

Introduction to the Book of Nehemiah

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Background of the Book

Note: To learn the background of Nehemiah, please see the study questions on Ezra.
1. Skim the book of Nehemiah and summarize its theme.

Theme

Ezra and Nehemiah give the historical accounts of the return of the Jews from Babylonian captivity. Nehemiah describes the return of the third group from captivity and the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem.

Period of Bible History

Restoration from captivity (click on the link to see a timeline of Bible periods: www.gospelway.com/commentary/bible_timeline.pdf).

Author

Generally believed to be Ezra, but could be Nehemiah.

Summary of book by sections:

Chap. 1-7 – Rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem

Chap. 8-13 – Spiritual restoration of the people

Contemporary prophets

Malachi

Recommended Reference Work

A Remnant Shall Return, Bob and Sandra Waldron, 1996

Historical Setting

Events in Ezra and Nehemiah occurred during the period of the Jews' return from Babylonian captivity. When the Babylonians had captured Jerusalem and overthrown the nation of Judah, they took the Jews into captivity away from Palestine into Babylon (see 2 Chronicles 36:11-21). But the Medes and Persians later overthrew the Babylonians and began a policy of allowing the Jews to return to Palestine.

There were actually three groups that returned. The first group returned in 536 BC under leadership of Zerubbabel, the second group in 458 BC led by Ezra, and the third group in 445 BC led by Nehemiah.

Consider the history of the period according to the reigns of several great Persian kings (see Chart):

Cyrus — He overthrew Babylon in 538 BC. The first group of Jews returned to Palestine under Zerubbabel's leadership in 536 BC.

Darius the "Great" — During his lifetime, the temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt.

Xerxes — This is the Ahasuerus of the book of Esther. He eventually chose Esther as his queen, and by her influence he saved the Jews from destruction.

Artaxerxes — This man was son of Xerxes and stepson of Esther. He ruled from about 465-423 BC. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written during his reign.

Ezra's record begins with the first group that returned under Cyrus. But Ezra himself became personally involved in the story during the 7th year of the reign of Artaxerxes, when Ezra led a group of Jews back to Palestine (458 BC). In the 21st year of the reign, Nehemiah led another group of Jews to return, and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

Practical Lessons

In many ways, the time of Ezra and Nehemiah was like our own. God's people had been in apostasy, which led to the Babylonian captivity. Some leaders had begun the work of restoring the people to God's service, but there were still many problems and the people continued to fall into sin. The task of Ezra and Nehemiah was to provide leadership to continue the restoration and to challenge the people to spiritual faithfulness.

Similarly under the New Testament, after the first century, God's church went into apostasy resulting in the Catholic and Protestant churches. In our age, God's people have sought to return to God and to restore the church. But there are still many problems, and God's people often continue to fall into sin. Strong and faithful leaders are needed to continue the restoration and to challenge God's people to spiritual faithfulness.

We can learn many practical lessons from the problems Ezra and Nehemiah faced and how they dealt with them by God's help.

Review Notes on Nehemiah

As you study the book of Nehemiah, be sure to understand and remember all the material listed below.

1. Know the 15 periods of Bible history, and the events that mark the beginning and end of each period. Know in which period Nehemiah lived. (See the chart at www.gospelway.com/commentary/bible_timeline.pdf).

2. Know the theme of Nehemiah. Know his occupation.

3. Steps to useful service to God, as shown by Nehemiah's example:

- a. Care & desire to see God's work prosper.
- b. Ask God's help in prayer and be sure your intentions are pleasing to Him.
- c. Respect properly ordained authority.
- d. Determine what action is needed, and develop a plan of action.
- e. Motivate people to work.
- f. Resist opposition.
- g. Rebuke sin among God's people.
- h. Be willing to make personal sacrifices and set a good example.
- i. Teach God's word and encourage people to worship Him.
- j. Lead people to recognize their sin and repent of it.
- k. Lead people to commit themselves to obey God's will.
- l. Remind people of their commitment to God, and rebuke disobedience.

