

BIB104 OT2 Life & Literature of Israel

Unit 5b Nehemiah: Reconstruction with Shovel and Scroll

Presented by the



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The Book of Nehemiah opens in the Persian city of Susa in the year 444 B.C. Later that year, Nehemiah traveled to Israel, leading the third of three returns by the Jewish people following their 70 years of exile in Babylon. Can you imagine the anticipation? The stories they had already heard of those that have gotten back. Some stories of the desolations and what used to be and what they now encountered, and some of the exciting things that God was doing. The temple was rebuilt. The opportunity now to go back and build walls and to reclaim their homeland with the compliments and encouragement of even the ungodly kings that held them in captivity. The previous chapter in Ezra describes the earlier two returns, if you'd like to head back there and get a little bit of background for this book. Most of the book, though, centers on the events of Jerusalem or in and around Jerusalem. The narrative concludes right around 430 B.C. And scholars believe the book was written shortly thereafter.

Nehemiah is the last historical book of the Old Testament. Although the Book of Esther appears after Nehemiah in the canon, the events in Esther actually occur in the time period between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7, between the first and second returns of the people of Israel, which was about 50 years. The prophet Malachi was also a contemporary of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a Hebrew who was in Persia when the word reached him that the temple of Jerusalem was being reconstructed. He grew anxious knowing that there was no wall to protect the city. Nehemiah invited God to use him to save the city. God answers his prayer by softening the heart of the Persian king Artaxerxes, who gave not only his blessing but also supplies to be used in the project. Nehemiah is given permission by the king to return to Jerusalem and he's even made governor of that province that was overseen by the Persians.

Now, again, take a moment to stop. You are in captivity. The Babylonians had conquered and taken into captivity prior to the Persians the nation of Israel. Both Israel and Judah, which were divided, you'll see in Chronicles and Kings, they've been put in captivity by the Babylonians. The Persians come in and conquer the Babylonians. And now the Jews are slaves, no rights, to the Persian Empire. They were the leftovers of what the Babylonians had. And look at what God does. God takes an unbelieving, ruthless king, and he not only allows Nehemiah to go back, but he gives him protection to get there and resources to get worked on. The hand of God is amazing. In spite of the accusations and the oppositions to the wall being built by Israel's enemies, God silences them. The people who are inspired by Nehemiah give tithes of much money. Now, remember, these were people who were rebuilding themselves, and yet the sacrifice they had, great reminder for us. How are we in our sacrificial spirit? They gave supplies. They gave manpower to complete the wall in a remarkable 52 days. Despite all the opposition that took place, 52 days.

The united effort, though, is short-lived. Before Jerusalem falls back into its apostasy, the devil always seems to go after us spiritually when we accomplish or seek to accomplish great things for God. And Nehemiah had left for a while. He had other work to do. And the devil used that time period, which reminds us about things. Rising and falling in leadership. Are we being the leader we need to? When we don't have the spiritual influences in our life that help us, do we still take the stance on the word of God that we should? The Israelites did not. And unfortunately, 12 years later, when Nehemiah returns, he finds the walls strong but the people weak.

He set on about the task of teaching the people morality, and he didn't mince any words. He says this in Neh 13:25, "I argued with those people. I put curses on them. I hit some of them and pulled out their hair." Wow. He was not messing around. He was serious about the people understanding the severity of what they had done. He re-establishes true worship through prayer and by encouraging people to revival by reading and adhering to the word of God.

The Book of Nehemiah is one of the history books of the Bible, as we mentioned, and it continues the story of Israel's return from the Babylonian captivity and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Nehemiah was written to encourage those who had returned to the Promised Land to continue the work of Zerubbabel. He had led the first wave of exiles or remnants back. Then Ezra, the second, who was also a priest and a scribe and has the book, reigned after him. And then finally, Nehemiah. Now, the key personalities, we mentioned Zerubbabel, Nehemiah, and Ezra. But in the Book of Nehemiah, we see that not Zerubbabel is in there, but Nehemiah and Ezra. We also see Sanballat and Tobiah, who were enemies again, opposition to what was taking place in the walls being built in Jerusalem. Now, Nehemiah writes the records of these events right around the time of their returning to Jerusalem and their rebuilding of walls, which was right around that 445 B.C. time period.

