

Nehemiah: The Potter's Vessel Restored

Nehemiah: Man Who Loves What God Loves

Lesson 1 | Introduction

OUTLINE:

- I. Nehemiah Loves What God Loves
 - A. The Wall (32x), the Gates, and the City
 - B. The Remnant
- II. Nehemiah is a Man of Prayer
 - A. Nehemiah is Not a Lawgiver, but He Prays Like One
 - B. Nehemiah is Not a Prophet, but He Confesses Like One (cf. 1:5-11; Daniel 9:4ff) in a very similar context.
 - C. Nehemiah is Not a King, but He Can Intercede Like One
 - D. Nehemiah's Prayers are Steeped in God's Covenantal Promises (1:5b; cf. Exodus 20:6; Psalm 89:2)
- III. Nehemiah Correctly Interprets Israel's History (cf. Leviticus 26:14-46, see 26:33)

INTRODUCTION:

- The book of Nehemiah dates roughly to the 1000th anniversary of the Exodus from Egypt. God wants us to marvel at what He began to do at the Exodus. And God wants us to marvel at what He did in restoring the people to their land. And what He began to do in returning Israel to their land is presently happening all over again in our lifetimes. It would not end – in fact, it continues today in the restoration of Israel:

¹⁴ "Therefore behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when it will no longer be said, 'As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel out of the land of Egypt,' ¹⁵ but, 'As the LORD lives, who brought up the sons of Israel from the land of the north and from all the countries where He had banished them.' For I will restore them to their own land which I gave to their fathers (Jeremiah 16:14-15).

- We learn a great deal biographically about Nehemiah (his father, his brother (cf. 7:2), his exile setting, his likely never having even been to Israel, born in exile, yet bent on obeying God's admonition through Jeremiah to "seek the welfare [peace and prosperity] of the city" – Jeremiah 29:7)
 - About his professional life (1:11, cupbearer)
 - About his spiritual life (interest in worship, prayer, covenant language)
- We will learn a great deal about important aspects of Jewish life – important in Nehemiah's day in the post-exilic era, but also elements that will be very important as we anticipate the Messiah's coming.
- The approach we will take will look at the situation as Nehemiah finds it. He is – as a man of faith – forced to look at the present through the lens of God's past promises and revelation,

but also to take into account promises God has given that have not yet been fulfilled for the people of God. Nehemiah is faith-full and that keeps him faithful. (At the conclusion of the study, we'll take a look at Nehemiah through a retrospective glance from the perspective of the New Testament in the form of an article written by Robert Bell, "The Theology of Nehemiah," in *The Biblical Viewpoint*, November 1986).

- This is the third consecutive book where God blesses His people from Persia (Ezra, Esther, Nehemiah). Nehemiah was in Susa, the fortress¹ – the very place where the anti-semitic plot of Haman had been hatched and two days of fighting needed to root it out.

I. Nehemiah Loves What God Loves

A. The Wall (32x), the Gates, and the City

1. God loves the city of Jerusalem and its Gates

Why do you look with envy, O mountains with many peaks, at the mountain which God has desired for His abode? Surely the LORD will dwell there forever (Psalm 68:16).

⁶⁸ But chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion which He loved. ⁶⁹ And He built His sanctuary like the heights, like the earth which He has founded forever (Psalm 78:68-69).

² The LORD loves the gates of Zion more than all the other dwelling places of Jacob. ³ Glorious things are spoken of you, O city of God. Selah (Psalm 87:2-3).

God set His affection on this place and dwells there forever. In a special way, He loves Jerusalem even more than the rest of the land of Israel. He even loves its gates. The city, the Temple, the walls, and the gates are all a package.

2. Nehemiah mourns over the partially ruined walls and the burned gates

Nehemiah seems to have internalized the heart cry of the writer of Psalm 137:

*¹ By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. ² Upon the willows in the midst of it we hung our harps. ³ For there our captors demanded of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion." ⁴ How can we sing the LORD'S song In a foreign land? ⁵ **If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget her skill. ⁶ May my tongue***

¹ "Susa in the southwest part of modern Iran was a major city about 150 miles north of the Persian Gulf. It served as the Achaemenid winter residence, but was not used by the Persian kings in summer when the temperatures became unbearably warm" (Steinmann, 387).

cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy (Psalm 137:1-6).