4. Methods of opposition to God's work, and how to deal with them, as shown by Nehemiah's example

(Note: be able to name the 3 men that led the opposition against Nehemiah):

- a. Mockery & discouragement — Handle this by appealing to God, trusting and praying to Him; rebuke the opponents; keep working.
- b. Threats of warfare/attacks — Handle this by appealing to God, organizing people to fight evil, always be on guard, and keep working.
- c. Offers to meet and compromise — Handle this by refusing to compromise or to meet if it hinders the work; keep working.
- d. Accusations of self-serving motives — Handle this by denying the accusations, point out the lack of proof, appeal to God, and keep working.
- e. Attempts to cause fear or encourage sin that will discredit workers — Handle this by refusing to violate God's word, consider the influence of your conduct, trust God, and keep working.

f. Attempts to weaken opposition to error by means of compromising people — Handle this by keeping working.

5. How to deal with sin among God's people, as shown by Nehemiah's example:

- a. Be concerned enough to see the need for change.
- b. Think carefully and determine a Scriptural plan of action.
- c. Confront people who sinned and call on them to repent.
- d. Discuss the error before an assembly of God's people.
- e. Present the evidence on which you base your conclusions.
- f. Offer a Scriptural solution.
- g. Expect people to repent, make restitution, and bring forth fruits of repentance.
- h. Reach a definite plan of reconciliation, and expect all parties to do as promised.

6. Neh. 9 describes the following characteristics of the Israelites, as demonstrated by the works listed below:

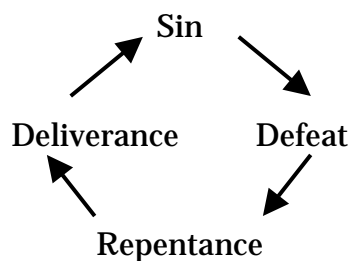
Characteristics	Works
Pride Stubbornness Disobedience Ungratefulness	Refused to enter Canaan Golden calf

7. Neh. 9 describes the following characteristics of God.

These characteristics are demonstrated by the works of God that are also listed:

Characteristics	Works
Power Wisdom Uniqueness (one God) Righteousness Faithfulness to promises Love, care, & concern Justice Guidance & authority Grace, mercy, & forgiveness Provision for His people	Creation of universe Preservation of universe Covenant with Abraham Plagues on Egypt Crossing of Red Sea Pillar of cloud/fire Giving of the law Food & water for Israel Israel made a great nation Israel given Canaan

8. The cycle of Israel's relationship to God, as described in Neh. 9, can be illustrated as follows:



9. The following steps are illustrated in Neh. 8-13 as necessary steps in spiritual conversion and restoration:

- a. Study and learn God's law (chap. 8). (Note the methods used to study God's law. Also remember the people's attitude in learning. Note that the people were able to understand God's will and restore their relationship to God by following a message written hundreds of years earlier.)
- b. Recognize and confess God's goodness and man's sinfulness (chap. 9).
- c. Make a commitment to obey God's word (chap. 10).

d. Follow through and practice the obedience that was committed (chap. 13).

10. Neh. 13 lists 4 specific ways that the Jews had violated their covenant to serve God, and/or had disobeyed God's law:

- a. Tobiah's personal possessions were kept in the temple chamber.
- b. The Levites' provisions had not been given to them.
- c. People were working and doing business on the sabbath.
- d. People were inter-marrying with those who were not God's people.

Part 1: Rebuilding of the Walls of Jerusalem - Chap. 1-7

I. Nehemiah Learns the Conditions in Jerusalem - Chap. 1

Notes on Nehemiah 1

Verse 1

2. When and where did events in this book begin?

Introduction to the man Nehemiah

The book is introduced as the words of Nehemiah, son of Hachaliah. This could mean, either that he wrote the book, or that the story records his life and words but someone else actually recorded it. Many people believe Ezra wrote the book, because it is so similar to his writings. But it is spoken in the first person as though Nehemiah himself is speaking.

Little is known of Nehemiah except what is written in this book. He was apparently recognized as an important person in many ways. He had the serious responsibility of being the king's cupbearer (see on v11). The Persian king readily named him governor of Judea (10:1). So, like Daniel and Esther, he was a Jew who became prominent in the nation of his captivity. Nothing is known for sure about his father Hachaliah.

The story begins in the month Chislev in the 20th year. 2:1 shows this means the 20th year of the reign of Persian king Artaxerxes (see chart). The Waldrons state that Artaxerxes started to reign in 465BC, so these events would have taken place beginning in 445 BC. Artaxerxes had been king when Ezra brought his group of exiles back to Judah in the 7th year of the king (Ezra 7:1,8). So it was 13 years from the time Ezra brought his group to Judah till the time Nehemiah's story began.

