

# **The Book of Nehemiah**

Re-building and battling with God...

# Nehemiah: Historical Context

- 586 BC, Jerusalem destroyed and burnt.
- 539 BC. Babylon fell to Medes & Persians.
  - Cyrus issues decree allowing Jews to return
- 536 BC, 1<sup>st</sup> return (Ezra 1-6), Zerubbabel.
  - 535 BC, Temple construction begins > 516 BC, Temple completed.
- 455 BC, 2<sup>nd</sup> return (Ezra 7-10), Ezra.
- 445 BC, 3<sup>rd</sup> return (Neh. 1-3), Nehemiah.
  - 446 BC, Nehemiah hears bad report (1:3-4)
  - 445 BC, Nehemiah speaks with King following 4 months of prayer (2:1ff.)
  - 52 days later wall complete.

# Nehemiah has two natural divisions: God's work *through* His people & God's work *in* His people

- Ch's 1-6, Rebuilding walls of Jerusalem.
  - Ch.1 – 3, Building with God.
    - 1:1-2:10, Moving a resistant authority.
    - 2:11 – 3:32, Motivating a reluctant community
  - Ch.4-6, Battling with God.
    - 4:1-23, External opposition.
    - 5:1-19, Internal opposition
    - 6:1-19, Personal opposition
- Ch's 7-13, Restoring hearts of God's people.
  - Ch's 7-9, Steps to restoration
    - Ch.7, Reorganization
    - Ch.8, God's Word
    - Ch.9, Repentance
  - Ch's 10-12, Importance of commitment
    - Ch.10, Covenants.
    - Ch.11, Appointments.
    - Ch.12, Leaders.
  - Ch.13, Necessity of purging



## Ch's 1:1—2:10, Building with God—Moving a resistant authority

African proverb: *'Don't ask a person a question because you may have to be a part of the answer'*

If a bad answer you'll have to get involved...

- Starting point for Nehemiah, v.2 *'I asked concerning the Jews and Jerusalem...'*
- v.3, Answer not good – *'great trouble, disgrace, walls broken, gates burnt...'*
- v.4, Nehemiah's response - *'wept, mourned, fasted, prayed...'*

## Ch's 1:1—2:10, Building with God—Moving a resistant authority.

- Vv.4-11, Nehemiah's prayer – the foundation of God's calling.
  - Patience in prayer...
    - V.4, '...for some days I mourned, fasted and prayed before God of heaven...'
    - V.6, '...to hear the prayer your servant is praying before you night and day...'
    - 1:1 > 2:1, Comparison of dates reveals period of four months passed by.

**Lesson:** Nehemiah waited *patiently* but not *passively* for God to work

# Ch's 1:1—2:10, Building with God—Moving a resistant authority.

- Vv.4-11, Nehemiah's prayer – the foundation of God's calling
  - Content of prayer (ACTS – adoration, confession, thanksgiving, supplication)
    - V.5, Adoration: *'Great and awesome God'*
    - V.6b – 7, Confession: x3, open, free unconditional language.
    - V.8, Thanksgiving, *'Remember...'* (repeated word): When God remembers He acts upon His covenant promises to do what He said He would do.
      - Lesson: We (like Nehemiah) need to remind God to remember the things he has said – not because He has forgotten but as an expression of our faith.
    - V.11b, Supplication, *'Make your servant successful and grant compassion before this man...'*
      - Problem: **Ezra 4:8 ff.** Rehum (Persian official) wrote, *'Jews planning to rebuild... a rebellious city...'*
      - Artaxerxes issued decree to halt work by force of arms.

## **Ch's 1:1—2:10, Building with God—Moving a resistant authority.**

- Vv.4-11, Nehemiah's prayer – the foundation of God's calling
- Question: How do you get a resistant authority to change their mind?

*'The kings heart is in the hands of the Lord, He directs it like a stream, wherever He pleases'*

Proverbs 21:1

## Ch's 1:1—2:10, Building with God—Moving a resistant authority.

- 2:1-10, God moves the heart of the King.
- Vv.7-9, Notice: While praying and waiting Nehemiah also planned and prepared
  - V.7, Thought through logistics – letters
  - V.8, Gathered information – names
  - V.8, Calculated materials – timber
- **Lesson:** · Neh. Positioned himself expectantly, so when God began to work he was ready, i.e. waited on God *patiently* not *passively*! > **FAITH!**

## Ch's 1:1—2:10, Building with God—Moving a resistant authority.

- 2:1-10, God moves the heart of the King.
  - V. 10, Closing picture – opposition arises.

