

SESSION 2

The Book of Nehemiah

I. PRAYER/REVIEW

II. INTER-RELATIONSHIPS OF THE POST-EXILIC SCRIPTURE (BOOKS)

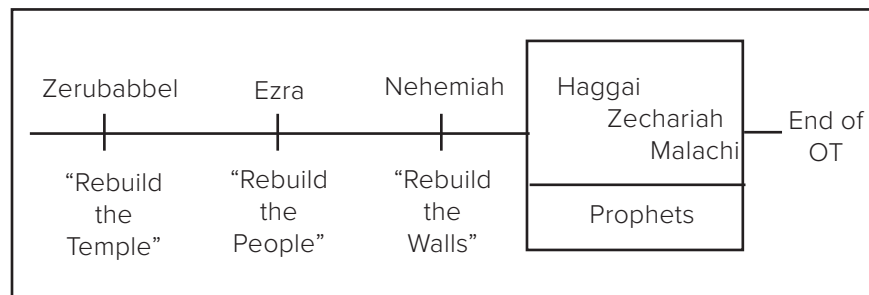
538-535 BC	483-473 BC	457 BC	444-425 BC
Zerubbabel	Esther	Ezra	Nehemiah
Ezra 1-6	Book of Esther	Ezra 7-10	Book of Nehemiah
First Return	In Persia	Second Return	Third Return

— Haggai (520 BC)

— Zechariah (520^{ff} BC)

— Malachi (ca 433-31 BC)

III. MOVEMENT 9: The Return from Exile



IV. BOOK OF NEHEMIAH

A. Author

Some scholars believe that Ezra-Nehemiah was originally one book (see “Interrelatedness of Ezra-Nehemiah,” p. 10). If this is true (and it is reasonable to think so), then the question of authorship of either Ezra or Nehemiah is difficult to determine.

But the internal evidence (cf. first person account in Ezra 7:28-9:15) strongly points to Ezra as writer and the “I” - “we” sections of Nehemiah convey a firsthand account of that book. Likely, Ezra and Nehemiah wrote their books attributed to them, but an inspired editor(s) may have made some additions that linked the books together. Thus, Ezra—Nehemiah could be considered one book.

The view of this study is that Nehemiah was inspired by the Spirit to record the Book of Nehemiah (cf 2 Pet 1:20-21; 2 Tim 3:16) and his work may have been augmented by an equally inspired compiler-editor.

B. Theme of Nehemiah

While the Book of Ezra focused upon the religious restoration of the people and specifically the rebuilding of the Temple, Nehemiah faced a different challenge. The walls of the ancient city were in ruin and rubble and the political climate was tense (thus the opposition to rebuilding the walls).

Nehemiah (the book) demonstrates the providential, guiding hand of God leading to Jerusalem’s restoration. It emphasizes the crucial need for and abundant practice of prayer. The book completes the return from exile and brings to a close the Ezra-Nehemiah saga.

C. Date

The Ezra-Nehemiah story unfolds over a period of some 110 years (538 BC-430 BC). The first two-thirds is covered by the Book of Ezra, the latter one-third by the Book of Nehemiah. Refer to “III, Chronological Setting,” p. 9.

D. Book of Nehemiah

1. Charted

BOOK OF NEHEMIAH					
Construction			Consolidation		
Physical Focus	:	Walls to be Built	Spiritual Focus	:	Worship to be Restored
Preparation to Build			Census of Returnees		
1		3			7
Opposition to Build			Covenant Renewal		
From Without	:	From Within			
4		5	8		10
Wall Completed			Re-Assignment of Residents		
52 days (Neh 7:1)			11		12
			Dedication and Reform		
			12		13
Chapters 1-6			Chapters 7-13		

2. Outlined: **Book of Nehemiah**

The outline is based upon the previous chart. This broad outline provides the structure for the Biblical Development section that follows.