Nehemiah served in Shushan, the palace of the king of Persia. This was the same place where Esther earlier had lived and served as queen in the book of Esther (Esther 1:2). Remember that events in the book of Nehemiah actually occurred after the events in the book of Esther (see introduction).

Step#1 to Useful Service to God: Really Care and Desire To See God's Work and God's People Prosper.

Verses 2,3

- 3. Who gave Nehemiah information about people in Jerusalem? What did he say about them?
- 4. Application: List some distresses that God's people today have faced in recent years.

Nehemiah's brother reported conditions in Jerusalem

Nehemiah received a visit from Hanani who is identified as one of his brothers (cf. 7:2) who came with other men from Judah. At this time two groups of Jews had returned to Judah from captivity (see introduction). Apparently some of these came back for a visit to their relatives in Shushan.

Nehemiah asked these men about the welfare of the Jews who had returned from captivity to Jerusalem. This question led to a discussion that informed Nehemiah about the problems in Judah, which in turn introduces the theme of the book.

The visitors informed Nehemiah that the remnant of the people in Jerusalem were facing severe problems. They were in distress and reproach. The city wall was broken down and the gates burned with fire. The Babylonians had done this when they overthrew the city (2 Kings 25:8-10; 2 Chron. 36:19; Jer. 52:12-14). There is no record that repairs had been made to the wall by the first two groups that had returned. If they had attempted repairs, they did not complete the work and whatever work they had done had fallen into disrepair again. Remember, it had been 90 years since the first group had returned.

The subsequent story will help us understand the significance of this problem. But cities in those days needed walls for protection from enemies. Also a destroyed wall symbolized a city in defeat and desolation (cf. 2:17).

We will see that these problems deeply grieved Nehemiah. This was a time of restoration and rebuilding the nation that had fallen because of apostasy. The Jews had returned to rebuild the city and restore the nation. But Nehemiah was grieved by the evidence that they were so far from achieving that goal.

God's people in our own day also face serious needs.

The problems the Jews faced in Nehemiah's day had begun because of their apostasy from God's way. Some restoration had occurred, but there were still problems and challenges. Likewise, many problems have occurred because people have departed from God's plan for the New Testament.

Much has been done to restore the service of God among His true people, though many who claim to serve Him yet remain in apostasy. But even among those who have come so far in the restoration, there remain many problems to be dealt with: worldliness, neglect of God's work, divorce and remarriage, perversion of church organization and work, sexual laxity (immodesty, dancing), immoral entertainment, humanism, family problems, lack of dedicated leaders, profanity, smoking, drinking, lack of Bible study and prayer, and negligence in spreading the gospel.

Some congregations of God's people are doing fairly well in these areas, but in many congregations the wall is broken down and the gates have been burned. What is our reaction? Consider Nehemiah's reaction when he learned of the problems in Judah.

Verse 4

5. How did Nehemiah react to this news (v4)? (Think: Why would he react this way?)

Nehemiah's reaction to the news of problems among God's people

When Nehemiah heard the condition of God's people, he wept and mourned, fasted, and prayed to God. This continued for "many days," not just a few minutes. Note that fasting was an expression of his sorrow and grief, associated with prayer to God (cf. on Ezra 8:21; 9:3ff; 10:1ff).

We too should be concerned and troubled when we see God's people are in trouble. We should not just overlook it or shake our heads and go about our business. We should be truly sad to know the problems and weaknesses that exist in the lives of members. We should go to God in prayer for His help. And we should grieve to the point of seeking to work to overcome the problems.

How much does it bother you to see problems and spiritual failings in the lives of God's people?

Step #2 In Useful Service to God: Seek God's Help in Prayer and Be Sure Our Intentions Please Him.

Verse 5

6. How did he begin his prayer to God (v5)? What can we learn about prayer from this?

Nehemiah's prayer

The following verses summarize Nehemiah' prayer after he heard of the distress of the Jews in Jerusalem. The record gives a good lesson on the content of prayer.

Praise to God

Nehemiah honored God as the God of heaven, the great and awesome God. He keeps His covenant and shows mercy to those who love Him and keep His commands.

The God of the Bible is the one true God, ruler of heaven and earth. He deserves our worship and praise. He keeps His word and respects His promises. When He agrees to do a thing, we can trust Him to do it. When covenants are broken, we can be sure that it is man who has broken them, not God.