Now, there are some key truths that stick out that we want to make sure that we take some time to lay out and be aware of. There's four in particular. The first one was we see that God endorsed and blessed Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah as they further restored the nation of Israel after the exile. The second thing we see is that Ezra and Nehemiah both provide faithful leadership as the restoration of Israel falters. The third thing we see is the temple and Jerusalem played a central role in bringing God's blessing to his people. And then the fourth is that the people of Israel must be led to repentance and holiness in order to receive God's blessings.

Now, the same author composed both Ezra and Nehemiah. The Book of Nehemiah, like Ezra, doesn't specifically name its author, but both Jewish and Christian traditions recognize Ezra probably as the author of the books. Now, some modern translations of Ezra and Nehemiah treat them as separate books. Although the modern ones do, we find in our Bible that they're written separately. But in the Hebrew canon, they were one book. The Talmud has the writings there, and so does Josephus. He mentions them as one time period, which was around A.D. 37 to 100 when he wrote that. And there's even some older manuscripts of the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, that treat them as one book, which was right around A.D. 185 to 553, right in that time period. And then you see that separation that takes place between Ezra and Nehemiah into the two books after that.

Ezra has traditionally been considered the essential author of Ezra and Nehemiah as well as 1 and 2 Chronicles, yet there are arguments and scholars that believe it was written by more than one person. Now, given Ezra's important role in history and in his literary skills, which you see in Ezra 7:6, it's likely that he was at least significantly involved in the writing of the book if he wasn't the author. Ezra, no doubt, wrote his memoirs, which you see in Ezra 7:27-9:15. So we know he at least has a section in there that, whether he put it in there or another individual did, you see his writings in there.

And then also you see that from Nehemiah in Nehemiah 1:17 [sic Neh 2:17?] and also then Neh 5:12-27 and then Neh 13:4-31. Ezra and Nehemiah both were probably completed, as I mentioned, about 430 to 400 B.C., which, again, both of them would have been alive during that time.

In recent interpretation, questions sometimes have been raised as to the interconnectedness between the ministries of Ezra and Nehemiah. It's traditionally been held that Ezra came to Jerusalem in 458 B.C., the seventh year (you'll see that in Ezra 7:8) of Artaxerxes I, and that Nehemiah followed him in the 20th year, about 444 B.C. And you see that in Nehemiah 2:1. Nevertheless, it's interesting to note that the content of the book favors that more traditional view in which Ezra arrived before Nehemiah and their ministries overlapped instead of a reversal there. They appeared together in their reading of the law, we see in Nehemiah 8:9, as well as the dedication of the city walls in Neh 12:26-36. So although they were separate, most scholars, I think, when it comes down to it, see Ezra is the first and Nehemiah is the second. But it's interesting to note that there is some debate around that.

Nehemiah was written to the community of Jews in and around Jerusalem during this restoration attempt that they had. Since the initial move toward restoration had begun almost a century earlier—think about that—a century earlier is when it began. It's interesting to note that that original audience that had descended from those families that lived in that area for several generations, Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah had continued to draw a continuing amount of Jews back to that area. Others in the original audience were more recent transplants to Jerusalem. While Ezra wrote mainly to encourage and direct those who returned to participate in the restoration, it's likely that he also intended his work to encourage those that were still living in Babylon to join the restoration efforts. So although there was a remnant there, it appears that part of the writing was to kind of be used as a marketing of sorts to let the other Israelites see what God was doing there and how vital it was for them to consider to come back and join in on the efforts. Because if you note here, almost everything takes place around Jerusalem. Israel is much bigger than just the city of Jerusalem. Many other key cities, they were still inhabited either by foreign enemies of the Israelites or had just been abandoned. So Ezra and Nehemiah both, I'm sure, desired to see more and more Israelites come back and truly take the land of Israel back as their own.

Nehemiah is a historical narrative that presents the works of Zerubbabel, Ezra, and Nehemiah in a very positive light by showing only the positive side of their leadership. And this book is encouraged to those, again, who returned from the exile. So they needed that encouragement and that proper leadership that God had established. There's three vital themes, I think, that you'll find that are closely related and appear in the opening record of this decree of Cyrus in Ezra 1:2-4. First of all, you see a divine authorization of the restoration program. Remember what I noted? How you had a non-believing king (Artaxerxes in Nehemiah, Cyrus back in the Book of Ezra) who was willing to help them in the restoration program and, by the way, gave them permission. They would have never been able to go back without that king who was their (still) ruler, without his permission.

