

Valley Bible Church - Bible Survey

Bible Survey Lesson 29: The book of Nehemiah

INTRODUCTION OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

Review:

Remember there are six post-captivity books that record the return and restoration of the children of Judah to Jerusalem after 70 years of Babylonian captivity. Three of them are historic--Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther and three of them are prophetic--Haggai, Zecharia, and Malachi.

In the Introduction to the book of Ezra we discussed the three-stage captivity of Judah and the three stage deportation of the people and, likewise, the three specific returns to Jerusalem and Judah.

In the Outline of the book of Ezra we watched Zerubbabel and Jeshua, first rebuilding the altar and re-instituting sacrificial offerings: **Get right with God.** And next re-instituting the commemoration of the ceremonial feasts: **Stay right with God.** Only then did they lay the foundation and begin to rebuild the temple.

Finally, we were introduced to Ezra, who lead in the restoration of temple worship and re-introduced the Word of God to the people. The people responded, **not when they re-established the "form of worship," but when they applied the Word of the Lord to their lives.**

Introduction:

Twelve years after Ezra instituted his religious reforms and brought about a revival to Judah Nehemiah came to rebuild the city walls. He was appointed governor of Jerusalem by Artaxerxes. Arriving in Jerusalem he conducted a secret survey, attacked the job with determination and wisdom, ignoring fierce opposition. With the help of the Lord and the king he completed this monumental task in just seven weeks. John Phillips writes that Nehemiah is a story of victory in the face of "the ridicule and rage, the greed and guile of his adversaries that makes thrilling reading."

The overlap of Ezra and Nehemiah are evident in the last part of the book as they work together to consecrate and consolidate the nation after the wall is built. This happened in three steps:

1. Re-population of Jerusalem
2. Repentance and revival brought by a return to the Word of the Lord
3. Renewal of the covenant

The majority of the book of Nehemiah is his own first person account with Ezra's ministry mentioned in the third person. This leads us to believe that either Nehemiah wrote it himself or a close associate (perhaps one from Ezra's scribe school) wrote it referring to Nehemiah's journals, genealogical records, covenant documents, and official residency lists.

Theme

A very succinct statement of the book of Nehemiah could be: God protected his people physically with a new wall rebuilt under Nehemiah, and spiritually with a new commitment to the old covenant re-established under Ezra.

OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

I. REBUILDING OF THE WALLS (Chapters 1-7)

It was fairly common for the kings and governors of the provinces of various ancient countries, i.e. Israel, Assyria, Babylon, Persia to keep journals or archives (remember Xerxes reading when he couldn't sleep). This is undoubtedly the source for the first seven chapters of Nehemiah.

The beauty of this record is that it gives us an accurate account of his role in fortifying Jerusalem, the opposition he encountered and God's intervention in the process to bring about success.

A. Prayer (1)

1. News from home (vv. 1-3)

Nehemiah was in Susa (in modern Iran), which was the winter palace of the kings of Persia, when he received a delegation of Jews (his brothers) from Judah reporting on the plight of those who had escaped the original captivity and those who had returned to rebuild the temple.

The worst of the news was that the walls, since they were broken down and the great gates burned, offered little or no protection for the people or their temple.

2. Nehemiah's response (vv.4-11)

v. 4 -- " . . . when I heard these words, I sat down and wept and mourned for days; and I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven."

His appeal to God was based on God's covenant given to Israel in Deuteronomy 28 and 30 where He threatened to punish the unfaithful, but promised to aid the repentant. His prayer was one of confession and repentance for himself and his people. Now even before we know *who* he is, we know *what* he is . . . a righteous man.

B. Place (2)

1. In the right place at the right time

Chapter one ends with a phrase which is actually the start of a new paragraph, "*I was the cupbearer to the king.*" The cupbearer was the personal valet or butler to the king and most probably the man closest to him. Part of his responsibility was to taste all food and drink before the king to assure that it was not poisoned.

King Artaxerxes noticed that Nehemiah, who was usually upbeat, was sad and depressed. He asked why? Obviously small talk with the king was not an everyday occurrence because he was scared spitless.

He had, however, spent four months of time with the Lord and so he answered honestly. The king's response was unexpected, "What do you want me to do?" The next phrase exposes his heart, (v 4 -6) "So I prayed to the God of heaven, and I said to the king . . . Send me ... that I may rebuild it."

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2. A faithful servant receives honor and opposition

The king not only let him go, but provided royal letters of authority and protection, and a letter to Asaph, keeper of his forests, to provide supplies. The people rallied behind them.

Sanballat, governor of Samaria, and Tobiah, an Ammorite official (Elephantine papyri found at Aswan in Egypt) were really upset. They, together with Gershem, the Arab, threatened them and called them traitors just as they had Zurubabel. But this time Nehemiah placed the opposition in proper perspective. His response was that he had the backing of the king, and more importantly, the true supreme authority of God.

C. Plan (3)

1. Opposition expressed in words (vv. 1-3)

The re-builders were maligned and ridiculed and taunted as weak and inept laborers.

2. Actions speak louder than words (vv. 4-32)

People of all ages, classes, occupations, and sometimes complete families, took part in rebuilding the gates and then the walls connecting those gates. They ignored their enemies because they were "doing the Lord's work." (Study of gates interesting)

D. Problems (4-5)

1. Verbal threats answered with prayer (4:1-9)

Organized intimidation through threats, taunts, and rumors was met with prayer and hard labor, "for the people had a mind to work." (v 6)

2. Physical threats answered with preparation (4:10-19)

Their enemies said, "They will not know or see until we come among them, kill them, and put a stop to their work." (v 11)

Nehemiah's response was civil defense. He posted armed guards at the exposed places and stationed whole families, armed and ready, at the work site. That shut their enemies plans down, but he still had everyone work with weapons beside them and in shifts, half working and half on alert.

