

# BEN WASHINGTON BAPTIST CHURCH

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Wednesday Noon Bible Study

January 7, 2026



## The Book of Nehemiah - Introduction

**Author:** The Book of Nehemiah does not specifically name its author, but both Jewish and Christian traditions recognize Ezra as the author. This is based on the fact that the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one. After a period of time Ezra and Nehemiah were separated into two books. Nehemiah is the central figure in the book. It contains some of his own records, but he is not the author of the entire book. The same author probably wrote Nehemiah and portions of Ezra. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in 445 B.C., 13 years after Ezra arrived. He returned for a further visit sometime between 433 and 423 B.C.

Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries, and they both wrote about the rebuilding of Jerusalem, which occurred seventy years after the city was first attacked by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar. Ezra wrote about the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel, while Nehemiah wrote concerning the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls. From ancient times, the cities located in the Middle East were surrounded by stone walls with gates that were guarded for the protection of the citizens. The important men of each city would gather at the gate where they would conduct the business of the city, share important information, or just pass the time.

Nehemiah's account begins in 446 BC. The next year, the prophet Daniel's "70 weeks of years" prophecy (Daniel 9:24-27) begins to see its fulfillment. Daniel's prophecy was based on a specific event, which happened on March 15, 445 BC—the date the prophetic timeline began that will end with the second coming of Jesus Christ. This prophecy speaks of the Messiah's being "cut off." It gives details about the Antichrist, how he will come onto the world scene, and how he will move against Israel in his final assault on God and His people. We are currently living in a gap between the 69th and 70th weeks of Daniel's prophecy.

The portion of Daniel's prophecy that relates to Nehemiah is found in Daniel 9:25: "*Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble.*" Nehemiah was part of the fulfillment of this prophecy, and he listed specific dates, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to provide a written record as to the issuing of the decree to rebuild Jerusalem.

Before he asked the king's permission to rebuild Jerusalem's walls, Nehemiah prayed, and God granted his request. As he was leaving Babylon, he met some Arab men who mocked him for what he was about to do. Nehemiah 2:20 records his statement, which stands even today as a testament to who has the right to the city known as Jerusalem: "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.'"

Nehemiah continued in his quest to rebuild Jerusalem. God provided all the necessary workers, and the building began. However, they were not without enemies—those who desired to stop the rebuilding. But God intervened as He had done with Moses (Exodus 14:14). Nehemiah 4:20 records, "Wherever you hear the sound of the trumpet, join us there. Our God will fight for us!" This was God's pre-ordained plan to bring His people out of bondage and back into their land to worship in the temple once again.

We can learn from the life of Nehemiah valuable lessons in restoring and maintaining a relationship with God. As the people returned to the rebuilt city, the first order of business was to make certain that they understood the Law of Moses. So Ezra, a priest, spent many hours reading the Law before the assembly, making sure they understood what God desired. Nehemiah 8:18 records what should be part of every believer's life, the daily reading of God's Word: "Day after day, from the first day to the last, Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God. They celebrated the feast for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly."

Nehemiah stands as a testament to faithfulness and perseverance. He lived far away from his home, yet he never gave up hope that someday he would return to it. He spent most of his life in exile in a pagan land, yet he never wavered in his faith and trust in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was a prayer warrior, putting everything before the Lord in prayer, interceding on behalf of his people, and he was rewarded for his diligence and perseverance. Nehemiah cared so much for his people that he never gave up the hope of their restoration, not only to their homeland, but to the God that first called their forefather, Abraham, out of the same area and made a covenant with him, one that Nehemiah believed would stand forever.

**Date of Writing:** The Book of Nehemiah was likely written between 445 and 420 B.C.

**Key Personalities:** Key personalities include Nehemiah, Ezra, Sanballat, and Tobiah. Nehemiah wrote it to records the events of returning to Jerusalem and rebuilding the walls in 445 B.C.

**Purpose of Writing:** The Book of Nehemiah, one of the history books of the Bible, continues the story of Israel's return from the Babylonian captivity and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. The basic purpose and background of Nehemiah are the same as that for Ezra. Ezra, "a scribe skilled in the Law of Moses" (Ezra 7:6), called the returning exiles back to covenant loyalty and obedience to the law. Nehemiah rebuilt the city walls so that the community could be protected from enemies who might take advantage of them.

**Key Themes:**

- The Lord hears prayer (1:4–6).
- The Lord works providentially, especially through powerful rulers, to bring about his greater purposes (e.g., 2:8).
- The Lord protects his people. Because of this, they need not be afraid (4:14).
- The Lord is merciful and faithful to his promises despite his people's ongoing sin (9:32–35).
- Worship is at the center of the life of God's people. It includes the willing, joyful giving of resources (10:32–39).

