



NEHEMIAH

BUILDING A WALL, BUILDING A PEOPLE



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Background to the Book of Nehemiah

Author

In ancient times, Ezra and Nehemiah were viewed as one book, with Nehemiah serving as the sequel to Ezra. Though it is hard to say with certainty, Jewish tradition names Nehemiah himself as the primary author of this historical account. The book is written as Nehemiah's memoirs, containing many first-person perspectives as he recounts the work of God through his life and leadership. Nothing is known about Nehemiah's background, other than that he was a Jewish refugee, born after the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians in 586 BC. Our introduction to Nehemiah is as an adult, serving in the Persian royal court as the personal cupbearer to King Artaxerxes.

Date & Historical Context

The events recorded specifically in Nehemiah take place between the years 445 BC and 423 BC. In order to understand the beauty of the events that unfold in the book, you must understand a few key historical events that took place leading up to the story of Nehemiah:

The Fall of Jerusalem in 586 BC

In 586 BC, King Nebuchadnezzar, the King of Babylon, attacked Jerusalem, completely destroying the temple that Solomon has constructed, burning the walls and gates of the city, and taking God's people into captivity. For God's people, the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple was one of the most tragic and devastating events to have taken place in Jewish history. Jerusalem was more than just a city; it was a place of worship, justice, and peace for the good of man and the glory of God. The temple was the dwelling place of God Himself with His people. It was the place where sacrifices took place and sins were passed over. The temple served as a continual sign of God's blessing and favour on His people. But when Jerusalem fell, God's people were cast out of the city (the equivalent of being cast out of God's presence) and taken into captivity. Sadly, the city that was supposed to be a light to the nations became a reproach, as it slowly began to decay.

The Fall of Babylon in 539 BC

In 539 BC, King Cyrus of Persia overthrew the Babylonian empire, gaining control over both the territory of the former kingdom of Judah and the Jewish people who had been exiled by Babylon. By the providence of God, Cyrus was an unusually compassionate king. In the first year of his reign, he issued a decree that the Jews were free to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple.

The Return of the First Wave of Exiles in 538-535 BC

As a result of the decree of King Cyrus, a group of Jewish exiles returned home to Jerusalem between the years 538-535 BC under the leadership of a man named Zerubbabel and a priest named Jeshua. At this time, the project to rebuild the temple, where it had once stood, officially began, but it wasn't fully completed until 516 BC (see Ezra 1-6).

The Arrival of Ezra in 458 BC

It wasn't just the physical temple in Jerusalem that needed to be rebuilt; it was also the spiritual needs of the people of God that needed revival and reformation. The city once filled with worshippers of God devoted to His law was now filled with people who were neglecting both God and His law altogether. Being aware of this spiritual need, Ezra travels to Jerusalem in order to call the community of God's people back to loyalty and obedience to the law of God (Ezra 7-10).

The Arrival of Nehemiah in 445 BC

Although the temple was rebuilt in 516 BC, the city of Jerusalem itself and the walls surrounding it remained in disarray until the arrival of Nehemiah. After 141 years of failed efforts from others, Nehemiah rebuilt the walls and renewed the city of Jerusalem in a short fifty-two days. During his time in Jerusalem, which lasted more than a dozen years and involved at least two separate trips to Jerusalem from Persia, Nehemiah brought about lasting physical and spiritual restoration to both the people of God and the city.

Structure

The book of Nehemiah is divided into two major sections: chapters 1-6 and chapters 7-13. The differences between these two sections are important to note.

Chapters 1-6 — Focus primarily on Nehemiah's leadership to rebuild, renew, and restore the physically broken down aspects of the city of Jerusalem

Chapters 7-13 — Focus primarily on Nehemiah's leadership to rebuild, renew, and restore the spiritually broken down aspects of the city

Themes

Nehemiah, a sequel to Ezra, is a fascinating account of the Lord's protection of His people, the rebuilding of the wall around the city of Jerusalem, and the rededication of the exiles to the God who saved them. In the book we will become well acquainted with Nehemiah, a strong, courageous leader, and a man committed whole-heartedly to the Lord.

