



**Ezra and Nehemiah:
Rebuilding the Temple, a Faith and the Wall**



Book of Nehemiah

Rebuilding Our Faith

Purpose: Provide historical background of the book of Nehemiah with dates and timelines linking Nehemiah's and Ezra's activities.

Nehemiah faced eight (8) problems when rebuilding Jerusalem.

1. Ridicule (2:9, 4:1-3)
2. Wrath (4:1, 4:6-9)
3. Discouragement (4:10)
4. Fear (4:11-23)
5. Internal Strife (5:1-5)
6. Laziness (4:10)
7. Satanic subtlety & compromise (6:1-8)
8. Lying prophets (6:10-14)

The Exile and Captivity

The Jews faced complete destruction of their possessions, traditions, the Temple, and their country. They had sinned and were judged by God as recorded in 1 & 2 Kings, 1 & 2 Chronicles, and most of the major and minor prophets. Significant dates follow:

- Jerusalem destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians in 586 B.C. (2 Kings 24)
- Babylon defeated by the Medes and Persians in 539 B.C.

Jews Allowed to Return to Israel

1. Zerubbabel led first wave of Jewish exiles in 536 B.C. (Ezra 1-6)
 - Approximately 50,000 Jews came with him.
 - 23 years to build Temple
 - Temple started in 535 B.C.
 - Temple completed and dedicated in 516 B.C.
 - Roughly an additional 57-year gap before Ezra arrives.
2. 81 years after Zerubbabel left Persia, Ezra leads second wave in 455 B.C (Ezra 7-10)
 - About 1500 men and families left Persia in 455 B.C.
 - About 6 months later, the group arrives in Jerusalem.
3. Ten years after Ezra departs Persia, Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem in 445 B.C.
 - In late 446 B.C., Nehemiah hears a report of conditions in Jerusalem.
 - In 445 B.C., after a period of prayer (about 4 months), Nehemiah speaks with the King.
 - Once Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem, the wall was completed in 52 days.

Why did it take so long to build the wall?

The question must go through our minds, “Why wasn’t the wall rebuilt earlier?” It only took 52 days. However, God’s plan is God’s plan. First the Temple, the center of Jewish religion, government, culture, and customs, was rebuilt. Then Ezra re-established the correct worship with teaching or reteaching the laws of God that had become a distant memory for the current crop of Jews.

There were obvious obstacles and opposition. Keep an eye out for the evil trio: Sanballat (Governor of Samaria), Tobiah (Ammonite leader), and Geshem (Arab chieftain). Noble men in Jerusalem were unwilling to help with the rebuild due to allegiances to various factions surrounding Jerusalem. Politics are at play and due to the situation, resources were hard to obtain.

Nehemiah kept his own counsel and his plans secret to avoid initial opposition planned by detractors. Nehemiah was more of a government official, whereas Ezra the scribe was more of a religious leader. Nehemiah obviously had organizational skills, but he also brought a God involved vision through prayer, the backing of the king’s treasury and bold leadership to the work of building the wall.

The book of Nehemiah helps us visualize the obstacles the Jews faced in rebuilding, but it also gives us courage to rebuild our shattered lives and to turn from sin to live as a Christian.

STUDY GUIDE FOR NEHEMIAH

Historical Time and Background for Nehemiah

The historical book of Nehemiah covers the third phase of the Post Exile period of Israel's history. The book is closely linked with Ezra and is considered the second book of Ezra in Jewish scripture. Those who had been living in Babylon and Persia during the 70 years of captivity that began around 605 B.C. were allowed to return to their homeland. This captivity was judgement on Israel's Southern Kingdom (tribes of Judah and Benjamin) for not giving the land its Sabbath's rest. Read the following scriptures for insight into the Captivity:

Leviticus 25:1-7 / 2 Chronicles 36:20-23 / Jeremiah 25:11-12 / Jeremiah 29:10-14 /

Jeremiah 30:3 / Daniel 9:1-3

The book /life of Nehemiah is somewhat concurrent with the ministries of Haggai and Zechariah and focuses on rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. Many of the same problems exist in the book of Nehemiah that occurred in the book of Ezra, and 100 years later in the book of Malachi (see Ezra 9 & 10 and Malachi). Watch for the attitude of the people!

Reading the last chapter of 2 Chronicles, Haggai and Malachi will provide historical context to Ezra and Nehemiah. Experience in understanding the Old Covenant and history of Israel will add to your understanding of the importance and process of rebuilding the Temple, rebuilding the people, and then rebuilding the wall.

