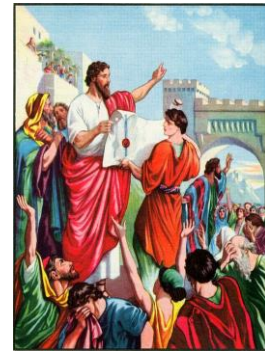


Nehemiah

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Nehemiah is the 16th book in the Old Testament. It follows on from Ezra and completes the set of books which describe the history of the Children of Israel in the Promised Land. (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 and 2 Samuel, 1 and 2 Kings, 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra and Nehemiah).

Originally Ezra and Nehemiah were one book, but are now separate books in Hebrew and Christian Bibles. Some Rabbis felt that Nehemiah wasn't worthy of being a book on its own because Nehemiah used the boastful expression *Remember me with favour, O my God, for all I have done for these people.* 5:19, and because he disparaged the work of his predecessors, including Daniel. See 5:15. Even today some modern Jewish scholars combine Ezra and Nehemiah in the Hebrew Bible as one book: Ezra-Nehemiah or Nechemiah.

Ezra describes the return of the Jews to Jerusalem after their captivity in Babylon, and the beginning of the rebuilding of the city and its Temple. Nehemiah, describes the rebuilding of the city walls and the revival of religion that took place afterwards.

Author Nehemiah. The book is mainly Nehemiah's personal description of events that happened as the walls of Jerusalem were being rebuilt. It shows Nehemiah as a strong, compassionate and patriotic man, who was totally dedicated to the Lord and His people. Nehemiah was obviously politically wise and an outstanding leader, but he was also ruthless in confronting those who promoted sin, or who were enemies of the rebuilding. As a result of Nehemiah's leadership the dispirited people responded positively and the walls were rebuilt quickly.

Date Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458 BC and supervised the rebuilding of the Temple. 13 years later, in 445 BC, Nehemiah arrived to supervise the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. The rebuilding took 52 days (6:15).

Type History and personal memoirs.

Background The books of 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles show how God gave His people many opportunities to repent and turn back to Him but they consistently turned away from Him, mocked His messengers, and rejected the words of His prophets. *Therefore the Lord their God rejected all of the people of Israel; He afflicted them and gave them into the hands of plunderers, until He thrust them from His presence.* 2 Kings 17:20.

- Samaria, the capital of the Northern kingdom of Israel fell in 722 BC. and the people of Israel were taken into captivity in Assyria. Little is known of what happened to them after this and they are now commonly known as the "10 lost tribes of Israel".
- The Assyrians were defeated by Babylon around 609 BC. when the Babylonian Empire was established.
- Jerusalem, the capital of the Southern kingdom of Judah fell to the Babylonians in 586 BC. The city was trashed, the Temple was destroyed and the people were taken into captivity in Babylon as servants.
- Meanwhile the land of Israel *enjoyed its Sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah* (Jeremiah 27:22, 25:9-12). God purged His land and His people of their evils and they were now ready to be the way by which God would bring blessing to all nations. See Ezekiel Chapter 36.

- In 539 BC. Babylon fell to the Persian king Cyrus the Great, and the Jewish people then became servants of the Persians. Cyrus issued an edict allowing the Jews to return to Jerusalem in 538 BC.
- Ezra was sent to Jerusalem in 458 BC and supervised the rebuilding of the Temple and the foundations for the city walls.
- Nehemiah was sent to Jerusalem in 445 BC and supervised the rebuilding of the walls.

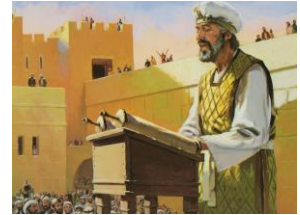
Overview

Chapters 1-7 describe how Nehemiah was sent from Babylon to be the Governor of Jerusalem and how the walls of Jerusalem were rebuilt, despite much opposition.

Chapters 8-10 describe how Ezra read out the Law of the Lord and how the people responded by confessing their sin and agreeing to follow the Law.

