

## **Nehemiah**

- Author: Nehemiah
- Time period: 445 – 432 BC
- Chapter 1
  - Nearly a century after the first Jewish exiles returned to Jerusalem from Babylonian Captivity, Nehemiah, cupbearer to the king in Susa, the capital of Persia, heard about their dismal plight.
  - He immediately prayed about the situation, acknowledging the sins of the nation and the warnings made by God, but also mentioning the promise of God that He would bring them back if they would return to Him.
- Chapter 2
  - While serving the king, the king noticed that Nehemiah was downcast, and the king inquired about it. Nehemiah was frightened by this because to be sad in the king's presence was forbidden.
  - Nehemiah prayed, then responded to the king concerning his sadness, which was due to the conditions in Jerusalem.
  - The king responded favorably, so Nehemiah asked for leave to lead the rebuilding of the city wall and the gates (to make the city defensible). He also asked for permits from the king to obtain lumber from the king's forest (probably in Lebanon).
  - When Nehemiah arrived, he secretly surveyed the walls and gates so he would know the size of the task. Then he encouraged the people to start the rebuilding process. Of course, the main reason that people went along with Nehemiah was because he had permission from the king.
  - The opposition leaders, Sanballat and Tobiah (both non-Jews), ridiculed their efforts, but this time their words had no effect, unlike in Ezra's time. Nehemiah let them know that they had no part in this Jewish rebuilding process. The foreigners in the area were a combination of peoples from the surrounding areas who had moved in to take over the land that had been Israel.
- Chapter 3
  - The names of the various families who undertook repairs of various sections of the walls and gates are listed.
  - In verse 5, the first hint of a problem is given: the nobles from among the Tekoites did not participate.
- Chapter 4
  - The non-Jews in the region (the ethnic groups are listed in verse 7) first ridiculed the rebuilding efforts of the Jews, but then realized that the walls and gates were coming along well. So, they switched from ridicule to preparation for war. They assumed that they could attack repeatedly at the unfinished parts of the wall and kill enough workers to both deplete the manpower pool and strike fear in those who remained.
  - The Jews heard about the preparations for war, so set soldiers in the gaps that were likely to be attacked. This relieved the immediate threat.
  - Then, as a continuing preventive measure, half the workers stood guard and held weapons while the other half worked. But even those who labored wore their swords. Further, Nehemiah passed the instruction that, if attacked, those being attacked should sound a trumpet and all the rest would come to their aid.

- Those who lived in surrounding villages stopped going home at night so as to provide security.
- Chapter 5
  - As the work progressed, many had to take out loans and even sell children into slavery to buy food. The wealthy were using proportionately less of their assets for the work, but instead were loaning money to the poor at interest. As a result, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. So, the poor, as a group, complained to Nehemiah.
  - Nehemiah investigated. Having discovered the facts of the matter, he challenged the rich to do their part, and to return the lands and slaves taken from the poor, and to stop charging interest. They also started donating a larger part of their assets.
  - As an example to the rich, Nehemiah refused to accept the customary tax money that had been used in years past to feed and house the governor and his entourage. Rather, he served at his own expense for twelve years and fed at least 150 people.
- Chapter 6
  - Seeing that the walls and gates were almost complete, their non-Jewish enemies tried to use political intrigue to dishearten the Jews and stop the last bit of work.
  - The enemies tried to set up a negotiation in an open area outside Jerusalem. Nehemiah determined that they really were trying to get him out in the open to assassinate him, so refused to go.
  - The non-Jewish enemies threatened to send a letter full of false accusations to the king. That tactic had worked for a while in the days of Ezra (chapter 4). Nehemiah was not afraid, probably because he knew the king personally.
  - The non-Jewish enemies bribed a prophet to tell Nehemiah that he had information that an assassination was imminent, so he should hide in the Temple. Nehemiah saw through it and declined to show such weakness.
  - In the past century, many Jews had formed alliances with non-Jews in the area, so many were connected by marriage or by contract. The non-Jews and their Jewish allies were exchanging letters constantly, trying to find a way to return to the status quo.
  - Even their enemies recognized that completing the wall and gates in 52 days was phenomenal and was the result of the work of the God of Israel.
- Chapter 7
  - When the work was finished, Nehemiah turned over control to his brother and another faithful man.
  - A census was conducted, which is reproduced in the rest of the chapter.
  - Those priests who could not prove their genealogy were excluded from the priesthood. However, they could be reinstated after consultation with the Urim and Thummim (the two clasp stones on the High Priest's ephod). Apparently, these stones could indicate yes/no answers.
  - The people donated large sums to re-stock the treasury.
- Chapter 8
  - The people gathered to hear the Law as read by Ezra. In addition, a number of priests were scattered through the crowd to add commentary to the Law, to help the people understand. He read for about 6 hours.
  - They were not to be sad about hearing the Law and realizing that they were not keeping it, but to rejoice that they were now hearing it.