- I. PREPARATION TO BUILD (ch 1-3)**
 - A. Return Under Nehemiah (ch 1-2)
 - B. Rebuilding the Walls (ch 3)
- II. OPPOSITION TO REBUILDING (ch 4-6)**
 - A. From Without (ch 4)
 - B. From Within (ch 5)
 - C. From Without (ch 6)
- III. CENSUS OF RETURNEES (ch 7)**
 - A. Wall Completed : Instructions (7:1-3)
 - B. Records Consulted : First Returnees (7:4-73)
- IV. COVENANT RENEWAL (ch 8-10)**
 - A. Ezra Reads the Law (ch 8)
 - B. Israelites Confess their Sins (ch 9)
 - C. Israelites Renew their Covenant (ch 10)
 - 1. Signatories (1-27)
 - 2. Stipulations (28-39)
- V. REASSIGNMENT OF RESIDENTS (ch 11-12)**
 - A. People Resettled (ch 11)
 - B. Priests and Levites Registered (12:1-26)
- VI. DEDICATION AND REFORM (12-13)**
 - A. Dedication of the Wall (12:27-47)
 - B. Reformation of the People (ch 13)

V. BIBLICAL DEVELOPMENT

The Biblical exposition of the Book of Nehemiah will follow the broad outline as given above. The student will need to periodically return to the Chart of Nehemiah as well as the outline. The exposition follows.

A. Preparation to Build (Neh 1-3)

The Biblical text of the first seven chapters of Nehemiah are written in the first person (as also 12:31-13:31). These have been called the Nehemiah Memoirs, a first-hand account of leadership challenges and struggles.

1. Return under Nehemiah (1:1-2:20)

a. Report (1:1-3)

Nehemiah was in the citadel of Susa during the Hebrew month of Kislev (Nov-Dec) in the twentieth year of Artaxerxes (around 445 BC). His brother and others had returned from Judah, and Nehemiah inquired about “the Jewish remnant” and “about Jerusalem.” The reply was disturbing.

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.”

b. Response (1:4-11)

Upon hearing the sad news, Nehemiah did five things: (1) he “sat down” (2) he “wept” (3) he “mourned” (4) he “fasted” (5) he “prayed” (v. 4).

There are at least ten prayers mentioned in the Book of Nehemiah (1:5-11; 2:4; 4:4-5; 5:19; 6:9; 6:14; 13:14; 13:22; 13:29; 13:31). This obvious reliance upon prayer is a distinctive of the man and of the book. Note other significant references to prayer as follows:

- Philippians 4:6-7 (pray when distressed)
Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
- 1 Timothy 2:1-2 (pray for those in authority)
I urge, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for all people— ² for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. (Nehemiah will embody these two prayer passages to his own life situation.)

Nehemiah's prayer (1:5-11^a) can be structured in the following way.

- (1) Adoration (5)
 - "great and awesome God"
 - (who) "keeps his covenant of love"
- (2) Plea (6^a)
 - "let your ear be attentive"
 - (let) "your eyes be open to hear"
- (3) Confession (6^b-7)
 - "sins... committed against you"
 - "acted very wickedly"
 - "not obeyed the commands, decrees and laws you gave"
- (4) Petition: remember (8-9)
Nehemiah 1:8-9
"Remember the instruction you gave your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations, ⁹ but if you return to me and obey my commands, then even if your exiled people are at the farthest horizon, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place I have chosen as a dwelling for my Name.'"

- (5) Petition: grant success (10-11^a)
Nehemiah ends his prayer asking for God's help ("grant your servant success") with a particularly strategic man (i.e. the king).

Nehemiah's prayer concluded requesting aid with a particular man. The last part of verse 11 explains the reason.

"Now I was cupbearer to the king" (1:11^b).