God has mercy and loving kindness toward men. He cares what happens to us. But we benefit from His love conditionally: we must love Him and keep His commands. Such a God gives us a reason to pray and hope that He will answer.

Our prayers should not just make requests for things we want for ourselves. We should also express praise for God's greatness. This praise was especially appropriate because Nehemiah was about to ask God to do the thing he just praised God for: to keep His covenant and show mercy on His people.

Verses 6,7

7. How did he describe the conduct of the Israelites in vv 6,7? List *passages* showing that we too need to confess our sins to God.

Confession of sin

Having praised God, Nehemiah then begged Him to open His eyes, be attentive, and hear the prayer Nehemiah was about to offer. He said he was in prayer day and night about this matter. Note the frequency and duration of prayer: night and day over a period of many days – v4 (not just a few hours a week whenever the church is meeting).

Nehemiah prayed on behalf of God's servants, the children of Israel, not just for something he wanted for himself. He prayed for others, the whole nation in this case.

He then confessed and acknowledged the sins of the people. Israel had sinned; Nehemiah and his family had sinned. He openly admits their corrupt conduct toward God, that they had not kept God's commands, statutes, and ordinances given through Moses. Cf. Ezra 10:1; Neh.9:2; Dan. 9:20.

Today we are obligated to keep, not Moses' law, but Jesus' law in the gospel. Nevertheless, we must confess when we sin under the gospel (see Matt. 6:12; Luke 18:9-14; Acts 8:22; 1 John 1:9).

Verses 8,9

8. What promise did Nehemiah recall in vv 8,9? Where else is this recorded?

9. Special Assignment: Had God kept these promises? How do you know? What can we learn about God's promises?

Claims on God's promises

Nehemiah then reminded God of His promises to Israel. Through Moses God had commanded Israel that He would scatter them among the nations if they were unfaithful. But if they would then repent and keep His commands, He would gather them and bring them back to the

land chosen as His dwelling place – no matter where they were scattered, He could and would do this. Moses wrote this in Lev. 26:14,15,33,39; Deut. 4:25-31; 28:15,36,63-67; 30:1-10.

God had truly kept His word in this. The people had been unfaithful and He surely had scattered them across the world for those sins. Now Nehemiah was urging God to keep the second part of the promise: to return the people when they repented and bless them again in the land.

Likewise, God has made plain promises to us under the gospel, and we have every right to claim those promises in prayer. He has promised forgiveness of sins, the hope of eternal life, strength to overcome temptation, blessings in raising our families, etc. We have every right to believe God will keep His promises in these matters if we live to serve Him.

Verses 10,11

10. What occupation did Nehemiah have? What request did he make in his prayer?

11. Special Assignment: An ongoing assignment as we study this book will be to list principles of useful service to God followed by Nehemiah. List two principles you can find in this chapter.

Requests for God's help in His service

Nehemiah then reminded God that he was making request on behalf of God's own servants, the people He had redeemed by His mighty power. He was not making request on his own behalf. Here is another lesson for us: we surely may pray for things we ourselves need, but we should also remember to pray for the needs of others, especially God's people.

Nehemiah again called on God to hear his prayer and the prayer of others who feared Him. He then came to the specific point of his prayer. He wanted God to bless and prosper him in his effort to make request of the king. At this point we are not told exactly what request he wanted to make; however, the next chapter immediately reveals that Nehemiah wanted the king to empower him to go back to help the Jews with the problems Nehemiah had heard about. We are not even told exactly what "man" it was that he wanted mercy in his eyes. However, this is clearly hinted at by telling us Nehemiah was cupbearer to the king.

Note that we likewise need to pray to God for the things that are truly important in life, especially for His blessings on our work for Him. We should realize that our strength and success comes from Him, and we will prosper only if we have His blessings. Without Him we can do nothing. When we see problems in our families or in the church, we should be willing to work to meet the need. But we must also seek God's blessings in prayer.

Nehemiah's occupation: cupbearer to the king

Finally, the chapter tells us Nehemiah's occupation: he was the cupbearer to the king. This was not a trivial job: carrying around a cup. It was a serious responsibility, like current security police who work to protect the president. The cupbearer's job was to make sure that no one poisoned the king. He was to constantly supervise all that the king drank to be sure no harm came to him.

As cupbearer, Nehemiah was a very trusted servant. He would also be a constant companion to the king, present or at least nearby every time the king drank anything (cf. chap. 2). The effect would be to even give him access to the king as a friend or possibly even a counselor.

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