Number two, we see the importance that they had on the rebuilding of the house of God. I don't think that we in our day and age quite understand the emphasis that's there. And I believe the reason for that is that because for us as believers, the church is a building. Why is that? Well, because we as believers now have the Holy Spirit who live within us and we are the temple of God. In that day, God still inhabited the temple, not the individuals. So it was a big deal that the temple of God was established that would contain the presence of God physically in their situation.

The third thing that we note here is the essential role of all the people of God in the project, the necessity of all of them to put their efforts and resources towards things. Jerusalem had a temple, but there wasn't any protection for the temple or the city from further attack. So Nehemiah travels to Jerusalem and he uses his leadership skill to rally a citywide construction crew. Within a few weeks, the walls around Jerusalem are built and standing tall. And their enemies, they lose their confidence. In the first part of the book, Nehemiah restores Jerusalem in a physical sense, which is much like the Book of Ezra, if you look back to that one. When Nehemiah hears that the walls of Jerusalem are broken down and the gates are burned with fire in Neh 1:3, he gets permission, as we noted earlier, from King Artaxerxes to rebuild the city. And again, he was made the governor of that. And not just Jerusalem, by the way, but the surrounding territories that he was made governor over. But again, as I mentioned, there were those that viciously opposed Nehemiah's effort. But regardless of the opposition, as I stated (don't lose sight of that), 52 days these walls were built. No modern day technology, no heavy equipment. The skills of individuals with a backbreaking labor to be able to build that wall. Again, that's in Neh 7:15. When God wants to do something and he raises up the men to do it, God can see amazing, miraculous, in fact, things get done. And I think we can lose sight of that sometimes in our lives.

Now, as a result of the city being restored, we also see that Nehemiah is able to restore the economic justice in the land by admonishing the wealthy for taking advantage of their less fortunate brothers in Nehemiah 5. In fact, in chapters 1 to 7, Nehemiah recounts the events of his temporary return to Jerusalem from Persia as the governor. Nehemiah leads and he directs the projects that are there. And each family is building a section of the wall that's directly in front of their house. And with hard work, the wall was completed. This method that they used allowed the remnant to feel an identity and a uniqueness in the part of repairing the walls of Jerusalem. I love what it says in Neh 6:15-16. Listen to this. "So the wall was completed on the twenty-fifth day of the month of Elul, in fifty-two days. When all our enemies heard of it and all the nations surrounding us saw it, they lost their confidence, for they recognized that their work had been accomplished," listen to this phrase, "with the help of God." That's on the first section of Nehemiah.

Now, in the second section, Nehemiah and Ezra now focus on bringing spiritual revival to Jerusalem. Ezra reads the Law of Moses aloud to the people, and the nation rededicates themselves to obeying God. Later on, Nehemiah works diligently to point people back to the Law of Moses. We see that in Nehemiah 13. Now, here you see that Nehemiah, by the way, is writing it in first person. His story is peppered with personal commentary. In fact, sometimes it reads like a historical account and sometimes it reads like Nehemiah's journal.

We know when he's afraid (Neh 2:2). We know when he's angry (Neh 5:6). We even see him break his own narrative with prayers to God in Neh 13:14. The book gives us a look into the mind of an Old Testament man of God, giving us examples of how to lead in prayer, how to pray ourselves, and how to deal with discouragement that comes up when your adversary seems stronger than you even are aware they are or think that they are.

Then we see from chapters 8 through chapter 13 that this is a time of Israel finding and re-establishing themselves again as a nation. After this long period of exile in Babylon, Ezra leads all the Jews in a renewal ceremony. This incorporated a public time of teaching of the law, in which he read it and he explained it. For example, the recognition of the Sabbath Day was reinstated. Listen to this in Neh 8:1. "And all the people gathered as one man at the square which was in front of the Water Gate; and they asked Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses which the Lord had given to Israel." They all gathered as one person, it says there, to be able to hear it. They wanted to hear the law.