The book of Nehemiah is more than just the technical history of Israel. It is the story of a sovereign God who delights in using human means to accomplish His plans and purposes. Babylonian and Persian kings, Jewish priests and prophets, nobles and peasants, craftsmen and cupbearers are all caught up in the divine drama of redemption that began the day Adam and Eve brought ruin to humanity. Nehemiah was given a taste of Jesus's burden for Jerusalem. He was invited to follow and risk. He was called to add his few lines to God's story of rebuilding.

This is where we are invited to step into the story of Nehemiah. We are invited, as Nehemiah was, to find our place in God's great plan to rebuild, renew, and restore all things through His Son Jesus. Rich and poor, pastor or single-mum, all of the people of God are invited to participate in the Great Scheme of redemption. As we dig into this book, my first hope and prayer is that you would see the greater Nehemiah who died and rose to rebuild, renew, and restore all things. My second hope is that you would taste Jesus' love and burden for you, for His church, and for our community; He cares about the broken walls and broken lives. My third hope is that you would play your role. May you find your place in Jesus' work to rebuild, renew, and restore!

Connect

The book of Nehemiah essentially begins with a report of bad news. When you receive bad news about someone or something you care deeply about, how do you generally respond? Do you turn inward, or do you turn toward the Lord? Why do you think you respond this way?

Study

We can't jump into a study of Nehemiah without reminding ourselves of who these people are whom Nehemiah leads to rebuild. Read the following passages and discuss what you learn about the history and identity of these people:

- Genesis 12:1-7; Exodus 19:3-6; 2 Samuel 7:12-16; 1 Kings 9:1-9
- What do you think was the significance of the wall of Jerusalem being broken down?
- Verse 4 tells us that Nehemiah 'wept and mourned' at the news he heard. Why do you think he was so deeply concerned about the situation in Jerusalem?

Think

- Nehemiah's name literally translates as 'Yahweh has comforted'. What does his name say to you about God's care for his people? His care for you?

Apply

- What are some of the issues today that break your heart? Where do you see 'broken down walls' in our own community? In your own life? How do you think we ought to respond to these concerns?
- Upon hearing this news, Nehemiah turns to the Lord through fasting and prayer. We'll look in more detail at the prayer next week, but what does this reveal to you about Nehemiah's character? What can we learn from Nehemiah about our own prayer life?

Pray

- This week, take time to pray earnestly over the broken down walls we have identified in our community and in our lives. Ask the Lord to forgive your disobedience, and ask Him to give you a heart that cries out for the restoration of all things.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Connect

After receiving a sobering report about the condition of Jerusalem and its people, Nehemiah turns to fasting and prayer. Can you think of one or two moments in your life that have pressed you into prayer more deeply than 'normal'?

Study

- What words or phrases from Nehemiah's prayer stand out or challenge you? Why?
- Nehemiah asks God to remember His promises to His people. Since God does not need to be reminded of His promises, why do you think Nehemiah reminds Him?
- What does Nehemiah's prayer seem to indicate about his understanding of the character and promises of God?

Think

- How do you think a growing understanding of God's character and promises might help your prayer life?

Apply

- As part of his prayer to God, Nehemiah confesses sin. Why do you think this is important? How often is confession of sin a part of your time of prayer?
- Verse 5 mentions the 'steadfast love of the Lord', which will be a recurring theme in the book of Nehemiah, despite the failures of God's people. How have you witnessed the steadfast love of the Lord in your own life?
- How vital a force do you think prayer was for him: Daily routine? Crisis only? Intimate? Energizing?

Pray

- Spend time thanking the Father for His faithfulness to His promises, and for His steadfast Love. Ask Him for favour with those who do not believe. Plead as Nehemiah pled, as the Church pleads through the ages, "Lord, hear our prayer."

REFLECT

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RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Connect

In this passage, Nehemiah has the opportunity to enlist the help of the King in order to return to Jerusalem and rebuild its walls. As you think about your own life, has there ever been a time when you saw a need and felt compelled to action? What was it you were compelled to do?