*‘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.’*
- **Lesson:** When God rises to work, the enemy will arise to oppose.

## Ch's 2:11—3:32, Building with God— Motivating a reluctant community.

- V.11, By time Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem...
  - V.12, On the one hand: God's vision burns, *'I had not told anyone what God had put in my heart to do for Jerusalem...'*
  - On the other hands... Jews are disillusioned after years of set-back and opposition

**Nehemiah's biggest challenge – not building the wall but motivating a disillusioned community... how...**

God's vision > which became Nehemiah's vision > can become people's vision

## Ch's 2:11—3:32, Building with God— Motivating a reluctant community.

- Vv.11-18, Secret survey and successful motivation of community.
  - Vv.13-16, Nehemiah completes the secret survey of ruins by night.
  - Vv.17-18, Nehemiah successfully motivates the community.
    - He communicated corporately and identified personally
    - He appealed spiritually, 'disgrace' lit. 'ra' – evil.
    - V.18, He testified to God's moving, *'I also told them about the gracious hand of my God upon me, and how...'*
  - V.18b, *'So they put their hand to this good (tov – creation account) work'*
- Lesson – Nehemiah prepares before imparting the vision

## Ch's 2:11—3:32, Building with God— Motivating a reluctant community.

- Ch.3, Nehemiah's smooth execution of the vision (a result of his night-time survey)
  - A long chapter filled with difficult names and dated building information – valuable as it shows Nehemiah's team-leader qualities.
    - Commendation – Nehemiah was an encourager.
      - Mentions 75 people by name, recognizing their accomplishment & contribution.
      - Made 'the rounds', called them by name, praised for achievements.
      - Note: v.20, '*Baruch*' who '*zealously repaired another section...*'
    - Cooperation – Nehemiah was an example.
      - Differing people involved – priests v.1, goldsmiths v.8, perfumers v.8, temple servants v.26, merchants v.32, even whole families, v.12
      - 28 x in 32 verses – '*next to him*', '*next to them*', '*after him*', '*after them*' – everyone worked harmoniously in their place – diverse people cooperating together!!!
      - Doesn't 'just happen' – example, commitment, planning & praying.

# Ch's 4-6, Battling with God

- Ch.4, Overcoming external opposition.

(As work goes ahead according to plan of Ch.3, simultaneous problems arise – external Ch.4, internal Ch.5, and personal Ch.6 opposition).

- Ch.4 – external opposition in 2 forms: psychological (1-6, 'angry') & physical (7-23, 'very angry') – as work intensity increases so does attack
- Thoughts...

'VERY OFTEN, THE ENEMY'S ONLY POWER IS TO SPREAD LIE/SLANDER  
AND TO WATCH OUR FEARFUL REACTION'

'THE ONLY POWER SATAN HAS OVER YOU COMES IN RELATION TO THE  
ENERGY YOU GIVE HIM IN HIS LIE'

'SATAN'S POWER LAY IN OUR ABILITY TO REACT IN FEAR'

# Ch's 4-6, Battling with God

- Ch.4, Overcoming external opposition (psychological).
  - Vv.1-3, Nature of the ridicule...
    - *'What are feeble Jews doing?'* – Q. Personal strength & ability?
    - *'Are they going to restore it...?'* – Q. Source of power?
    - *'Can they offer sacrifices...?'* – Q. Is God with them?
    - *'Can they finish in a day?'* – Q. Impossibility of task?
    - *'Can they revive stones?'* – Q. Ultimate success?
    - *'If fox should jump on it...'* – Inferior – give up, what's the point!
  - Note – Nehemiah able to quote back every taunt!
  - Applic: 'what good you think you are doing?', 'what's the point?', 'you think you can really make a difference?', 'who are you trying to fool?'