Chapters 11 and 12 list the exiles who returned to Jerusalem.

Chapters 12 and 13 describe the dedication of the walls, and the reforms put in place by Nehemiah during his second term as Governor.



Significance

God's chosen people, the Jews, had completed their time in exile and a remnant had returned from Babylon and were now back in their homeland. Jerusalem was safe; the Temple had been rebuilt; and the people had re-dedicated themselves to following the Lord. The Law was back in place and all of the rituals of the Jewish religion had been re-activated.

Judah still wasn't a recognized as a nation and had no political status but it was on the verge of rising as a new and glorious expression of God's favour and blessing. Nehemiah insisted that the Jewish people maintain their racial and the religious purity by separation from paganism, prohibition of marriage with non-Jews and careful observance of the Law

The foundations for Judaism and for the nation of Israel were laid!

Key verses

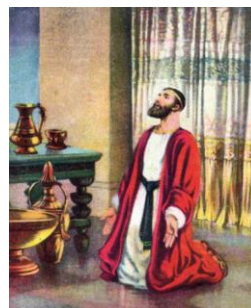
So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard about this, all the surrounding nations were afraid and lost their self-confidence, because they realized that this work had been done with the help of our God. 6:15,16.

Outline

Chapter 1. Nehemiah's prayer

When Nehemiah was in Susa (the capital of Elam in Persia) some of his fellow Jews returned from Jerusalem and he questioned them about *the Jewish remnant that survived the exile, and also about Jerusalem*. He was told that Jerusalem was still *broken down* and its gates *burned with fire*. Nehemiah was distressed when he heard this and *sat down and wept*. He then mourned and fasted and prayed for three days before praying to the Lord on behalf of his people.

In his prayer Nehemiah confessed that the Israelites had acted *very wickedly* and had not obeyed God's *commands, decrees and laws*. He asked that God would remember His word to Moses that if the people would return to God and obey His commands He would gather them from their place of exile and bring them to the place He had chosen as a dwelling for His Name. (Deuteronomy 30:1-10). He reminded God that the Israelites were His people and asked that God would give him success as he sought favour from the King of Persia.



Nehemiah's prayer

Nehemiah's prayer stands as a model for all effective prayer because it had the following qualities:

- It was fervent and from the heart.
- It acknowledged God's power and sovereignty.
- It petitioned God clearly and specifically.
- It acknowledged and confessed sin.
- It reminded God of His promises.
- It was not self-centred,
- It asked of God but didn't tell God what to do.
- It left the answer to God.

Nehemiah can teach us a lot about prayer!

Chapter 2. Nehemiah sent to Jerusalem.

Nehemiah was the cupbearer for the King of Persia, and as such had no right to address the king. If he spoke to the king he would normally expect to lose his life. One day Nehemiah was serving the king and his *face looked sad* due to the situation in Jerusalem. When the king asked why he was sad Nehemiah was *very much afraid* but boldly explained it was because the city where his fathers came from was *in ruins* and its *gates burned with fire*.

When the king asked what Nehemiah wanted to happen he quickly prayed an “arrow prayer” asking for God’s help. Nehemiah asked the king to allow him to return to Jerusalem so he could *rebuild it*. The Lord answered Nehemiah’s prayer! The king agreed that he could go so Nehemiah even more boldly asked that the king provide a letter of ‘safe conduct’ and support for the materials to be used in the rebuild. *Because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests*. The king even sent army officers and cavalry to protect Nehemiah as he travelled! Nothing is too hard for the Lord!

There was immediate opposition. *When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this they were very much disturbed that somebody had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites*.

When Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem he inspected the broken down walls and gates and sought help from the Jewish leaders: *Come let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be a disgrace*. The people agreed and began the *good work*. Sanballat and Tobiah, however, *mocked and ridiculed* the rebuilding work but Nehemiah answered them by saying *“The God of heaven will give us success. We, His servants will start the rebuilding”*.