Study

- What do you notice in this passage about the interplay between God's Sovereign hand and Nehemiah's human action?
- The report about Jerusalem came to Nehemiah during Chislev (Nov.-Dec.) but his conversation with the King doesn't happen until Nisan (Mar.-Apr.) What do you think Nehemiah has been doing in these four or so months?
- Do Nehemiah's requests of the king seem deliberate or spontaneous? How is his readiness to speak an example to us?

Think

- The King notices Nehemiah's emotional state which leads to the discussion and Nehemiah's release to go to Jerusalem. Do you tend to wear your heart on your sleeve, or keep it under lock and key? Why is that?

Apply

- Nehemiah secures the trust and respect of a pagan King without compromising his commitment to God. How can we do the same today with those in authority over us?
- Nehemiah uses his position for the benefit of his people, even at great personal risk. What wrong thinking causes us to protect ourselves rather than risk like Nehemiah?
- Is there anything God is stirring in you that you might hesitate to commit to because of difficulty or danger? If so, what is it? Where has He given you a vision to build His Kingdom right now?

Pray

- As you pray this week, thank the Father for granting favour to His people. Thank Him for specific times He has shown you favour. Ask the Lord to strengthen the hands of His servants. Pray specifically for your church leaders, your Community Group leaders and members.

REFLECT
What is God saying to me?

RESPOND
What am I going to do about it?

Connect

In this week's passage, Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem and finally gets a first-hand look at the condition of the city, and it is as bad as he was told. Have you ever witnessed a natural disaster, house fire, car accident or the like? What was it like to walk through the wreckage?

Study

- What do you notice in this text about Nehemiah's actions and words? His heart?
- Are there any obstacles to his success that still loom on the horizon?
- What three points does Nehemiah make publicly to rally the people to rebuild? Which one do you find most convincing?
- How does Nehemiah respond to the charges his opponents bring against him?

Think

- Nehemiah seems confident God is with him in this effort to rebuild. How can you know if God is with you in some endeavour?

Apply

- How is Nehemiah's decision to tour the city at night wise? When is it wise to do things on your own and when is it wise to seek the help of others?
- Even after seeing the damage first-hand, Nehemiah seems to choose hope over despair, issuing a call to rebuild. What does the people's response teach about how contagious a leader's attitude can be?
- How does Nehemiah's example challenge you to think and act as a member of your gospel-centred community?

Pray

- Use this time of prayer to thank God for his promises to always be with His people. Ask Him to strengthen our resolve in the works He has called us to, and help us by His Spirit to choose hope, even in difficult situations.

REFLECT

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RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Connect

After a compelling challenge to his fellow Israelites, the work on the wall around Jerusalem begins. But it is not without opposition. As you think about endeavours you have undertaken, how have you dealt with criticism or opposition from others?

Study

- Rather than record names and details about the builders of the wall, Nehemiah could have simply written, “And many people from all walks of life rose up to rebuild the wall.” Why do you think the Spirit prompted him to include these details? What can we learn about God from this careful listing?
- Nehemiah’s name is absent from this list. What do you think Nehemiah was doing while all the others were ‘doing the work’?
- Why do you think Sanballat was so opposed to Nehemiah’s efforts?
- To whom does Nehemiah turn during this time of opposition? Does anything about Nehemiah’s prayer surprise you? Why?

Think

- Which gives you more difficulty: External criticism, or internal fears? Why?

Apply

- Nehemiah employs workers with all kinds of skills and abilities. Have you ever been tempted to avoid a necessary but unpleasant task with the excuse, “That’s not really my area of gifting”? Is such an excuse valid? Why or why not?
- What is often your first response to fear or loss of control? What does your response say about where you place your confidence?
- Where are you tempted to fear man over God? What situation or relationship tempts you to trust in your own strength, control or provision more than God’s?
- Read Romans 8:14-17 aloud. How does our adoption as sons and daughters of God change both our doubts about His attitude toward us and our ability to face opposition?