The book of Ezra covers the years 537-458 B.C. and it covers the longest period in the post exile period of the Jews. Ezra overlaps the book of Esther (25 years) as Esther covers the period 483-471 B.C. Nehemiah covers the years 444-425 B.C (all dates are approximate). These three books cover the return of the Jews to Israel from captivity in Babylon and Persia. This period is also the time of the prophets Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Key People of the books Ezra / Esther / Nehemiah

The influential leaders were Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Zerubbabel led the first return, leading approximately 50,000 exiles about 536 B.C. Ezra was a scribe and teacher who led a group of about 1500 returning exiles in 455 B.C. Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem as the governor with an even smaller group in 445 B.C.

It is interesting that the Jews were taken into captivity in three waves. In 605 B.C., Nebuchadnezzar took the first captives, including the royalty, nobility and educated people. This group included Daniel and his three faithful companions. The second wave of captives were taken away in 597 B.C. and the third in 586 B.C. All these events occurred during the time of Nebuchadnezzar. The third wave coincided with the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem.

The Babylonians had been defeated and replaced by the Persians and the first return was under King Cyrus (539-530 B.C.) Cyrus was followed by his son, Cambyses (530-522 B.C.). Darius I led Persia (522-486 B.C.) and during this period the Temple was completed by Zerubbabel and the prophets Haggai and Zechariah wrote in this period. Xerxes I, also called Ahasuerus in the book of Esther, married Esther and gave the Jewish people the right to protect themselves. Remember the story of Haman and Mordecai and the influence of Esther in the book of Esther. Artaxerxes I (465-424 B.C.), the son of Xerxes I (and the stepson of Esther??) ruled during the time when Ezra and Nehemiah went back to Israel.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The northern ten tribes of Israel fell into Assyrian captivity in 721 B.C. and the southern tribes of Judah and Benjamin fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. The wickedness and idolatry brought the judgment of God upon them. After 70 years of captivity, thousands from the southern tribes were allowed to return to Judah.

In 536 B.C. the first group of approximately 50,000 returned to Judah under the leadership of Zerubbabel (Ezra 1-6). Over a period of years and with intense opposition from the Samaritans, the returnees eventually succeeded in rebuilding the Temple in 516 B.C.

In 455 B.C., about 57 years after the Temple was rebuilt, the second group of 1,500 returned with Ezra as their leader (Ezra 7-10). Arriving in Jerusalem, Ezra found the people in a state of spiritual and moral degradation. They had intermarried with pagan neighbors and were participating in pagan practices. Through Ezra's effort and faithful teaching, most of the people turned from their sins and once again followed the precepts of God.

About 445 B.C., Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, God used him to guide Judah into rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. Additionally, Nehemiah reordered the social and economic structure of the people. Nehemiah was principally a governor of Jerusalem, but his leadership was infused with the Godly principles of the Mosaic law. He accomplished the rebuilding of the walls in 52 days. How he accomplished this goal is the central theme of the book.

AUTHOR: The author is Nehemiah and much of the book is a first-person account of the circumstances surrounding his return to Jerusalem. Little is known of Nehemiah's early years or background except that his father's name was Hacaliah (1:1) and he had a brother, Hanani (1:2). It is possible that Nehemiah's great grandparents were part of the initial group of captives in 586 B.C. when Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. Nehemiah was likely born in Persia sometime around Zerubbabel's departure with the initial 50,000 returnees.

Nehemiah had risen to a position of prominence in his pagan environment. He served as King Artaxerxes' personal cupbearer (Neh. 1:11, 2:1) and was in and around the heartbeat of the kingdom. Achieving this important position as a foreigner gives us some insight to his character and trustworthiness. A mighty king would choose a man of discretion, honesty and

wisdom for this position. Nehemiah must have displayed a high degree of intellectual capability and emotional maturity to be selected.

DATE: The book covers about a 12-year period of Nehemiah's first term as governor (Chap 1-12). Nehemiah returns to the king's service for an unknown number of years and then returns for a second term as governor (Chap. 13). The book was probably written sometime after these events were completed, probably around 430 B.C.

PURPOSE: A great revival had taken place during the time of Ezra. However, the people had regressed into a depressed condition. The Temple had been rebuilt by Zerubbabel, beautified by the work of Ezra, but continued persecution by local adversaries prevents rebuilding the walls of the city, "they are in great affliction and reproach", (Neh. 1:3). Ezra is still present as a priest and teacher but now Nehemiah comes as a governor with official instructions to rebuild the city (Neh. 2:5). The first step is to rebuild the wall (Neh. 2:17). The book tells how, under Nehemiah, the walls are rebuilt and the people are revived.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Theme: Rebuilding the Walls (1:3, 2:13, 4:6, 6:15, 12:27)

Key Verse: Neh. 4:6 (Neh. 6:15-16)

Key Words: Wall=32 Times, Build=23 Times

I. Nehemiah Returns and Rebuilds the Wall: Chapters 1-6

CH 1. Parts of the book are in the first person, being quotations from Nehemiah's official reports. -Nehemiah learns of the afflictions of the people in Jerusalem.