Insight:

In ancient times the office of cupbearer was far more than a simple butler or table servant. Constable (*Notes on Nehemiah*, 9) writes, "Nehemiah was not only the chief treasurer and keeper of the king's signet ring, but he also tasted the king's food to make sure no one had poisoned it." The role was akin to personal adviser, one with frequent access to the ear of the king. Even so, no one entered the monarch's presence lightly or in a cavalier fashion. Nehemiah must be most careful, especially in light of what he wishes to ask of the king.

c. Request (2:1-8)

Four months passed from Nehemiah's prayers (chapter 1) to the encounter with the king (in chapter 2). The king had noticed that Nehemiah was "sad in his presence," a potentially volatile condition. Sadness could be interpreted as displeasure with the king. But bolstered by his previous prayers, the cupbearer boldly yet humbly replied to the king.

Nehemiah 2:2^b-3

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?”

- (1) The king’s question
“what is it you want?” (4^a)
- (2) The cupbearer’s response (4^b)
“Then I prayed to the God of heaven...”
- (3) The cupbearer’s desire (5)

Nehemiah 2:5

...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.”

- (4) The cupbearer’s request (6-8)
With boldness generated by his prayers, Nehemiah made the following requests:
 - to be sent to his home to rebuild it
 - to receive official letters from the king to insure safe conduct
 - to be given the king’s authority to take needed resources from the king’s realm to rebuild the walls

Insight:

On the surface, what Nehemiah requested may seem audacious. But after asking how long Nehemiah would be gone, the king amazingly granted each of his requests. But was this reply to be attributed to the cupbearer’s privileged position? His deferential charm? His skillful negotiating acumen? The Biblical text reveals what Nehemiah thought. *“And because the gracious hand of my God was upon me, the king granted my requests”* (Neh 2:8^b).

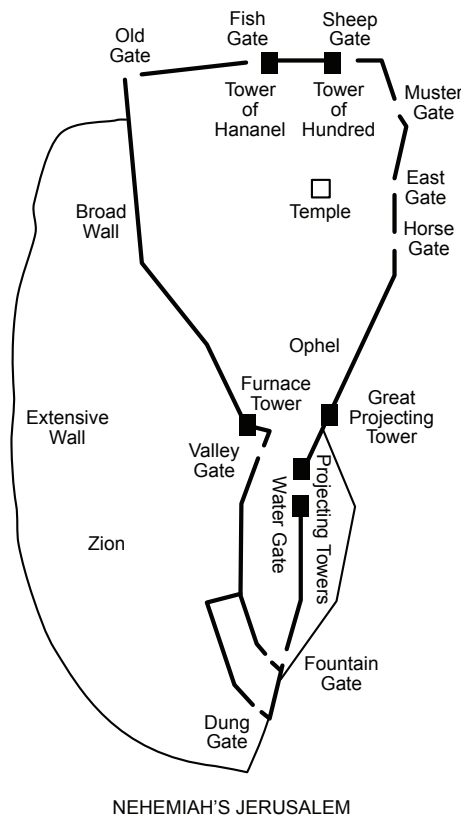
d. Return (2:9-20)

Nehemiah departed with his official letters as well as a military escort (9).

(1) Inspection (10-16)

Quietly Nehemiah went at night to assess the situation concerning the broken walls. He did not inform anyone of what “God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem” (12). The reason for the secrecy was to avoid potential conflict if Israel’s enemies (antagonists) observed what he was doing. Once he did openly share his plans to rebuild the walls, the opposition certainly began.

For a geographical look at Nehemiah’s night time survey, note the map which follows (from Constable, 12).



(2) Exhortation (17-18)

Nehemiah 2:17-18

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.

Recruiting to a Vision

Step One: Assessment (gather the facts)

Step Two: Need (clarified/personalized)

Step Three: Challenge (to collective action)

Step Four: Resources (God's favor)

Nehemiah skillfully cast a vision before a discouraged, uninvolved remnant. This vision would subsequently be challenged, but it was never quenched.

(3) Opposition (19-20)

Nehemiah 2:19-20

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."

Note the opposition's strategy:

- mockery and ridicule
- slander ("rebellling against the king")

2. Rebuilding the walls (3:1-32)

The challenge before Nehemiah was daunting; the task was overwhelming and the opposition unrelenting. To accomplish the project would require exceptional leadership, strategic planning and most importantly, motivated workers.