Sometimes, as I study and prepare for these, I see the excitement when people are renewed that way and it reminds me of the joy that God gets from getting in the word and also the opposition to getting into the word. And I encourage you, brother and sister, that we make sure that we make a priority to get into the word when we're excited about what God is doing, and even when we're not, because we know that that's a source of power and strength in our life. See, the Israelites understood that if they were to survive, they must remember and obey God's laws. Do we? Nehemiah establishes policies and he addresses the issue of mixed marriages, which he condemns. And one of the main concerns was that mixed marriage families were not teaching their children the Hebrew language. Interesting. Or the language of Judah, as it says in Neh 13:24. The record of Cyrus' edict twice mentions the divine authorization of the restoration program. Isn't that interesting? First, Cyrus issued his all-important decree because, this is the exact phrase, Ezra 1:1, "The Lord moved in the heart of Cyrus." Second, Cyrus himself acknowledged that his decree came from God in Ezra 1:2. As the book continues, the Lord reinforced the actions of the returnees again and again.

Now, I love that because when I feel weak, God is always strong. When I feel hopeless, he can give me hope. And there's times as we drudge through sometimes the mundane, like putting a wall up (in our situation, it might be working a job) that God is still there, and that when the attacks come, whether it's through the mundane, like raising our children, which can seem overwhelming and yet has eternal significance, I love the fact that God is there to remind us with his promises over and over again and walk with us step by step. An example of that in this book is those who returned did so because the Lord had moved in their hearts. We know that. Ezra 1:5. Ezra succeeded because the gracious hand of God was upon him, we see in Ezra 7:9. And Artaxerxes supports the rebuilding enterprises because the Lord put it in his heart (Ezra 7:27). And I reference back to Ezra in those times because that carryover to Nehemiah, it was God, it was God, it was God, it was God.

I love this key verse in Nehemiah. There's probably some others, but this is the one that stuck out the most to me. Neh 5:19, "Remember for my good, O my God, all that I have done for this people." That's the heart of Nehemiah. "Lord, would you remember that I did this because I cared for the people that you put in front of us, that you've put it my responsibility?" I'm a pastor, and as a pastor, I want to have that. Lord, I want to shepherd these people because you've put them under my care. As a father, I want to shepherd the four children that God has given to me because he has put them under my care. I want to shepherd my wife properly because God put her under my care. Who have you been called to shepherd? Be thankful to God for it, but do it with all your energy and all your might.

Now, we know, as we said, that Cyrus commissioned the return from the exile for the expressed purpose of rebuilding the temple at Jerusalem and Judah (Ezra 1:2) and bringing offerings for the temple of God to Jerusalem (Ezra 1:4). The reconstruction of the temple in the city of Jerusalem was the central feature of the restoration. That's why the book concentrates on how the temple was completed in Ezra 6:13-18 and how the walls surrounding the city was built and dedicated (Neh 12:27-47). The readers who lived after these initial construction projects had ended, they were encouraged to perpetuate the orientation of the people of God toward the city and toward the temple. "Let's draw more people in. Let's inhabit Jerusalem and its surrounding areas so we can continue to see Israel be replanted by the children of God and take back the land that God had promised us."

Cyrus' commission was directed towards all the people of God, not merely to just the leader, which we've talked about in Nehemiah. Cyrus stressed that any one of God's people (Ezra 1:3) or the people of any place (Ezra 1:4) could return to the land. There was no restrictions. Again, you see the power of God. An unbelieving king saying to his slaves, "Anybody that wants to go, whether you're a Jew or not, and you want to go help in this, go." I just love the way that God works. The long list of otherwise unknown individuals also underscores the fact that the people of God as a whole were deeply involved in the restoration of the nation. And you see that in Nehemiah 7:8-73. The reforms of both Ezra and Nehemiah led them, but weren't limited to, a select few that were designed to transform the community of returnees or exiles. You see that in Neh 13:1-31. The book stresses that all of God's people need to be sanctified for the restoration of the nation to God's blessing.

Nehemiah is a compilation of a number of separate documents that were masterly woven together to form a beautiful and powerful whole. The lists play a significant role. In fact, the lists that are included is, first of all, those who rebuilt the wall (Neh 3:1-32), the list of those individuals. Number two, those who sealed the covenant. They said they would follow God again (Neh 10:1-27). And then we see another list of the new residents in Jerusalem and the surrounding towns in Neh 11:1-36. And last, the priests and Levites who returned with Zerubbabel in Neh 12:1-26. There was a lot of official correspondence that was included as well. Letters were not even translated but were kept in their original Aramaic, the language of international diplomacy, at that time and place.