God's people need to be on their guard against their own moral weakness (ch. 13).

**Key Verses:**

- **Nehemiah 1:3**, "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.'"
- **Nehemiah 1:11**, "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."

- **Nehemiah 6:15-16**, "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."

**Brief Summary:** Nehemiah was a Hebrew in Persia when the word reached him that the Temple in Jerusalem was being reconstructed. He grew anxious knowing there was no wall to protect the city. Nehemiah invited God to use him to save the city. God answered his prayer by softening the heart of the Persian king, Artaxerxes, who gave not only his blessing, but also supplies to be used in the project. Nehemiah is given permission by the king to return to Jerusalem, where he is made governor.

In spite of opposition and accusations, the wall was built, and the enemies silenced. The people, inspired by Nehemiah, give tithes of much money, supplies, and manpower **to complete the wall in a remarkable 52 days, despite much opposition**. This united effort is short-lived, however, because Jerusalem falls back into apostasy when Nehemiah leaves for a while. When he returned to Jerusalem, **Nehemiah found the walls strong but the people weak**. He set about the task of teaching the people morality and he didn't mince words. "I argued with those people, put curses on them, hit some of them and pulled out their hair" (13:25). He reestablishes true worship through prayer and by encouraging the people to revival by reading and adhering to the Word of God.

**Foreshadowing:** Nehemiah was a man of prayer and he prayed passionately for his people (Nehemiah 1). His zealous intercession for God's people foreshadows our great Intercessor, Jesus Christ, who prayed fervently for His people in His high-priestly prayer in John 17. Both Nehemiah and Jesus had a burning love for God's people which they poured out in prayer to God, interceding for them before the throne.

**Practical Application:** Nehemiah led the Israelites into a respect and love for the text of Scripture. Nehemiah, because of his love for God and his desire to see God honored and glorified, led the Israelites towards the faith and obedience God had desired for them for so long. **In the same way, Christians are to love and revere the truths of Scripture, commit them to memory, meditate on them day and night, and turn to them for the fulfillment of every spiritual need.** Second Timothy 3:16 tells us, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." If we expect to experience the spiritual revival of the Israelites (Nehemiah 8:1-8), **we must begin with God's Word.**

Each of us ought to have genuine compassion for others who have spiritual or physical hurts. To feel compassion, yet do nothing to help, is unfounded biblically. At times we may have to give up our own comfort in order to minister properly to others. We must totally believe in a cause before we will give our time or money to it with the right heart. When we allow God to minister through us, even unbelievers will know it is God's work.

## Outline

- I. **Nehemiah Returns to Jerusalem to Rebuild Its Walls (1:1–2:20)**
  - A. Nehemiah learns of Jerusalem's dilapidation (1:1–11)
  - B. Nehemiah gains permission to return and inspects Jerusalem's walls (2:1–16)
  - C. First signs of opposition (2:17–20)
- II. **The Wall Is Built, Despite Difficulties (3:1–7:4)**
  - A. The people work systematically on the walls (3:1–32)
  - B. Opposition intensifies, but the people continue watchfully (4:1–23)

- C. Nehemiah deals with injustices in the community; Nehemiah's personal contribution to the project (5:1–19)
- D. A conspiracy against Nehemiah, but the wall is finished (6:1–7:4)
- III. **A Record of Those Who Returned from Exile** (7:5–73)
- IV. **The Reading of the Law, and Covenant Renewal** (8:1–10:39)
  - A. The law is read (8:1–8)
  - B. The people are to be joyful (8:9–12)
  - C. The people keep the Feast of Booths (8:13–18)
  - D. A prayer of confession, penitence, and covenant commitment (9:1–38)
  - E. Signatories and specific commitments (10:1–39)
- V. **The Population of Jerusalem and the Villages; Priests and Levites** (11:1–12:43)
  - A. Those who lived in Jerusalem and the villages of Judah (11:1–36)
  - B. High priests and leading Levites since the time of Zerubbabel (12:1–26)
  - C. Dedication of the walls (12:27–43)
- VI. **Nehemiah Deals with Problems in the Community** (12:44–13:31)
  - A. The administration of offerings for the temple (12:44–47)
  - B. Ejection of Tobiah the Ammonite from the temple (13:1–9)
  - C. Dealing with neglect of the offerings (13:10–14)
  - D. Dealing with Sabbath breaking (13:15–22)
  - E. The problem of intermarriage again (13:23–29)
  - F. Summary of Nehemiah's temple reforms (13:30–31)