- Nehemiah instructed them to be generous to one another on this day, sending presents and food, especially to those who had little.
- Ezra continued on each successive day. The people realized that the day in which Ezra started reading was supposed to be the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles. So, they quickly made booths in which to live for that week. Tabernacles had not been celebrated since the time of Joshua.
- Because Ezra read the Law to the crowd for seven days, he probably read it more than once.
- Chapter 9
  - After the Feast of Tabernacles was completed, the people assembled as a nation to confess their sins, review their history, and pledge themselves to the Law and to God again. Foreigners were specifically excluded, as was appropriate for a national day of prayer. They listened to the reading of the Law again (6 hours) and prayed (6 hours).
  - The Sabbath is described as being originated at Mount Sinai, not as an eternal injunction for all people of all time.
- Chapter 10
  - Those who signed the poem reproduced in chapter 9 are listed.
  - All the accountable people made an oath to follow the Law of Moses, specifically mentioning not intermarrying with the surrounding peoples, and keeping the Sabbath.
  - They instituted a one-third shekel tax for the upkeep of the services in the Temple, hopefully in addition to the half shekel Temple tax for the upkeep of the tabernacle or temple that is stated in the Law (Exodus 30:13 – 16).
  - They re-instituted the rotation of priests working in the Temple as had been set up by David (1 Chronicles 24).
  - They re-instituted the tithe system.
- Chapter 11
  - Although the city of Jerusalem was very large, it had a small population, so could not be defended with just those who lived there. So, the Jews drew lots to decide who would move to the city. Ten percent were chosen to move to the newly walled city.
  - The names of those who dwelled in Jerusalem are listed, with special mention of those who were priests and Levites and singers.
- Chapter 12
  - The first half of this chapter completes the list from chapter 11.
  - The second half of the chapter describes a thanksgiving ceremony for the dedication of the new wall.
- Chapter 13
  - During the dedication ceremony (chapter 12), the people noticed that no Moabite or Ammonite was to be allowed in the assembly of God (because of Balaam and because they had not welcomed the Israelites after the Wilderness period). So, the people removed all the mixed-blood people from the assembly.
  - However, Eliashib the priest had an alliance with Tobiah the Ammonite, and had provided Tobiah with living quarters within the Temple compound.
  - Nehemiah was back in Persia during the time this happened. When he returned, he threw Tobiah and his possessions out of the Temple grounds.

- Nehemiah also learned that the portions for the Levites and singers was not being distributed to them, causing many to go back to farming in order to live. Nehemiah rectified the situation.
- Further, Nehemiah saw people working on the Sabbath. He rectified the situation. Further he saw to it that the gates were closed at dusk to prevent pagans (and unfaithful Jews) from bringing materials into the city on the Sabbath.
- Those who had married women of the surrounding countries were identified were excluded.

### **Applying the Examples of Nehemiah to the Church**

- The faithful can accomplish great things in the face of adversity. Trust God and be dedicated to the task. Remember, the workmen wore their sword while building the wall.
- Learning the truths of the New Testament is not a time of mourning but of celebration. When we learn that we have been doing something wrong, we should rejoice that we can serve God better with this new knowledge.
- Undo the mistakes of the past; do not keep them just because they already exist.
- Set up the finances to keep the worship going.
- Sometimes we need to re-locate in order to do the work of God.