Chapter 3. Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

First of all the gates of the city were repaired and rebuilt. The Sheep Gate, the Fish Gate, the Jeshanah Gate, the Valley gate, the Dung gate, the Fountain gate, the Water Gate and the Horse Gate.

Chapter 4. Opposition to rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

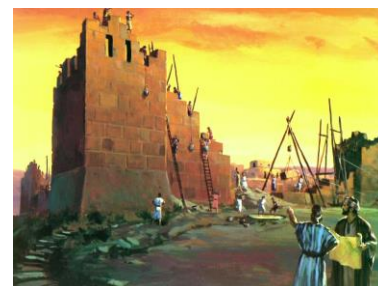
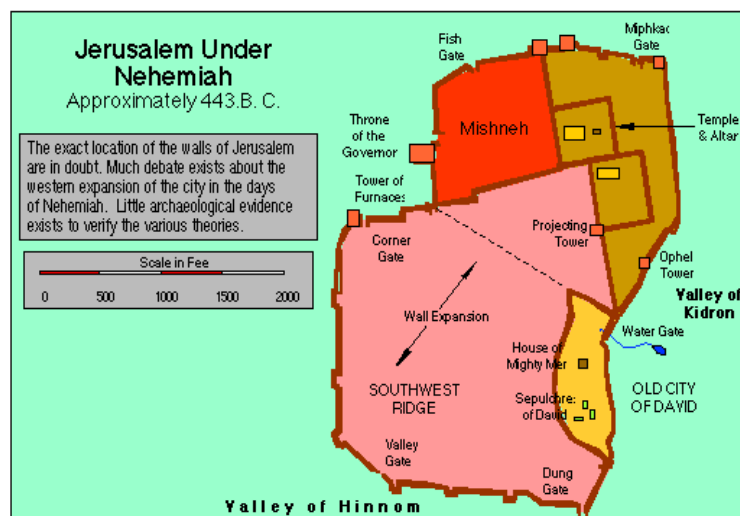
Sanballat and Tobiah were angry when they heard the rebuilding had begun and ridiculed the Jews, but Nehemiah turned to the Lord and the wall was rebuilt to half its height for *the people worked with all their heart*.

Sanballat and Tobiah then *plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it*. Once again Nehemiah and the people responded by praying to the Lord, but they also *posted a guard day and night* to meet the threat.

The people got a little discouraged with so much rubble to move, and the ever-present threat from enemies. Nehemiah reminded them not to be afraid saying *Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes*. From then on half of the people worked while the other half were on guard, and all were equipped with weapons. They set up a warning system so if a trumpet blew all were to come together and *Our God will fight for us*.

Chapter 5. Nehemiah helps the poor in Jerusalem.

The people soon ran out of food and had no money to pay their taxes and mortgages. This led to a *great outcry* by the poor in Jerusalem against their Jewish brothers. When Nehemiah heard about this he was very angry with the officials who had allowed the situation to take place. They had no right to exact usury from their own countrymen! What they were doing was *not right* and had to stop. Nehemiah made them take an oath to give



back what they had taken from their own countrymen or lose their own houses and land. *The whole assembly said "Amen," and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.*

At this point Nehemiah was appointed as Governor in the land of Judah and he determined not to lord it over the people or take extra food as previous governors had done *out of reverence for God*. He then asked God to remember him with favour for all he had done for the people.

Chapter 6. Completion of the wall.

Sanballat and Tobiah upped their opposition when they heard that the wall was nearly finished. Four times they asked for a meeting with Nehemiah and were *scheming to harm him*. Nehemiah refused to meet them saying he was too busy carrying out the *great project*. The enemies then sent a letter accusing Nehemiah of plotting to revolt so he could set himself up as king. Nehemiah replied to the letter saying the enemies had made it all up and were just trying to frighten them. Again he prayed to the Lord for strength.



Next Sanballat and Tobiah hired men to kill Nehemiah but he was warned about this by Shemaiah and told to hide in the temple. Nehemiah refused to run away when he realized Shemaiah had been hired by the enemies to intimidate him.