Chapter 3 elaborates on the work assignments, both where the repair work was assigned and who was responsible for that section of the walls.

The first listed assignments regarded the gates around the city. The following chart captures the work responsibilities (see also the map on p. 37).

THE WALL PROJECT (Neh 3)		
Reference	Gate	Assignment
(3:1-2)	Sheep	Eliashib the high priest (and others)
(3:3-5)	Fish	Sons of Hassenaah
(3:6-12)	Jeshanah (Old)	Joiada and Meshullam (and others)
(3:13)	Valley	Hanun and residents of Zanoah
(3:14)	Dung	Malkijah (son of Recab)
(3:15-16)	Fountain	Shallun
(3:26-27)	Water	Temple servants
(3:28-30)	Horse	Various priests
(3:31-32)	Inspection	Malkijah the goldsmith

One of the noteworthy observations in Nehemiah 3 is the frequency of the phrase “next to him” (“beyond them” and others). The NIV 84 translation uses the phrase (or similar ones) close to 30 times. The idea is one of cooperation, responsibility, division of labor, unified teamwork, strategic planning and so forth. What Nehemiah could not do alone could be accomplished only if the people caught the vision and worked the plan. (God’s hidden hand of guidance and strength must also be acknowledged).

B. Opposition to Rebuilding (4:1-6:19)

1. Opposition from Without (4:1-23)
 - a. By mockery (1-6)

Nehemiah 4:1-3

When Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became angry and was greatly incensed. He ridiculed the Jews, ² and in the presence of his associates and the army of Samaria, he said, “What are those feeble Jews doing? Will they restore their wall? Will they offer sacrifices? Will they finish in a day? Can they bring the stones back to life from those heaps of rubble—burned as they are?” ³ Tobiah the Ammonite, who was at his side, said, “What they are building—even a fox climbing up on it would break down their wall of stones!”

No one should have been surprised at the hostility directed toward those attempting to rebuild the walls. Whenever one attempts to do great things for God, inevitably there will be opposition. Ultimately, the Enemy of our souls will use whatever devices or persons (e.g. Sanballat, Tobiah, et al.) he can to counter God’s good work. As Warren Wiersbe has noted, “If you start building you will soon be battling; so be prepared!” (quoted by Constable, 16).

How one responds to criticism or derision is a measure of maturity. Nehemiah did not directly reply to his critics. His first response was prayer.

Nehemiah 4:4-5

Hear us, our God, for we are despised. Turn their insults back on their own heads. Give them over as plunder in a land of captivity. ⁵ Do not cover up their guilt or blot out their sins from your sight, for they have thrown insults in the face of the builders.

Scathing criticism could in some cases cause a devastating work stoppage. Not so with the motivated Israelites.

Nehemiah 4:6

So we rebuilt the wall till all of it reached half its height, for the people worked with all their heart.

b. By imminent threat (7-23)

Nehemiah 4:7-8

But when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites and the people of Ashdod heard that the repairs to Jerusalem's walls had gone ahead and that the gaps were being closed, they were very angry. ⁸ They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem and stir up trouble against it.

The threat was real. The opposition to the project was very real. The progress on the wall was impressive, even to the point of being half-finished (6). But this new danger threatened not only the work itself, but the workers. Once again, Nehemiah and the people prayed.

Nehemiah 4:9

But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat.

Yet notice that not only did Nehemiah lead the people to pray but with wisdom and prudence he posted a guard to defend the workers. Prayer alone could be presumptive upon God's will; posting guards only would have been faithless. The dual action of both was faith that works (or in this case, watches!)

Insight:

Donald Campbell (39) relates the following story about D.L. Moody.

On one of D.L. Moody's trips across the Atlantic, a fire broke out in the hold of the ship. Moody and a friend joined the crew and other volunteers passing buckets of water to be thrown on the fire. The friend said to Moody, "Mr. Moody, let us go to the other end of the ship and pray." The common-sense evangelist replied, "no sir; we stand right here and pass buckets and pray hard all the time!"