NOTE: Nehemiah was a man of prayer, patriotism, action, courage, and perseverance. His first impulse was to pray (1:4, 2:4, 4:4, 4:9, 6:9, 6:14). He spent four months in prayer before making his request to the king (1:1, 2:1).

CH 2. Nehemiah is sent to Jerusalem, and he makes his plans.

CH 3. Building of the wall and the gates.

CH 4. The old-time enemies of the Jews bitterly opposed the rebuilding of the wall. They mobilized their armies and marched against Jerusalem. However, Nehemiah, with faith in God, skillfully armed and organized the men to discourage any attack.

CH 5. The work is hindered by internal selfishness and greed that Nehemiah addresses.

CH 6. The wall was finished in a remarkable 52 days.

II. Spiritual Revival (Chapters 7-10)

CH 7 & 8. After the wall was built, Nehemiah and Ezra gather the people to organize their national structure and return them to God. Chapter 7 resembles Ezra Chapter 2, providing a list of returnees. Then for seven days, everyday from morning to midday, Ezra instructs from the Book of Law. His teaching brought understanding of God's Law to the people. This public reading and teaching brought a great wave of repentance and spurred a great revival with a solemn covenant to keep the Law.

CH 9 & 10. In deep penitence and earnestness, the people made a covenant that they should walk in God's Law. (Neh. 9:38, 10:29). Note the seven provisions of the covenant: 1) Not to marry heathens, v 30; 2) Observe the Sabbath, v 31; 3) Observe the Sabbatical Year v 31; 4) Pay the Temple tax, V 32-33; 5) Supply wood for the Temple altar, v 34; 6) Give Priests and Levites their due support, v 35-38; Not to forsake God's house, v 39.

III. Reforming the Nation

Ch 11. Provisions made to bring 1/10th of the population into the city to live.

Ch 12. The dedication of the wall.

Ch 13. Correcting laxities about tithes, the Sabbath, and marriages. (Note: The book of Malachi appears to be written about the time of Nehemiah's second term as governor.)

IMPORTANT LESSONS FROM NEHEMIAH

Nehemiah stands as one of the greatest works on the subject of leadership. From Nehemiah we learn leadership principles that are applicable for the home, the church, the community, and the nation.

1. Nehemiah shows us how to plan...
2. Nehemiah teaches us how to organize for great works...
3. Nehemiah teaches how to integrate skills of the people into a unified effort...
4. Nehemiah show the importance and the methods for motivating people...

The dominating feature of the book is the importance of prayer and how it should factor into our daily activities. The book contains the longest prayer in the Bible, and we can learn much from it.

God's Picture of a Leader

Glance through the daily news and chances are good that you will find a story of leadership breakdown and/or leadership failure. There are leadership breakdowns in the home, in schools, in churches, in communities and within nations. The crying need for good leadership rings strong and loud in every aspect of our lives. Much of daily frustrations come as a direct result of faulty leadership-tensions at home or work, communications failures within communities, and power struggles in the state and nation.

What do we mean by the word leadership? There may be many answers but **influence and influence in God's ways** are extremely important. Reams of paper and stacks of books have been written on the subject of leadership. However, there is one book, written about 430 B.C., that reigns as a classic work on effective leadership. Yet, this book is virtually unknown to people due to their disregard for the Bible and Biblical studies.

Nehemiah was written by a man prominent in the community and in the politics in the ancient Middle East. He not only possessed an exception respect for God but also exemplified a level of personal conduct that caused people to trust and follow him. In his lifetime, he rose from obscurity to international recognition. The book of Nehemiah reveals the art of leadership at its finest.

Nehemiah's leadership challenges are the same type of challenges we face today. Whether we are thinking of "leadership" in terms of the home, the community, in our work, our church or the nation, we can learn great truths in relation to Godly leadership as we study the life of Nehemiah.