Pray

- Take time this week to thank the Father that He knows you by name. Thank Him for uniquely gifting you and placing you to build in the place that he set you. Ask the Lord to give you the patience, compassion and humility to work well with your fellow builders of God’s kingdom, and to love them as you love yourself.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Connect

This chapter opens with disunity among the people of God. Can you think of a time when there was division between you and friends, family or others? What happened? How was it resolved?

Study

- What is the great outcry all about? What needs are going unmet? What do you think brought on the economic crisis?
- How does Nehemiah respond to the cries of his brothers and sisters?
- Why do you think he gets so angry at the nobles and officials?
- In what ways you do react like, or unlike Nehemiah?

Think

- Nehemiah shows that loving God and others may require personal sacrifice. What rights and privileges are we willing to give up so that God's work may prosper? When have your beliefs really cost you something?

Apply

- The disunity of chapter 5 is caused by injustice. What lesser reasons can cause disunity among believers today? How can we guard ourselves against falling into disunity over unimportant or secondary matters?
- Why does Nehemiah tell the Hebrew nobles and officials to walk in the fear of the Lord? How would this fear have changed their actions? How should it change ours?
- The Hebrews are the people of God, but they fail to protect their unity because of sin. Is there anything that keeps you from being unified with your Christian brothers and sisters in this room?
- Nehemiah lets the fear of the Lord guide his decision-making, resulting in justice and generosity. How have you seen justice and generosity operating within the body of believers? How could you join in those efforts? What specific steps could you take to demonstrate fairness and generosity in your key relationships with family and friends?

Pray

- Pray for the Lord to grant greater unity to His people and specifically for unity within your group/home. Ask the Lord to deliver us from pride, arrogance and greed that might cause us to oppress others. Ask Him to stir our hearts to pursue justice and generosity. Thank the Lord that He is faithful, just, generous and good.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Connect

As the wall around Jerusalem nears completion, Nehemiah's enemies make one last desperate attempt to stop the work through rumours and threats. Have you had to deal with people spreading false rumours about you? What happened? How did you work through it?

Study

- What are your thoughts on the opening verses of chapter 6? What practical wisdom can we take from Nehemiah's response to his enemies?
- What do you think makes Nehemiah continue to refuse to meet with those who keep requesting a meeting? What makes the proposal to meet attractive?
- What, in your opinion, was the intent of the 'unsealed' letter? What impact was it intended to have? How scared do you think Nehemiah was, really?

Think

- Nehemiah stays focused on the "better" thing instead of being distracted by a potentially "good" thing. When have you been tempted to settle for second best or good enough?

Apply

- Nehemiah discerns that Sanballat and Shemaiah are dealing falsely with him. How does a Christian discern between truth and error? The following verses may help you: Romans 12:2, James 1:5 and John 10:27
- Nehemiah's rebuilding of the wall represents an enormous accomplishment. When the Lord grants you great favour and success, how do you respond in your thoughts? Words? Actions? What temptation to sin are you particularly prone to?
- Nehemiah repeatedly turns to prayer when his enemies assert themselves. What difficulty are you currently facing that could benefit from greater prayerfulness? In light of that difficulty, what activity have you been practicing in place of prayer?
- Read Psalm 109:1-4 aloud. This is a messianic Psalm, meaning Jesus applied this to Himself. In the presence of evil He literally says, "I become prayer". This week when confronted with evil or with deceptive people, what might it look like to "become prayer"? How might this change you to become more like Jesus in the presence of evil?

Pray

- Spend time this week thanking the Lord for His faithfulness to His name and therefore to those called by His name. Confess your fears and failures and ask Him to forgive your sins. Ask the Lord to guide you in wisdom to know when to sacrifice what is good for what is even better.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

What am I going to do about it?

Connect

The wall around Jerusalem is now completed and it is time to repopulate the city. Chapter 7 gives us a lengthy list of the exiled families who returned to inhabit Jerusalem. What do you know about your family name and history? What would you like to discover about your family tree?