The imminent threat revealed a level of discouragement in the Israelite camp.

- People in Judah (10): "strength of the laborers is giving out"... "so much rubble"... "we cannot rebuild the wall."
- Enemies (11): "will kill them"... "put an end to their work."
- Jews nearby (12): "wherever you turn they will attack us."

Nehemiah faced the threat by strategically posting armed guards at vulnerable spots along the walls. He encouraged the Israelites.

Nehemiah 4:14-15

After I looked things over, I stood up and said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "Don't be afraid of them. Remember the LORD, who is great and awesome, and fight for

your families, your sons and your daughters, your wives and your homes.”¹⁵ When our enemies heard that we were aware of their plot and that God had frustrated it, we all returned to the wall, each to our own work.

To confront this looming danger Nehemiah organized and instructed the people how to respond to real attacks. He reminded the people, “Our God will fight for us!” (20^b).

2. Opposition from Within (5:1-19)

The most dangerous of oppositions may not be from without, but perhaps from within. The New Testament warns of such internal strife.

James 3:16

For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

Galatians 5:14-15

For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁵ If you bite and devour each other, watch out or you will be destroyed by each other.

a. Complaint (1-5)

Nehemiah 5:1-5

Now the men and their wives raised a great outcry against their fellow Jews.² Some were saying, “We and our sons and daughters are numerous; in order for us to eat and stay alive, we must get grain.”³ Others were saying, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our homes to get grain during the famine.”⁴ Still others were saying, “We have had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax on our fields and vineyards.⁵ Although we are of the same flesh and blood as our fellow Jews and though our children are as good as theirs, yet we have to subject our sons and daughters to slavery. Some of our daughters have already been enslaved, but we are powerless, because our fields and our vineyards belong to others.”

Walls in shambles was not the only problem in Jerusalem. The destitute and poor were being ignored (or abused) by their wealthier brothers. While they likely professed a love for God, there was a sad, discernible lack of love for their Israelite brethren. It was a blatant disregard of social responsibility and ignoring of basic Jewish teaching. In this regard, Jesus had keen insight.

Matthew 22:34-39

Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. ³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: ³⁶ “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” ³⁷ Jesus replied: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

b. Condemnation (6-13)

Nehemiah 5:6-8

When I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry. ⁷ I pondered them in my mind and then accused the nobles and officials. I told them, “You are charging your own people interest!” So I called together a large meeting to deal with them ⁸ and said: “As far as possible, we have bought back our fellow Jews who were sold to the Gentiles. Now you are selling your own people, only for them to be sold back to us!” They kept quiet, because they could find nothing to say.

When faced with such injustice, Nehemiah confronted the offenders. “What you are doing is not right!” (9). He charged them all with redressing the wrongs committed against their own people. The nobles and officials agreed to right the wrong and the injustice was righted.

c. Conduct (14-19)

Nehemiah was appointed governor in the land of Judah (14) and ruled fairly and equitably.

Nehemiah 5:15-16

But the earlier governors—those preceding me—placed a heavy burden on the people and took forty shekels of silver from them in addition to food and wine. Their assistants also lorded it over the people. But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. ¹⁶ Instead, I devoted myself to the work on this wall. All my men were assembled there for the work; we did not acquire any land.

Insight:

Chapter 5 (detailing opposition from within) ends with Nehemiah's sincere prayer.

"Remember me with favor, O My God, for all I have done for these people" (5:19).

3. From without (6:1-14)

Without question Nehemiah is a prime example of leadership under crisis. Already the (now) governor (5:14) has faced external opposition (ch 4) and internal strife (ch 5). Now the threat re-emerges with Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem and others.

a. Strategy one: distract Nehemiah (1-4)

Progress on the walls had impressively made great strides. The gates had yet to be set, but were nearing completion. The old nemeses (Sanballat, Tobiah and a new opposer, Geshem the Arab) set out again to foil the attempt to complete the project. A message was sent to Nehemiah.