NEHEMIAH-The Making of a Leader

Nehemiah exemplifies the positive side of leadership. Many of the kings of Israel and Judah serve as examples of bad leadership. Leadership that resulted in the captivity of the Northern, as well as the Southern kingdom. Nehemiah shows us about planning, organizing, skill integration and motivation. He provides lessons in how to "deal with touchy people", how to balance faith and planning, how to handle discouragement, and what to do with unwarranted criticism. Chapter 1 gives us some personal traits of a leader to ponder.

1. A Leader has a Clear Recognition of Needs: Neh. 1:1-4

Nehemiah, the cup bearer of the king, is visited at the palace in Shushan by his brother and others from Jerusalem. They are bringing sad news about the sufferings of the people in Jerusalem with the hope that Nehemiah could help.

Nehemiah recognized the need because he listened intently to their plea. Recognizing the need seems a simple concept. However, many leaders don't listen to the problem with uncluttered minds. Many leaders spend time solving auxiliary issues but never figure out the

root cause of a problem. Fathers, elders, teachers, businesspeople, and politicians need focus to identify the true need. However, most leaders are too preoccupied with other things to get to the root problem.

2. A Leader Must Be Personally Concerned with the Needs: Neh. 1:4-5.

Nehemiah went beyond recognition of the problem; he had a personal stake and was concerned about the problem. He was a Jew and the problems his people were having concerned him greatly.

We learn from Nehemiah that one is not used by God to bring blessings until we open our eyes and see things as they are. Nehemiah was used by God to rebuild the wall but first he wept over the ruins and sufferings of his people.

3. A Leader Goes to God FIRST with the Problem: 1:4-11

In verse 5 Nehemiah says, "I beseech thee O Lord God of Heaven." He prayed. Our problems can never be solved correctly until they are solved with God. What is our first response to a need? Is it for someone to blame or is it for a solution? A godly leader knows that prayer is essential in finding the correct solution. It is obvious that Nehemiah is no stranger to prayer.

How Nehemiah Prayed

1. First, he praised God (v. 5). Effective prayer is reverent toward God. We live in a time where it is more common to hear God's name taken in vain than with reverence.

2. Second, he realized and acknowledged the greatness of God (v. 5). Nehemiah worked for the ruler of the greatest empire of the time, but he worshipped the awesome God who created Heaven and Earth. For Nehemiah and us, the greatness of God reduces the size of our problems.

3. Third, he humbly confesses sin (v. 6). Nehemiah recognizes that "sin" put Israel into captivity, and it desecrated the city of Jerusalem. Nehemiah confessed and prayed for the sins of the children of Israel, and he identifies himself with the people saying, "which we have sinned against thee". A good leader identifies with the people and is a "we" person, not an "I" person.

4. Fourth, his prayer was based on scripture (v. 7-9). He remembered that God had predicted a scattering if the people forsook Him (Lev. 26; Deut. 4:25-31). But God also promised that if the people returned to Him, he would forgive. Nehemiah comes before God to ask for help to aid the people in reclaiming their birthright.

Nehemiah's prayer is one of submission, but it is also a bold petition to God (V. 10-11).

Benefits of Prayer as Seen in Nehemiah

Nehemiah is a blend of prayer and action. All godly leaders must place a high priority on prayer.

1) Prayer gives a new perspective of his problem. Prayer helps clear one's vision. Situations can be "foggy", but prayer burns away the fog.

2) Prayer helps one establish priorities. Nehemiah was serving a powerful king, but what was the priority? The king or God?

3) Prayer helps attain a new sense of purpose. Although Nehemiah "had the world by the tail" in serving King Artaxerxes, he saw where he needed to be to help his people in their time of need.

4) Prayer helped reduce and overwhelming problem into bite size pieces. Maybe the answer to pray is to slow down and focus on one step at a time. Nehemiah knew that the critical first step was to gain the support of King Artaxerxes.

LESSONS FROM CHAPTER 1

1. Leadership must be earned and not demanded: Neh. 1:1-4
2. Nehemiah was a leader concerned about the welfare of his people: Neh. 1:1-3
3. A leader must have a compassionate heart: Neh. 1:5
4. Leaders believe in the power of prayer and are willing to pray: Neh.1:4-11

Chapter 1 Discussion Questions

1. Comparing Ezra 7:1-8 with Nehemiah 1:1-What is the timeframe of the book of Nehemiah?
2. How does Nehemiah address the Lord concerning the situation of the exiles in Jerusalem?
3. What are the specific things Nehemiah says regarding himself and the people of Israel?
4. What can be learned from this section that applies to our time?
5. How can this apply to your role in your nation?
6. How can this apply to the church and its role in our nation?
7. What is (or are) your present roles and place of influence in others' lives?
8. How could we be a greater influence for the Kingdom of God?