

# BEN WASHINGTON BAPTIST CHURCH

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Wednesday Noon Bible Study

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## The Book of Nehemiah – Chapters 1 and 2

### Nehemiah – Chapter 1 and 2

Like the Book of Ezra, the Book of Nehemiah may be understood in terms of the faithfulness and holiness of God. The first part of Nehemiah is concerned primarily with the rebuilding of the walls. Once the people had returned and worship had been reestablished, the city of David, Jerusalem, had to be rebuilt.

Some 1,000 years after the time of Moses and some 400 years before the birth of Jesus, the nation of Israel and the Jewish people were in a desperate state. When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem, they deported almost everyone from the city and the region - for some 70 years, Jerusalem was a ghost town, with the potential to end up like many ancient cities - completely forgotten except to history. When the Jews were deported to Babylon, they began to make homes for themselves there. They settled down, and many still followed the God of their Fathers, but they did it from Babylon, with no desire to return to the land God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Some of these faithful Jews were raised up to places of prominence in the governments they were deported to. Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-Nego became leaders in Babylon; Esther was made queen in the courts of a Persian king.

But after 70 years of captivity in Babylon, they were given the opportunity to return to their homeland, the Promised Land. Out of the some two or three million Jews deported from the land, only 50,000 decided to return to the Promised Land. That's only something like 2%! But they did return, and in the days of Ezra, they rebuilt the temple and laid a spiritual foundation for Israel once again.

Before this, citizens of Jerusalem had tried to rebuild the walls but had failed. In Ezra 4:6-23, we see that some 75 years before they tried to rebuild the walls, but were stopped by their enemies. No one thought this obstacle could be overcome, so the walls lay in ruin and the people stayed in trouble.

The servant of God used to instigate this restoration was Nehemiah, the cupbearer to the king in Susa (Neh 1:11).

### NEWS FROM JERUSALEM

*1 THE words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah. And it came to pass in the month Chisleu, in the twentieth year, as I was in Shushan the palace, 2 That Hanani, one of my brethren, came, he and certain men of Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews that had escaped, which were left of the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem. 3 And they said unto me, The remnant that are left of the captivity there in the province are in great affliction and reproach: the wall of Jerusalem also is broken down, and the gates thereof are burned with fire.*

“Nehemiah” means “The LORD comforts.” The Lord used Nehemiah to revive the spirit of the discouraged exiles and bring them hope.

Nehemiah was an energetic leader who combined a deep trust in the Lord with precise planning, careful organization, and discreet but energetic action. Christian leaders find inspiration in Nehemiah's life and character.

Vs. 2 - "Questioned them" indicates Nehemiah's deep concern for his own people, even those who lived far away. From the beginning it is evident that Nehemiah's interest was not only himself or his immediate family; his vision included God's people even though far away. Christian leaders today must also have a global concern for God's work.

## **NEHEMIAH'S CONCERN AND PRAYER**

*4 And it came to pass, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned certain days, and fasted, and prayed before the God of heaven, 5 And said, I beseech thee, O LORD God of heaven, the great and terrible God, that keepeth covenant and mercy for them that love him and observe his commandments: 6 Let thine ear now be attentive, and thine eyes open, that thou mayest hear the prayer of thy servant, which I pray before thee now, day and night, for the children of Israel thy servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel, which we have sinned against thee: both I and my father's house have sinned. 7 We have dealt very corruptly against thee, and have not kept the commandments, nor the statutes, nor the judgments, which thou commandedst thy servant Moses. 8 Remember, I beseech thee, the word that thou commandedst thy servant Moses, saying, If ye transgress, I will scatter you abroad among the nations: 9 But if ye turn unto me, and keep my commandments, and do them; though there were of you cast out unto the uttermost part of the heaven, yet will I gather them from thence, and will bring them unto the place that I have chosen to set my name there. 10 Now these are thy servants and thy people, whom thou hast redeemed by thy great power, and by thy strong hand. 11 O Lord, I beseech thee, let now thine ear be attentive to the prayer of thy servant, and to the prayer of thy servants, who desire to fear thy name: and prosper, I pray thee, thy servant this day, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man. For I was the king's cupbearer.*

Nehemiah was a man of faith, and we can find two sources of his steadfast trust in God. The first is at the beginning of his prayer—his deep understanding of who God is. The second is seen throughout the prayer—his thorough knowledge of God's word.

This prayer is actually a prayer of repentance. It can be outlined as follows: (a) invocation to God; (b) confession of sins; (c) request to the LORD to remember his people; (d) request for success.