Nehemiah 6:2-3

Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: "Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono." But they were scheming to harm me; ³ so I sent messengers to them with this reply: "I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?"

The plain of Ono was about 25 miles west/northwest of Jerusalem. The journey alone would take 1-2 days to arrive, then meet, then return. The ruse would take Nehemiah, the acknowledged inspirational leader, away from rebuilding the walls. It would allow opportunity for attack without the governor present. (It also presented a unique opportunity to assassinate Nehemiah).

Nehemiah's reply clearly indicated that he was otherwise engaged in a much more important project. Four times the schemers sent the message but each time Nehemiah refused.

Insight (leadership):

Nehemiah's vision was a Jerusalem with rebuilt walls, restored national honor and political security from local, regional enemies. His mission was clear. Rebuild with haste the walls. But often leaders are faced with distractions that try to obscure the clear mission and vision. Wise leaders today echo Nehemiah's sense of purpose, *"I am doing a great work, so that I cannot (will not) come down"* (6:3 ASV - parenthesis added).

b. Strategy two: discredit Nehemiah (5-9)

The fifth time Sanballat sent a messenger to Nehemiah, he also delivered an "unsealed" letter. Such a letter could be (probably would be) opened, read and in rumor-like fashion spread about. The contents of this "divisive"

letter challenged Nehemiah's integrity and credibility.

Nehemiah 6:6-7

...“It is reported among the nations—and Geshem says it is true—that you and the Jews are plotting to revolt, and therefore you are building the wall. Moreover, according to these reports you are about to become their king⁷ and have even appointed prophets to make this proclamation about you in Jerusalem: ‘There is a king in Judah!’ Now this report will get back to the king; so come, let us meet together.”

The governor's reply dismissed the innuendo generated by the unsealed letter as something Sanballat was “just making it up out of your head” (8).

Nehemiah 6:9

They were all trying to frighten us, thinking, “Their hands will get too weak for the work, and it will not be completed.” But I prayed, “Now strengthen my hands.”

c. Strategy three: deceive Nehemiah (10-14)

The third attempt to stop Nehemiah involved a prophecy related to Nehemiah by Shemaiah (who was no doubt in collusion with Tobiah and Sanballat - cf. 6:14). The prophet indicated that the governor's life was in danger and that the two of them should meet inside the Temple and close the doors (10).

The obviously false prophecy erred in at least two significant ways:

- (1) Why would God halt the necessary, time-sensitive work on the walls?
- (2) Why would God lead Nehemiah, a non-Levite, to enter a place forbidden by Jewish law to enter (cf. Num 1:51; 3:10; 18:7)?

Nehemiah responded clearly.

Nehemiah 6:11-13

But I said, "Should a man like me run away? Or should someone like me go into the temple to save his life? I will not go!" ¹² I realized that God had not sent him, but that he had prophesied against me because Tobiah and Sanballat had hired him. ¹³ He had been hired to intimidate me so that I would commit a sin by doing this, and then they would give me a bad name to discredit me.

Nehemiah 6:14

Remember Tobiah and Sanballat, my God, because of what they have done; remember also the prophet Noadiah and how she and the rest of the prophets have been trying to intimidate me.

4. Summary

Nehemiah 6:15-16

So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth of Elul, in fifty-two days. ¹⁶ 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.

C. Census of Returnees (7:1-73)

1. Walls completed: instructions (1-3)

Nehemiah 7:1-3

After the wall had been rebuilt and I had set the doors in place, the gatekeepers, the musicians and the Levites were appointed. ² I put in charge of Jerusalem my brother Hanani, along with Hananiah the commander of the citadel, because he was a man of integrity and feared God more than most people do. ³ I said to them, "The gates of Jerusalem are not to be opened until the sun is hot. While the gatekeepers are still on duty, have them shut the doors and bar them. Also appoint residents of Jerusalem as guards, some at their posts and some near their own houses."