So what about Christ in Nehemiah? It's important that we understand the distinctive in the Book of Ezra and also Nehemiah how they reveal Christ in at least five different ways. The work of Nehemiah, number one, was based on the efforts of Zerubbabel, the man who brought the first group of exiles or the first part of the remnant back to Israel. He was a descendant of David who represented the royal family at the beginning of the final restoration of God's people to blessing. And you'll notice that in Haggai 1 and 2 and also Zechariah 1 to 8. Zerubbabel's efforts fell short, though, of expectations, but Jesus would later descend from Zerubbabel (Matthew 1:12-16) and receive the promises given the house of David after exile.

The second way we see is the idealistic portrayals of Zerubbabel, as written in Nehemiah, as leaders who anticipate the work of Christ, as they devoted their lives to leading God's people toward the blessings of God. Christ leads his own people toward ultimate and eternal blessings. Like Christ, Matthew 23:1-39, Ezra and Nehemiah both confront and correct sin within Israel (Neh 9:1-15). Like Christ, in John 17:6-26, they identified themselves with God's sinful people and prayed for them in Nehemiah 1:4-11.

The third thing that I think is interesting to note is the focus on reconstructing and properly operating the Temple in Jerusalem anticipates Christ. The temple is central in the Christian faith. Christ not only cleansed the temple (Matthew 21:12-13, also John 2:13-17); he also *is* the temple (John 2:19-22). Christ established the church as the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16-17 and 2 Corinthians 6:16), and he now ministers in the heavenly temple (Hebrews 9:11-12, 24). When he returns, Christ will bring the new Jerusalem from heaven to the earth to make the new heaven and the new earth the holy city of God with himself and the Father as its temple (Revelation 21:22). You see the themes of holiness, sacrifices, prayers, forgiveness, the priesthood, and the presence of God associated with the temple in Nehemiah. And they're all fulfilled in Christ.

The fourth thing is the moral reforms that Nehemiah brought to the nation also find ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Christ also called God's covenant people to return to the Lord and his law (Matthew 5:17-19). In fact, through his death, his resurrection, and the empowerment of his spirit, he cleanses those who believe in him from unrighteousness and leads them into faithful living (1 John 1:7-9) so they may inherit the blessings of God (Matthew 25:34-40). Nehemiah was a man of prayer and he prayed passionately for his people. Nehemiah 1, we see that. His zealous intercession for God's people foreshadows our great intercessor, which leads us to our last tie-in, and that was Jesus Christ who prayed fervently for his people. In his high priestly prayer, we especially see it, which is in John 17. Both Nehemiah and Jesus had a burning love for God's people which they poured out in prayer to God, interceding for them before the throne.

We see that Nehemiah led the Israelites into a respect and even a love for the text of Scripture. Nehemiah, because of his love for God and his desire to see God honored and glorified, led the Israelites towards faith and obedience to God. God desired for them for so long to follow him in the same way Christians are to love and revere the truths of Scripture. Commit them to memory. Meditate on them day and night, and turn to them for fulfillment. In fact, fulfillment for every spiritual need. 2 Timothy 3:16 reminds us, “All Scripture is given by the inspiration of God, and it’s profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.” Why? That the man of God may be perfect or mature, thoroughly furnished unto all good works.

If we expect to experience the spiritual revival of the Israelites, which we saw in Neh 8:1-8, we must begin with God’s word. Each of us ought to have genuine compassion for others who have spiritual or even physical hurts. To feel compassion yet to do nothing to help is unfounded biblically. At times, we may have to give up our own comfort in order to minister properly to others. We must totally believe in the cause before us or we’ll never give our time or money to it, especially not with the right heart. When we allow God to minister through us, even unbelievers will know it’s God’s work. The Book of Nehemiah shows us the kind of significant impact one individual can have on a nation. Nehemiah served in secular offices. He used his position to bring back to the Jews order, stability, and even a proper focus, or I should say, especially a proper focus on God. God uses all manner of people. Aren’t we grateful for that? And he uses us at all different kinds of places and all different kinds of work. Do you feel that you must be in “ministry” in order to serve God? Be encouraged. He’s not limited by your vocation. In fact, God has placed you where you are for a purpose. Have this attitude about your work, which we see in Colossians 3:17. “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord, giving thanks through him to God the Father.”