Vs. 6 - Nehemiah knew that God would hear; he was asking God to take action. One of the utterly astounding characteristics of biblical psalms is that the psalmist never doubted that God heard his prayer. How great is God that he can pay attention to each of our prayers, millions of them around the world, individually and simultaneously! Our minds cannot comprehend it, but God is beyond our comprehension.

## **THE COMMISSION OF NEHEMIAH (2:1-3)**

The last verse of Nehemiah 1 told us that Nehemiah was the king's cupbearer - a significant position in any ancient royal court. The cupbearer was a personal bodyguard to the king, being the one who tasted wine and food before the king did - making certain no one could poison the king.

*1 In the month of Nisan in the twentieth year of King Artaxerxes, when wine was brought for him, I took the wine and gave it to the king. I had not been sad in his presence before, 2 so the king asked me, "Why does your face look so sad when you are not ill? This can be nothing but sadness of heart." I was very much afraid, 3 but I said to the king, "May the king live forever! Why should my face not look sad when the city where my ancestors are buried lies in ruins, and its gates have been destroyed by fire?"*

On that particular day, Nehemiah noted that he had never been sad or depressed in the presence of the king, and on this day when the king took notice, Nehemiah became dreadfully afraid. As was true in the courts of many ancient kings, it was forbidden to be sad in the presence of the king. The idea was that the king was such a wonderful person that merely being in his presence was supposed to make you forget all of your problems. When Nehemiah looked sad, it could have been taken as a terrible insult to the king.

### **RESPONSE TO THE KING (2:4-8)**

*4 The king said to me, "What is it you want?" Then I prayed to the God of heaven, 5 and I answered the king, "If it pleases the king and if your servant has found favor in his sight, let him send me to the city in Judah where my ancestors are buried so that I can rebuild it." 6 Then the king, with the queen sitting beside him, asked me, "How long will your journey take, and when will you get back?" It pleased the king to send me; so I set a time. 7 I also said to him, "If it pleases the king, may I have letters to the governors of Trans-Euphrates, so that they will provide me safe-conduct until I arrive in Judah? 8 And may I have a letter to Asaph, keeper of the royal park, so he will give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel by the temple and for the city wall and for the residence I will occupy?" And because the gracious hand of my God was on me, the king granted my requests.*

Right away, Nehemiah knew God gave him favor with the king. His response was "What can I do to help?" Nehemiah knew that four months of prayer were answered.

He asked the king to share his concern for Jerusalem and to become a partner in getting the city and its people back where they should be.

Nehemiah's vision was also revealed: that I may rebuild it. That was a huge job and a big goal.

Nehemiah isn't going on a mere fact-finding expedition, or to tell the leaders of Jerusalem what a bad job they were doing. He goes to get the work done, trusting in God all the way!

As a capable leader, Nehemiah clearly had a plan. The four months in prayer were not only spent in talking to God, but also in listening to Him and in working out a Spirit-led plan for what to do when God did open the door.

Nehemiah had a plan, and God always works through a plan. The LORD our God is a planning God: The counsel of the LORD stands forever, the plans of His heart to all generations. (Psalm 33:11). From the beginning of the plan of salvation in eternity past, God has a plan and is working it out.

Though this was a pagan king, Nehemiah still understood that God could work through him in a mighty way. God can provide for our needs in totally unexpected or unlikely ways.

### **ARRIVAL AND OPPOSITION (2:9-10)**

*9 So I went to the governors of Trans-Euphrates and gave them the king's letters. The king had also sent army officers and cavalry with me. 10 When Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official heard about this, they were very much disturbed that someone had come to promote the welfare of the Israelites.*

Beyond the River: This means "beyond the Euphrates River," an important landmark that separated one region from another. Once a traveler crossed the river, they were on the road to the region of Judea and the city of Jerusalem. At this point Nehemiah spoke to the governors of this region who ruled under the Persians.

Nehemiah came prepared. He had letters showing he was truly sent by the king. He had captains of the army and horsemen with him. He also had substantial supplies of lumber from the king's forest. Truly, the king of Persia had responded to Nehemiah's invitation to become a partner in the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

Sanballat the Horonite... Tobiah the Ammonite: At the governor's station, Nehemiah met these two enemies of Jerusalem and anyone who cared for the welfare of the city. They were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel.

These two cared nothing as long as Jerusalem was weak and vulnerable; even though the temple was there, and worship conducted, that was fine - as long as the people of God were not strong, secure, and free from stress.