Study

- Chapter 7 is mostly made up of a detailed list of names and numbers. Why do you think it was important for Nehemiah to take the time and effort to reproduce the list of names here?
- What details from verses 6-73 stand out to you? Why?
- This genealogical record is nearly identical to the record in Ezra 2. Compare the two lists and discuss your observations about the functions of genealogies like this.

Think

- In order for the people of God to thrive in Jerusalem the city's wall, a symbol of defence and protection, first had to be rebuilt. As you think about your own life, are there any 'broken-down walls' that are keeping you from thriving? What are they?

Apply

- What do the detailed records kept by Nehemiah and others throughout the Scripture seem to indicate about the importance of remembering? How do you personally go about recording or remembering ways in which the Lord has met you or provided for you?
- Who have been the meaningful people in your spiritual genealogy? What has been passed on to you from your spiritual predecessors?
- What one quality are you now developing as one of God's people that you hope to pass on to others? How do you intend to do this?

Pray

- Spend time together this week thanking the Lord for all the ways he has shown his faithfulness to you, including the spiritual genealogy that he has given you. Ask for the Spirit's help in remembering his goodness, and in repairing the broken-down walls that are keeping you from thriving spiritually or otherwise.

REFLECT

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Connect

Chapters 8-9 record an incredible revival among God's people in Jerusalem, beginning with conviction brought by the Holy Spirit through the proclamation of God's Word. When have you experienced a time of spiritual renewal in your own life? What role did God's Word have?

Study

- Why do you think the people assemble in the public square instead of the temple?
- What happens when the people truly understand God's Word? (8:9-11) Why do they respond in this way?
- Look up 2 Corinthians 7:10-11. Based on this passage, what evidence do you find in Nehemiah 8-9 that genuine repentance is occurring?
- According to Leviticus 23:23-43, what was the intention of the Feast of Booths? Knowing what has just taken place in Jerusalem, how do you think living in a temporary 'booth' would remind people of God's faithfulness?

Think

- In Nehemiah 8:7-8 we see the Word of God not just being read but also being taught. How has the reading of God's Word spurred you on in your spiritual renewal? What about the preaching and teaching of God's Word?

Apply

- After being convicted by the Word of God, Ezra instructs the people to celebrate His goodness to them. Is it easier for you to mourn, or to celebrate? Why is that? Why are both important?
- As part of the Ceremonial Law, the Feast of Booths is no longer observed. These were shadows pointing to a greater reality: Jesus. How can we stay mindful of the temporary nature of this life? What steps can we take to remind ourselves that God is preparing a permanent home for us beyond this temporary life?
- Think back through your own history with God. What key times can you point to as evidence of His goodness? In light of His past faithfulness, what present difficulty can you entrust to Him?

Pray

- As you pray together this week, ask God to grant you, your group, a greater passion for and confidence in the Scriptures. Ask Him to show you what renewed faithfulness looks like. Thank God that He is faithful and just, through Christ, to forgive all unrighteousness that we bring before Him.

REFLECT
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Connect

On the heels of a great revival in Jerusalem, the people renew their commitment to the Lord and His commands. As you think through times of rebellion or failure in your life, what motivated you to recommit? How long did it last? Why?

Study

- Though many people are listed in the opening verses of chapter 10, to what groups do these people belong? What do you think this indicates about the people in differing segments of Jewish society?
- What is significant about the leaders making an oath to be obedient? Why do you think godly leadership is important?
- In addition to the leaders, who else takes the oath to obey God's commands (10:28-29)? Why do you think both corporate and individual repentance and obedience are necessary and good?
- What do the people commit to do with regard to: Marriage (10:30)? How they spend their time (10:31)? How they spend their money (10:32-39)?

Think

- Israel renews its commitment to observing Sabbath rest (10:31). What activities are most likely to interfere with your obedience to observing regular periods of rest? What wrong thinking does an inability to cease from our labours reveal?

Apply

- How are repentance and obedience linked to obedience in these chapters? How is this link evident in your own life?
- Read John 14:21-24. How is obedience linked to loving Jesus in this passage? Is it possible to love Jesus and not obey Him?
- The Israelites turn repentance into action by committing to change the way they handle relationships, time and money. Which of these areas in your life needs to be impacted by repentance and change? How can we help each other make these changes?