3. Economic threat answered with pronouncement (S)

A famine caused additional hardship on the people. Many had actually mortgaged their homes, and some of the very poor sold their children into servitude in order to provide food for their families. The tragedy was that the creditors and mortgage holders were fellow-Jews.

Nehemiah called a hearing, accused them of "usury" which was against Jewish law (Deut.) and announced to them that he had, for twelve years, refused to use his governor's allowance for his own use, but had supported 150 Jews with his own money (v 17). He also made loans, but according to the law, with no interest and taking no payments from money needed for necessities.

His statement caused the guilty to return confiscated possessions and enslaved children.

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E. Prize (6 and 7)

1. Final Plots (6)

Sanballat and his cohorts tried to lure Nehemiah into a meeting at Ono, between Judah and Samaria, on four separate occasions. Nehemiah, in touch with God, knew it was a plot and answered that he was too busy doing the "work of the Lord."

He next hired an alleged priest and prophetess to give Nehemiah a fake message from God, to avoid assassination by hiding in the temple. Again, by prayer, he avoided the attempt to discredit him before the people. God brought him honor instead.

2. Final Prize (7)

The wall was completed and the city was now ready for its new residents. He placed righteous men in charge and turned his attention to populating the city (Chapter 11). He began by reviewing the genealogical records of the first exiles who came to Jerusalem with Zerubbabel.

II. READING THE WORD (Chapters 8-10)

Now we move on to the ministry of Ezra. The people gathered together and asked Ezra, the scribe, to bring the book of Moses and he began to read "The Law." He probably read each morning for at least a week.

A. Conviction (8)

1. Law read and understood

The seventh month was the most important month of the ceremonial calendar. On the first day of that month Ezra read "The Law" to the people.

Several things are clear:

1. They wanted it. (They called for the reading)
2. They were serious. (They stood all morning listening)
3. They were affected by it. (They responded)
4. They had it read to understand it. (Levites explained)

2. Law produces results

After hearing the law, the Elders urged Ezra to call all the people together to observe the Feast of Booths (Exodus 34). This was a celebration to remind the people of their trip out of Egypt and God's provision of their needs in the wilderness.

For seven days they focused on the Lord and His blessings to them, bringing about a second exodus, from Babylon. It had not been properly celebrated since the time of Joshua. Again the people listened to the Word of the Lord every day and celebrated with praise, prayer, and tears.

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B. Confession (9)

1. Preparation

On the twenty-fourth of the month, two days after the feast time, the people dressed in sackcloth, threw dirt upon themselves and prepared for personal and national confession, repentance, and worship.

2. Participation

The Levites led and the people prayed:

1. Praising God as great and gracious
2. Recalling God's protection and provision
3. Admitting their stiff-necked rebellion
4. Acknowledging God's long-suffering
5. Continuing with supplications and call for mercy
6. Concluding with a national renewal of their covenant oath

C. Covenant (10)

1. Official signing (vv. 1 -27)

Nehemiah, the governor, Zedekiah and the other leaders of the people, both civil and religious, signed the covenant document as representatives of the people.

2. Features of the Covenant

1. Submission to the Law
2. Separation from foreign marriages (from idol worship)
3. Sabbath observance
4. Service through tithes, offerings, and obedience

III. REFORMING THE WORK (Chapter 11-13)

This section completes the repopulating theme begun in chapter seven. The catalog of new residents provided continuity with ancestral line. The ceremonies provide continuity with ancestral religious heritage. The covenant reforms provide continuity with ancestral accountability.

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A. Commencing (11-13)

1. Distribution of Population (11)

The exiles organized their society by lot, plus those who had voluntarily migrated to Jerusalem before it was "fashionable."

2. Descendants of Particular People (12:1-26)

Descendants of all of Israel's tribes returned to Judah, but only those whose families had been there in the days of David's kingdom, Judah, Benjamin, and Levi, would inhabit Jerusalem.

B. Completing (12:26-13)

1. Formal Dedication of the City (12:27-47)

The wall and the city were dedicated with a grand celebration including a music festival, two parades and services of praise and thanksgiving.

2. Fundamental Dealing with Sin (13)

Sin is an ongoing problem. Nehemiah went on a business trip to Persia and when he returned he found that Eliashib, the high priest had allowed Tobia, an enemy, to occupy several temple storerooms. He also found few people offering the required sacrifices, merchants selling on the Sabbath, and a renewal of intermarriage with foreigners. This last problem was so bad that even Sanballat's daughter had married into the priestly line.

Nehemiah again reformed the system and cleansed the people and the priesthood. His heart is reflected in his final words in chapter 13, verse 31, *"Remember me, O my God, for good."*

The book ends, as it began, *"the prayer of a righteous man."*

Lesson:

Once again we see the result of the convicting Word of God.

Nehemiah illustrates how much a layman, not a priest, prophet, king, or even an elder, can accomplish through a committed life of prayer and obedience.

Home work:

Read: The book of Esther

Think: Is it possible that you were "meant for such a time as this?"

Apply: See what you can do to change your world this week