The wall was finally completed *in fifty two days*. When the enemies heard that it had been completed *they lost their self-confidence*, because they realized that *this work had been done with the help of our God*.

Tobiah continued to send intimidatory letters and Nehemiah appointed Hananiah as commander of the citadel, *because he was a man of integrity*. He also took wise precautions to protect the city like only opening the gates in the daytime when guards were on duty.

Opposition to God's work

There has always been opposition to God's work (and there always will be) because the ultimate enemy, Satan, will never stop trying to undermine and thwart God's purposes. Nehemiah describes quite a few of the techniques that enemies used to oppose God's work, and ways that the opposition was overcome.

Sanballat, Tobiah and their supporters opposed God's work in the following ways:

1. Anger. 4:1,7
2. Ridicule, mockery and sarcasm. 4:2,3
3. Threats, intimidation, plotting, stirring up trouble. 4:7-12
4. Lying, insinuation, discouragement. 4:10
5. Negativism from those around but not involved 4:12
6. Threat of physical harm. 6:2
7. Inaccurate letters and reports to those in authority. 6:4
8. Use of an "official" to make a threat. 6:5-7
9. Use of hired intimidators and murderers. 6:10-13
10. Ongoing intimidation and pressure. 6:19

Sound familiar?

God's work today is opposed by enemies who use exactly the same techniques as the ones Nehemiah experienced.

The approaches he used to overcome this opposition are just as effective today as they were for in Nehemiah's time.

Nehemiah used the following approaches to counter this opposition:

1. Consistent prayer and fasting. 1:4, 4:9
2. Prayer for immediate help in particular situations. 2:5, 4:4,5, 6:9
3. Trusting the Lord in every situation, staying focused and refusing to quit. 2:20, 4:14,15, 6:9
4. Gathering like-minded supporters. 2:17
5. Giving regular encouraging reminders of God's faithfulness. 4:14,
6. Listening carefully to concerns of his people. 5:7
7. Devoting himself to the task, doing what is right, and thus setting a good example. 5:15, 16
8. Recognising and countering the schemes of enemies. 6:2-13
9. Not being intimidated. 6:14
10. Recognising and acknowledging God's hand was always at work in the "big picture". 4:20, 6:17

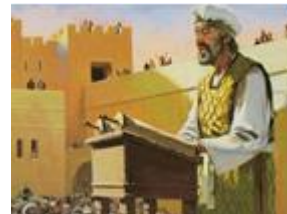
Chapter 7. List of those who returned to Jerusalem.

Inside the walls the city was *large and spacious*, but there were few people in it as the houses had not yet been rebuilt. Nehemiah assembled the people and registered everyone by their families. The list includes the men of

Israel, the priests, the Levites, the singers, the gatekeepers, the temple servants, the descendants of Solomon's servants, and people from surrounding towns. The whole company numbered 42,360 plus servants, singers and their animals. Many of the people also gave gold and silver for the treasury.

Chapter 8-10. Revival after Ezra reads the Law.

Jerusalem was finally secure so the people could then settle in their towns. In the seventh month the whole community came together again in Jerusalem and Ezra read to them from the Book of the Law of Moses. *He read it aloud from daybreak till noon.* The people *listened attentively* and had it explained to them in a way that made it clear by *giving the meaning* so that the people could *understand what was being read*. They responded by praising the Lord, bowing down and worshipping Him, and weeping before Him. Nehemiah recognized that this was a *sacred day*, and that the *joy of the Lord* was their strength.



When the Law was read to them the people discovered that they should *live in booths* during the Feast of Tabernacles and that they should *proclaim this word and spread it throughout their towns and in Jerusalem*. They obeyed the Lord and for the first time in many years the Feast of Tabernacles was celebrated properly. The people *confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers*, and then the Levites (priests) led them in a wonderful prayer of praise to the Lord *who is from everlasting to everlasting*.