Pray

This week, take time to confess and repent of places in your life where you have failed to follow God's commands. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you delight in obeying God and to help you realize that God's commands lead to greater joy. Pray for true repentance which includes not only being sorry for your sin but also a commitment to put that sin to death and a desire to respond in obedience.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

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Connect

In chapter 12, we see the people of Jerusalem dedicating the completed wall and worshiping the Lord with jubilant celebration. What is worship to you? When have you been most moved to worship the Lord?

Study

- Why do you think Nehemiah devotes so much care to recording the names of the priests and Levites in 12:1-26? Look up Numbers 3:9-10 to help with your answer.
- What musical instruments accompany the songs and hymns (12:27)? What about music makes it such an appropriate universal response in worship?
- Read and reflect on Psalm 48:9-14, a song reflecting on a similar time of celebration. What truths about God are celebrated?
- Chapter 12 describes joyful worship occurring after the people have repented and taken an oath. How do you see faithfulness and repentance linked to joyful worship?

Think

- When do you feel great joy during worship? Why do you think this is? What act of faithfulness or repentance might add to your joy?

Apply

- What causes the Israelites to worship with such joy and extravagance? Does your worship focus on your own feelings or on giving God the honour He is due? What is the key to right focus in worship (see Psalm 96:7-9)?
- Look at the first words of 12:44. What do they communicate about the people's willingness to fulfil their oaths to the Lord? What makes us slow to deliver on the promises we have made to God and others? What does our slowness reveal about what we believe to be true about God?
- What recent commitment have you made in the sight of God that needs your eager, willing fulfilment? What action can you take this week to fulfil it?
- Think about your own life as a believer. What completed work of "rebuilding" can you worship God for? What area in need of rebuilding can you trust Him for?

Pray

- This week, reflect (together) on the goodness of the Lord to you and confess places in your life where you have withheld joyful worship. Ask Him for a desire to experience more joy in worship. Thank the Lord for the work of rebuilding He has done and continues to do in your life. Thank the Lord that His oath to you is sure and certain, that your salvation is sealed in the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.

REFLECT

What is God saying to me?

RESPOND

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Connect

The book of Nehemiah comes to a somewhat sad and disturbing close. After the rebuilding and great revival, Nehemiah discovers the people of God have once again returned to their sins. Thinking about your own life, when do you find you are most likely to fall back into old patterns?

Study

- Nehemiah 13 is a chapter about forgetting and remembering. What commands do the people forget during Nehemiah's absence?
- How does Nehemiah address Tobiah's unacceptable living situation (13:8-9)? Compare his response to that of Jesus in Matthew 21:12-13. How are they similar?
- In chapter 11 the people commit to not intermarry with other races. Now they recognize that those of non-Jewish descent must be removed from their midst. What negative effects were these non-Jews likely having on the community of believers?
- What does Nehemiah ask God to remember about him (13:14, 22, 31)? Does Nehemiah's desire to have his good deeds remembered indicate that he believed he had earned God's favour? Why or why not?

Think

Have you ever felt anger that you could truly characterise as righteous anger? If so, when? How can we know if our anger is righteous or sinful?

Apply

- Based on the pattern in Nehemiah, what should we do to gain a better picture of our sinfulness so that we might repent?
- What keeps us from confronting a fellow believer about disobedience to God's commands? What would Nehemiah (and James) say about our reasons for avoiding such conflict?
- As we come to the end of our study of Nehemiah, what aspect of God's character is most evident to you in this book? How has reflecting on this character trait deepened your understanding of the gospel?
- What is one particular take-away from this study that you want to process, pray through and act upon in the days and months ahead?

Pray

- As you gather to pray this week, thank the Lord for all He has revealed through this study of Nehemiah. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you remember his faithfulness, to enjoy righteousness and hate sin. Pray for a desire to follow God's commands and encourage others to do so out of a loving and kind heart.

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