2. Records consulted: First returnees (4-71)

Observations:

- a. The list is not of those who returned with Nehemiah (444 BC) but those who came with Sheshbazzar, Zerubbabel, and Jeshua (ca 537 BC). The list is nearly identical to Ezra 2.
- b. The list comprises earlier returnees who had proper lineage and would be encouraged to move back to Jerusalem (cf 11:1-2).
- c. The list includes:
 - (1) Leaders (7)
 - (2) People by families (8-25)
 - (3) People by cities (26-38)
 - (4) Religious leaders (priests) (39-42)
 - (5) Levites (others) (43-45)
 - (6) Temple servants (46-56)
 - (7) Descendants of Solomon's servants (57-60)
 - (8) Returnees of questionable pure descent (61-65)
 - (9) Totals of people, animals and gifts (66-72)

D. Covenant Renewal (8:1-10:39)

These three chapters can be summarized as follows:

- Chapter 8 Scripture exposition (reading)
- Chapter 9 Confession (repentance)
- Chapter 10 Commitment (resolve)

Note that these sections of Nehemiah will follow a general outline punctuated by key Biblical texts.

1. Ezra reads the Law (8:1-18)

Nehemiah 8:2-3

*So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest **brought the Law** before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. ³ **He read it aloud** from*

daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the **people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.**

Nehemiah 8:5-6

Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

Nehemiah 8:8-10

They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read. ⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law. ¹⁰ Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our LORD. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

Nehemiah 8:18

Day after day, from the first day to the last, **Ezra read from the Book of the Law of God.** They celebrated the festival for seven days, and on the eighth day, in accordance with the regulation, there was an assembly.

2. Israelites confess their sins (9:1-38)

Nehemiah 9:1-3 (confession)

On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and putting dust on their heads. ² Those of Israelite descent had separated themselves from all foreigners. They stood in their places

and **confessed their sins and the sins of their ancestors.** ³ They stood where they were and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for a quarter of the day, and spent another quarter **in confession** and in worshiping the LORD their God.

Nehemiah 9:5^b-6 (prayer)

“Stand up and praise the LORD your God, who is from everlasting to everlasting.” “Blessed be your glorious name, and may it be exalted above all blessing and praise. ⁶ You alone are the LORD. You made the heavens, even the highest heavens, and all their starry host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them. You give life to everything, and the multitudes of heaven worship you.

Insight:

The prayer comprises most of chapter 9. It is similar to Psalms 78, 105, 106, 135, 136. The prayer traces Israel’s history, acknowledges the sin and failures of God’s people and praises God for nonetheless keeping faithful to His covenant promises. This sets the stage for the covenant renewal which follows.

3. Israelites renew their covenant (10:1-39)

a. Signatories (1-27)

Nehemiah 9:38

“In view of all this, we are making a binding agreement, putting it in writing, and our leaders, our Levites and our priests are affixing their seals to it.”

What follows in 10:1-27 is a listing of those who signed and ratified this renewed covenant.

b. Stipulations (28-39)

Following the example of the leaders, the people recommit to adherence to Mosaic Law (Covenant). Highlighted areas of covenantal promise were outlined:

- (1) General obedience to the Law (28-29)
- (2) No inter-marriage (30)
- (3) Keeping the Sabbath (31)
- (4) Temple tax (32-33)
- (5) Priestly obligations (34)
- (6) First fruits to God (35-37^a)
- (7) Tithes (37^b-39)

E. Reassignment of Residents (11:1-12; 26)

- 1. People resettled (11:1-36)

Eugene Merrill (*NOTS*, 361) summarizes the measures taken to repopulate Jerusalem.

A shortage of residents in Jerusalem seems apparent in the need to guarantee that at least 10 percent of the total population would live there, and Nehemiah had already explicitly mentioned the problem (7:4-5). A list now follows of those who willingly moved into the city (11:2), as well as those who did so more under compulsion (11:3-24). Also appended is a list of the villages in which both citizens and religious personnel took up residence (11:25-36).