In this prayer:

- they praised God as the Creator and giver of all life. 9:5,6
- they acknowledged God's faithfulness in keeping His promises. 9:7,8
- they reviewed God's past acts of mercy towards them. 6:9-15
- they acknowledged their disobedience and rebellion. 9:16,17
- they recognized God's grace, compassion and love in not deserting them. 9:17-19
- they acknowledged God's blessing upon them. 9:20-25
- they confessed their sinfulness and recognized that when they repented God heard and delivered them, but when they sinned they suffered the consequences. 9:26-30
- they realized that it was only because of God's mercy that they even existed. 9:30
- they asked God to help them in their current situation, recognizing that God had been *just* and had *acted faithfully*, and that their current distress was due to their own sinfulness. 9:32-37.

This kind of prayer is typical of all revivals. When God's people acknowledge His authority in their lives; genuinely confess their sins, and ask God to move in their nation, God hears and answers. See 2 Chronicles 7:14.

All of the people agreed with this prayer and *bound themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of the Lord and to carefully obey all of the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our God*.

They promised that they:

- would not intermarry with the people around them
- keep the Sabbath
- not neglect the house of God and would provide for its offerings, festivals, and storehouses.

This is one of the greatest revivals recorded in the Bible. It shows that no matter how far people or nations fall away from God, He will answer if they repent and can then move again in their lives with great power.

Chapter 11:1 - 12:26. The residents of Jerusalem.

The leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem but there was still plenty of room for others to live in the city. *The rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city*, while the rest of the people stayed in their towns. The names of those who lived in Jerusalem, and those who lived in their towns are listed.

Chapter 12:26-47. Dedication of the wall.

The rebuilt wall of Jerusalem was dedicated with much celebration. The Levites all came back to Jerusalem for the dedication and there were choirs, musicians, and much rejoicing because *God had given them great joy*. *The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away*. People were then appointed to be in charge of the storerooms where contributions for the temple (tithes and offerings of grain, new wine and oil) were stored and for the various temple functions.

Chapter 13. Nehemiah's reforms.

The reading of the Law highlighted *that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever be admitted into the assembly of God and all who were of foreign descent were excluded from Israel.*

At this point Nehemiah traveled back to Susa to give an account to King Artaxerxes of his stewardship. When he returned to Jerusalem he learned that Eliashib had provided a room in the temple for the enemy Tobiah, and he was *greatly displeased*. He also learned that the contributions for the temple had not been used properly and put trustworthy men in charge of this function. Next he learned that the Sabbath was being violated and Jews were marrying non-Jews, even to the point that their offspring could not speak Hebrew. It didn't take long for the Israelites to go back on their promises to the Lord!



Nehemiah made them take an oath that they would not inter-marry with foreigners and they had to do this *in God's name*.

The book of Nehemiah ends rather abruptly with a summary of Nehemiah's achievements: *I purified the priests and the Levites of everything foreign, and assigned them duties, each to his own task. I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times, and for the firstfruits.* He asks that God would remember him *with favour* for what he has done.

The book of Nehemiah completes the set of books which describe the history of the Children of Israel in the Promised Land. There is no further record in the Bible of what happened after Nehemiah, during what is called the inter-testamental period: the period between the Old and New Testaments.

Discussion questions

Why were the Israelites sent into captivity in Babylon? What lasting benefits (if any) came from their time in captivity?

When the people returned they first rebuilt the altar, then the temple and then the city walls. What does this tell you about their priorities? What are our priorities when rebuilding is needed after a disaster?

How was God's work opposed in Nehemiah's time? How is it opposed today? How did Nehemiah deal with and overcome this opposition? How do we deal with and overcome the opposition we face today?

Why was inter-marriage with foreign nations such a serious sin? What were the consequences of this sin? How did God require that the sin was dealt with? Was it dealt with effectively? Why, or why not?

There are two great prayers in the book of Nehemiah: in 1:4-11 and 9:5-37. Analyse these prayers to identify what they contained, and why they were effective. What can you learn from these prayers, that you can apply to your own prayer life?

Why was Nehemiah such a great leader? What can church, community and national leaders learn from his leadership approach?

What have you learned from your study of the Book of Nehemiah? How will you apply this in your life?