### **NEHEMIAH'S SECRET TOUR OF THE WALL (2:11-16)**

*11 I went to Jerusalem, and after staying there three days 12 I set out during the night with a few others. I had not told anyone what my God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem. There were no mounts with me except the one I was riding on. 13 By night I went out through the Valley Gate toward the Jackal Well and the Dung Gate, examining the walls of Jerusalem, which had been broken down, and its gates, which had been destroyed by fire. 14 Then I moved on toward the Fountain Gate and the King's Pool, but there was not enough room for my mount to get through; 15 so I went up the valley by night, examining the wall. Finally, I turned back and reentered through the Valley Gate. 16 The officials did not know where I had gone or what I was doing, because as yet I had said nothing to the Jews or the priests or nobles or officials or any others who would be doing the work.*

Nehemiah was in Jerusalem for 3 days and up to this point has not told anyone why he was there.

Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, full of heart, full of prayer, full of faith, full of wisdom, full of a big vision, full of support from the king, and finally gets to his destination - and he did nothing for three days.

Nehemiah wasn't just sightseeing. Instead, he carefully studied the broken down walls and the burned gates. The word viewed in Nehemiah 2:13 and 2:15 is a medical term for "probing a wound to see the extent of its damage."

For the first time, Nehemiah saw with his eyes what had been reported to him, and what God had called him to repair. There is no way he could have made this tour with a dry eye, knowing the extent of the damage and the fear, poverty, and insecurity the broken walls meant in the lives of the people.

As much as anything, Nehemiah took time to count the cost before starting the work. He has a heart, he has faith, he has a vision - but before that vision can become a reality, he has to see exactly what has to be done, and what it will cost - in terms of time, effort, money, and leadership.

### **NEHEMIAH MEETS WITH THE LEADERS (2:17-18)**

*17 Then I said to them, "You see the trouble we are in: Jerusalem lies in ruins, and its gates have been burned with fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem, and we will no longer be in disgrace." 18 I also told them about the gracious hand of my God on me and what the king had said to me. They replied, "Let us start rebuilding." So they began this good work.*

The citizens and leaders of Jerusalem were not sitting around waiting for a superman to come along and rebuild their walls. In all probability, they had come to accept that it was an impossible job. It seemed that no one could fix a 100 year-old problem. Years ago, when someone tried, enemies simply stopped them. So they lived with it.

Now, when Nehemiah came and explained his vision for the rebuilding of the walls to the leaders of the city, there was a tremendous amount of importance attached to the meeting. Nehemiah could not do the job by himself, and he was in a lot of trouble if leaders didn't support him.

Nehemiah wisely approached the leaders of Jerusalem. He had to. In the accomplishment of any vision or goal - or at least of a God-sized vision or goal, there will be certain people essential to accomplishing the goal - you must have their help. Nehemiah's wise approach gives us an example to follow.

Let us rise up and build: This response of the leaders of Jerusalem was of God. They said, "Yes, Nehemiah, we're with you!" This was all the more remarkable considering the ways they might have responded - ways we might respond when we are challenged to partner in a work.

### **OPPOSITION RISES IN RESPONSE TO THE WORK (2:19-20)**

*19 But when Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official and Geshem the Arab heard about it, they mocked and ridiculed us. "What is this you are doing?" they asked. "Are you rebelling against the king?" 20 I answered them by saying, "The God of heaven will give us success. We his servants will start rebuilding, but as for you, you have no share in Jerusalem or any claim or historic right to it."*

These two first surfaced in Nehemiah 2:10; they were deeply disturbed that a man had come to seek the well-being of the children of Israel. They had previously made their opinion known; now they will seek to do something about the progress Nehemiah is making.

Tobiah (a Jewish name) was a man of influence, being associated with the high priest's family, and getting help from the priests (Nehemiah 13:4). "Tobiah" was a prominent name in priestly families for generations to come. The name "Tobiah" means "Yahweh is good" - a strange name for a man who was an opponent of the work of God.

Sanballat was connected by marriage to priestly families (Nehemiah 13:28). An ancient document from this period refers to Sanballat as "governor of Samaria." (Kidner)

These men were Jews - were fellow brothers - of Nehemiah and the citizens of Jerusalem. We might have thought they would have supported his work, but they do not. Opposition is always difficult; but when it comes from brothers, it is then mixed with the pain of betrayal as well.

The God of heaven Himself will prosper us: Nehemiah instead proclaimed his confidence in God. "It doesn't matter if you are against us. God's work will succeed."