5; 2Chr. 9:4).

Andy Stanley wants to paint Nehemiah as an everyman vs. a person of privilege and power. His powerful position does not weaken his value as an inspirational figure for us, rather it strengthens it. He had more to lose, more to die to, since he was so entrenched in the royal court hierarchy with its power, pleasures, and politics. Judah was a broken down desert province of little account to the Persians.



# vision study

## Nehemiah's Vision Begins

the river church community  
week 1

### Leader's Guide

#### The Goals of this study –

1. Ground personal vision in the Biblical story of Nehemiah.
2. Make a personal connection to Nehemiah – educated, comfortable, busy, with a boss he serves, yet willing to risk it all to go build a wall in a city he'd never been to, on the dangerous frontier of the Persian Empire (the America of its day.) This was a situation where God had seemingly not done much to rebuild Jerusalem/the nation 75 years after the prophesied return to the land had taken place.
3. Reconnect to the funeral exercise for people who were at the Riverfest camp.
4. Share with one another where we are in the personal vision process.
5. Takeaway reflection questions to ponder in quiet time or in spiritual friendship or marriages.

#### Introduction

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Andy Stanley's characterization in chapter 1 of his book was a bit inaccurate and doesn't do justice to the reality of Nehemiah's radical, self-emptying choice. His descent from the court of the emperor to lay his life down in the broken down, famine plagued, enemy rich territory of Judah is a "type" of what Jesus Christ did when he left the Father's right hand to enter our world.

#### Nehemiah 1

1 The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah: In the month of Kislev<sup>4</sup> in the twentieth year<sup>5</sup>, while I was in the citadel of Susa, 2 Hanani, one of my brothers, came from Judah with some other men, and I questioned them about the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem. 3 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." 4 When I heard these things, I sat down and wept. For some days I mourned and fasted and prayed before the God of heaven. 5 Then I said: "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, 6 let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel. I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's house, have committed against you. 7 We have acted very

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# vision study

## Nehemiah's Vision Begins

the river church community  
week 1

wickedly toward you. We have not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave your servant Moses. 8 Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, 9 but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'<sup>6</sup> 10 "They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great strength and your mighty hand. 11 O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of this your servant and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give your servant success today by granting him favor in the presence of this man." I was cupbearer to the king.

You may want to keep the questions close to your vest and not print them out with the text. It's up to you how you like to lead the study. Feel free to add your own questions, provided they keep on the topic of Nehemiah's heart for God, compassion on Jerusalem, and his vision that causes him to act.

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You will want to hand out page 2 only after the study. The summary of the study's main points is good, but discovery and building a learning community around the Scripture is more important than handing out the answers and making it easy for folks to just read what us experts think are the main points.

(p.2 summary of main points)

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We realize that there are too many questions here to discuss in depth for one night. You may want to pick and choose which one(s) to focus the group's time and energy on, giving them time to go over the rest in their quiet time or in dialogue with one another later. We recommend Question #1 as the best application to the study.

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If people don't have a copy of *Visioneering* yet, you may want to have Xerox copies of Chapter 5 or a scanned pdf you can email them prepared.

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