# Ch's 4-6, Battling with God

- Ch.4, Overcoming external opposition (psychological).
  - Vv. 4-6, Nehemiah's Response x 3.
- Nehemiah did not retaliate.
  - He was meek and entrusted himself to God.
- Nehemiah prayed an imprecatory prayer (prayer of curse).
  - How to understand?
  - Genesis 12:2-3, '*...the one who curses you I will curse...*' – 'God – do what you said you would do!', i.e. biblical prayer of faith & meekness.
- Nehemiah carries on with the work, v.6, '*So we rebuilt the wall...*'

# Ch's 4-6, Battling with God

- Ch.4, Overcoming external opposition (physical).
  - Sanballat & Co. now had two options – ‘give up’ or ‘step-it-up’
  - Vv.7-b – 8, ‘...*they were very angry*’. They all plotted together to come and fight against Jerusalem...’.
  - Four things to note:
    - Walls half built and Jew’s feeling over-whelmed / losing perspective, vv.6,10.
    - Enemy was cunning and crafty, v.11.
    - Threat was real & effective – surrounded, v.12.
    - People were afraid, v.14, ‘*when I saw their fear...*’
  - Nehemiah’s Response.
    - V.14a, Right perspective, ‘*Remember the Lord who is great & awesome...*’
    - V.14b-15, 21, Resist the enemy (Eph.6 x.3 ‘stand firm...’)
    - V.23, Vigilance - threat of enemy is real and constant.

# Ch's 4-6, Battling with God

- Ch.5, Overcoming internal opposition.
  - Vv.1-5, Nature of community exploitation explained.
    - Contributing factors: mention of famine, v.3; mention of king's tax, v.4
    - Cries of community:
      - *'get us grain that we may eat and live'* v.2,
      - *'we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves'* v.5,
      - *'we are helpless b/c our fields belong to others'* v.5.
    - Probable scenario: Lack of food > hunger > poor borrowed money from wealthy against collateral of vineyards & fields > unable to repay loans so lost vineyards & fields to rich > result is sale of sons & daughters for sake of survival.

# Ch's 4-6, Battling with God

- Ch.5, Overcoming internal opposition.
  - Vv.6 – 13, Nehemiah's method of confronting community exploitation.
    - V.6, **First** – righteous anger, *'when I heard their outcry and these charges, I was very angry'*.
    - V.7b, **Second** – inner contemplation, *'I consulted with myself...'*
    - V.7b, **Third** – Private confrontation, *'I contended with the rulers and nobles... you are exacting usury each from his brother'*.
    - V.7b, **Fourth** – Public confrontation, *'Therefore, I held a great assembly against them'*
    - Vv.12-13, **Fifth** – Result: Community revival, *'We will give it back they said... Then I summoned the priests and made the nobles take an oath to do what they promised... At this the whole assembly praised the Lord and said 'Amen', and did as they promised'*.

# Ch's 4-6, Battling with God

- Ch.5, Overcoming internal opposition.
  - Vv.6 – 13, Nehemiah's credible example.
  - Key verse: vv.15b – 16, *'But out of reverence for God I did not act like that. 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.'*
  - Point: Unlike previous governors and leaders, Nehemiah had no self-interest. B/c he was outside of the exploitation, he could address the exploitation.

# Ch's 4-6, Battling with God

- Ch.6, Personal opposition (character in time of crisis).

Coincidence – Final phase of work, wall almost finished (v.1) – fresh wave of opposition arises unlike anything seen?

- Vv.1-4, Nehemiah deals with distraction, *'come let us meet together'* x 4
  - V.2, Kept single minded focus, v.3, Work more important.
- Vv.5-9, Nehemiah deals with deceit.
  - Open letter – accusation Nehemiah planning to revolt & become king.
    - Designed to damage – would have been read numerous times before delivery
    - Designed to manipulate – v.7, *'meet or king will be told'*
  - Nehemiah's response, vv.8-9, a clear conscience, concise contradiction, committed cry to God.