- 2. Priests and Levites registered (12:1-26)

The ultimate goal of the Israelites was not simply to return to the land or even to rebuild the walls, however important that was. The need was to re-establish worship in the recently built Second Temple within the confines of the recently rebuilt walls. To worship properly required an authentic, qualified priestly caste.

F. Dedication and Reform (12:27-13:31)

- 1. Dedication (12:27-47)
 - a. Preparations (27-30)

Nehemiah 12:27-30

At the dedication of the wall of Jerusalem, the Levites were sought out from where they lived and were brought to Jerusalem to celebrate joyfully the dedication with songs of thanksgiving and with the music of cymbals, harps and lyres. ²⁸ The musicians also were brought together from the region around Jerusalem—from the villages of the Netophathites, ²⁹ from Beth Gilgal, and from the area of Geba and Azmaveth, for the musicians had built villages for themselves around Jerusalem. ³⁰ When the priests and Levites had purified themselves ceremonially, they purified the people, the gates and the wall.

b. Ceremony (31-47)

Two choirs marched in different directions around the refurbished walls and gates (31-39). Each of the choirs (presumably) sang and gave thanks meeting eventually at the Temple.

Nehemiah 12:43

And on that day they offered great sacrifices, rejoicing because God had given them great joy. The women and children also rejoiced. The sound of rejoicing in Jerusalem could be heard far away.

The Temple worship was re-established (even as King David had so organized it—12:44-47). Israel was back in the land after the seventy-year captivity. The Temple had been rebuilt, the people revived, the walls repaired, and appropriate worship reinstituted.

2. Reform (13:1-31)

Nehemiah was apparently required to return to the king for a time. In the interim the spiritual condition of the Israelites deteriorated badly. Upon his return Nehemiah instituted certain reforms concerning the Temple, neglect of the Levites, practices on the Sabbath, and marital reform.

Also, note 4 times in the Book of Nehemiah, his prayer asking God to remember his service.

Nehemiah 13:14

Remember me for this, my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services.

Nehemiah 13:22^b

Then I commanded the Levites to purify themselves and go and guard the gates in order to keep the Sabbath day holy. Remember me for this also, my God, and show mercy to me according to your great love.

Nehemiah 13:29

Remember them, my God, because they defiled the priestly office and the covenant of the priesthood and of the Levites.

Nehemiah 13:31^b

I also made provision for contributions of wood at designated times, and for the firstfruits. Remember me with favor, my God.

VI. POINTS TO PONDER

A. Nehemiah and Leadership Principles

Consider the following list by Donald Campbell (23) of twenty-one principles for effective leadership demonstrated by the leader, Nehemiah. Which two or three most closely resonates with you?

- (1) He established a reasonable and attainable goal.
- (2) He had a sense of mission.
- (3) He was willing to get involved.
- (4) He rearranged his priorities in order to accomplish his goal.
- (5) He patiently waited for God's timing.
- (6) He showed respect to his superior.
- (7) He prayed at crucial times.
- (8) He made his request with tact and graciousness.

- (9) He was well prepared and thought of his needs in advance.
- (10) He went through the proper channels.
- (11) He took time (three days) to rest, pray, and plan.
- (12) He investigated the situation firsthand.
- (13) He informed others only after he knew the size of the problem.
- (14) He identified himself as one with the people.
- (15) He set before them a reasonable and attainable goal.
- (16) He assured them God was in the project.
- (17) He displayed self-confidence in facing obstacles.
- (18) He displayed God's confidence in facing obstacles.
- (19) He did not argue with opponents.
- (20) He was not discouraged by opposition.
- (21) He courageously used the authority of his position.

B. Nehemiah and Prayer

Consider the frequent mention of Nehemiah's prayers even as he was rebuilding the walls. Prayer (dependence on God) and effort (work of man) go hand in hand. Consider the following verses.

1. 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18
*Rejoice always, ¹⁷ **pray continually**, ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.*
2. Philippians 4:6-7
*Do not be anxious about anything, **but in every situation, by prayer and petition**, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*