# Ch's 4-6, Battling with God

- Ch.6, Personal opposition (character in time of crisis).
  - Vv.10-14, Nehemiah deals with desertion (temptation to escape)
    - Think of a godly person you trust – someone you confide in no matter what...
    - V.10, Shemaiah a 'trusted' prophet of God – spoke oracle/prophesy: *'Let us meet in the house of God, inside the temple, b/c men are coming to kill you...'*
      - V.12, Words do not match the person speaking them – *'I realized that God had not sent him, but he had prophesied b/c Tobiah & Sanballat hired him.'*
    - V.13, Betrayal, confusion & personal devastation: designed to tempt desertion for sake of personal safety, *'that I would commit a sin... they would give a bad name to discredit me...'*
  - Lesson: To quit & run at this stage is to deny all that God has done...
    - Rather: 'If I am experiencing persecution it is under God's calling, and He intends it for me for good'

# Ch's 4-6, Battling with God

- Ch.6, Personal opposition (character in time of crisis).
  - Vv.15-16, Wall completed & conclusion
    - V.15, *'So the wall was completed...'*
    - In 4:4, Nehemiah prayed, *'...turn their insults back on their own heads...'*
    - 6:16, God answered Nehemiah's prayer,  
*'When all our enemies heard about this, all surrounding nations were afraid and **lost their self confidence**, b/c they realized this work had been done with the help of our God'*

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# Ch's 7-13, Restoring the Hearts of God's People

- Ch.s 7-9, Steps to Restoration.
- Ch.7, Reorganization.

*Now the city was large and spacious but there were few people in it, and the house had not yet been rebuilt. So my God put into my heart to assemble the nobles, the officials and the common people for registration by families. I found the genealogical record of those who had been the first return... vv.4-5.*

*The priests, the Levites, the gatekeepers...and the rest of the Israelites, settled in their own town, v.73*

# Ch's 7-13, Restoring the Hearts of God's People

- Ch.s 7-9, Steps to Restoration.
- Ch.8, God's Word.

*Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them, and as he opened it all the people stood up. Ezra praised the Lord, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, 'Amen, Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshipped the Lord with their faces to the ground, vv.5-6.*

*They read from the book of the Law making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read... for all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law, vv.7-9.*

# Ch's 7-13, Restoring the Hearts of God's People

- Ch.s 7-9, Steps to Restoration.
  - Ch.9, Repentance.

*On the twenty-fourth day of the same month, the Israelites gathered together, fasting and wearing sackcloth and having dust on their heads... They stood in their places and confessed their sins and the wickedness of their fathers. 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 worshipping the Lord their God. Vv.1-3.*

# Ch's 7-13, Restoring the Hearts of God's People

- Ch.s 10-12, Importance of Commitment.
- Ch.10, Covenants.

*The rest of the people – priests, Levites, gatekeepers, singers, temple servants... together with their wives, and all their sons and daughters who are able to understand – all these now join their brothers the nobles, and bind themselves with a curse and an oath to follow the Law of God given through Moses the servant of God to obey carefully all the commands, regulations and decrees of the Lord our God, vv.28-29.*

# Ch's 7-13, Restoring the Hearts of God's People

- Ch.s 10-12, Importance of Commitment.
- Ch.11, Appointments.

*Now the leaders of the people settled in Jerusalem, and the rest of the people cast lots to bring one out of every ten to live in Jerusalem, the holy city, while the remaining nine were to stay in their own towns. The people commended all the men who volunteered to live in Jerusalem. These are the provincial leaders who settled in Jerusalem... vv.1-3.*

*The rest of the Israelites, with the priests and Levites, were in all the towns of Judah, each on his ancestral property, v.20.*

# Ch's 7-13, Restoring the Hearts of God's People

- Ch.s 10-12, Importance of Commitment.
- Ch.12, Leaders.

*These were the priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and with Jeshua... These were the leaders of the priests and their associates... The Levites were...v.1, v.7.*

*At that time men were appointed to be in charge of the storerooms for the contributions, first-fruits and tithes...for Judah was pleased with the ministering priests and Levites, v.44.*

# Ch's 7-13, Restoring the Hearts of God's People

- Ch.s 13, Necessity of Purging.

*Here I learned about the evil thing Eliashib had done in providing Tobiah a room in the courts of the House of God. I was greatly displeased and threw all of Tobiah's household goods out of the room... Vv. 6-8.*

*In those days I saw men in Judah treading winepresses on the Sabbath and bringing in grain and loading it on donkeys... Men from Tyre were bringing in fish and all kinds of merchandise... on the Sabbath. Once or twice merchants and sellers...spent the nights outside Jerusalem, but I warned them 'I will lay hands on you...', vv.15ff.*

*...I saw men of Judah who had married women from Ashod, Ammon and Moab...half of their children... did not know how to speak the language of Judah. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon King of Israel sinned... but even he was led into sin by foreign women... vv.23 ff.*