- The wall and gates have been burned with fire
 - In 587 B.C. (140 years before) Nebuchadnezzar had broken down the walls and burned the city with fire
 - In Ezra 4:12-24, some 80 years before Nehemiah's time, it may be that when the building of the walls had been stopped by force, that enemies (Rehum and Shimshai) burned up the progress that had been made

*¹² let it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you have come to us at Jerusalem; **they are rebuilding the rebellious and evil city and are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations.** ¹³ Now let it be known to the king, **that if that city is rebuilt and the walls are finished,** they will not pay tribute, custom or toll, and it will damage the revenue of the kings. . . . ¹⁶ We inform the king that **if that city is rebuilt and the walls finished,** as a result you will have no possession in the province beyond the River." ¹⁷ Then the king sent an answer to Rehum the commander, to Shimshai the scribe, and to the rest of their colleagues who live in Samaria and in the rest of the provinces beyond the River: "Peace. And now ¹⁸ the document which you sent to us has been translated and read before me. ¹⁹ A decree has been issued by me, and a search has been made and it has been discovered that that city has risen up against the kings in past days, that rebellion and revolt have been perpetrated in it, ²⁰ that mighty kings have ruled over Jerusalem, governing all the provinces beyond the River, and that tribute, custom and toll were paid to them. ²¹ **So, now issue a decree to make these men stop work, that this city may not be rebuilt until a decree is issued by me.** ²² Beware of being negligent in carrying out this matter; why should damage increase to the detriment of the kings?" ²³ Then as soon as the copy of King Artaxerxes' document was read before Rehum and Shimshai the scribe and their colleagues, they went in haste to Jerusalem to the Jews and stopped them by force of arms. ²⁴ Then work on the house of God in Jerusalem ceased, and it was stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia.*

At some point, the king had changed his mind as building resumed, at least on the Temple (Ezra 7:1, 10, 21).

- Or it may be that some other more recent skirmish led to further destruction that is now reported back to Nehemiah

Nehemiah is grieved over the destruction of what he knows God loves. Nehemiah has the psalter, and he knows these psalms and the sentiments of God. The following statement captures well the thoughts of Nehemiah's heart:

“. . . was not simply a political concern for the Judeans in Jerusalem, but was a theological concern for the holy city and its Temple, the place that God had chosen to dwell in his grace. Nehemiah viewed Jerusalem in the way that Solomon regarded the temple. This equation of the whole city of Jerusalem with the house of God derives from a theological perspective that has been called Judean Zion theology: God's house in Zion, where he graciously dwelt with his people, included the city, not simply the temple" (Andrew E. Steinmann, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, 391).

B. The Remnant

1. God Loves the People of Israel

- From Israel's youth – *When Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called My son* (Hosea 11:1).
- For the sake of the fathers – . . . *but from the standpoint of God's choice they are **beloved for the sake of the fathers*** (Romans 11:28); ***Because He loved your fathers, therefore He chose their descendants after them. And He personally brought you from Egypt by His great power*** (Deuteronomy 4:37); ***Yet on your fathers did the LORD set His affection to love them, and He chose their descendants after them, even you above all peoples, as it is this day*** (Deuteronomy 10:15); ⁶*For you are a holy people to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.* ⁷ *The LORD **did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples,*** ⁸ *but because **the LORD loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers,** the LORD brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt* (Deuteronomy 7:6-8).
- Forever – to David – *Blessed be the LORD your God who delighted in you to set you on the throne of Israel; **because the LORD loved Israel forever, therefore He made you king, to do justice and righteousness*** (1 Kings 10:9).

2. The Remnant of the People

The word "remnant" appears in the mouth of Joseph, when he testifies that God had used him to preserve a remnant (Genesis 45:7). Isaiah had prophesied that a remnant would *survive judgment* and a remnant would *revive* and return (Isaiah 10:20-23):

²⁰ *Now in that day the remnant of Israel, and those of the house of Jacob who have escaped, will never again rely on the one who struck them, but will truly rely on the LORD, the Holy One of Israel.* ²¹ *A **remnant** will return, the **remnant** of*

*Jacob, to the mighty God.²² For though your people, O Israel, may be like the sand of the sea, only a **remnant** within them will return; a destruction is determined, overflowing with righteousness.²³ For a complete destruction, one that is decreed, the Lord GOD of hosts will execute in the midst of the whole land.*

The word “remnant” would be a sobering reminder of the severity of God’s judgment, but it would also bear testimony to God’s faithfulness to His promises and His reviving of His people. It is this latter sense that Ezra picks up on his lengthy confessional prayer:

*⁸ But now for a brief moment grace has been shown from the LORD our God, to leave us an escaped **remnant** and to give us a peg in His holy place, that our God may enlighten our eyes and grant us a little reviving in our bondage.⁹ For we are slaves; yet in our bondage our God has not forsaken us, but has extended lovingkindness to us in the sight of the kings of Persia, to give us reviving to raise up the house of our God, to restore its ruins and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem. . . .¹³ After all that has come upon us for our evil deeds and our great guilt, since You our God have requited us less than our iniquities deserve, and have given us an escaped **remnant** as this,¹⁴ shall we again break Your commandments and intermarry with the peoples who commit these abominations? Would You not be angry with us to the point of destruction, until there is no **remnant** nor any who escape?¹⁵ O LORD God of Israel, You are righteous, for we have been left an escaped **remnant**, as it is this day; behold, we are before You in our guilt, for no one can stand before You because of this (Ezra 9:8-15).*

3. Nehemiah mourns² over the remnant (“great evil and shame,” 1:3)
 - b. Survived the sacking of the city (586 B.C.)
 - c. Returned under Zerubbabel (530 B.C.)
 - d. Returned under Ezra (70-80 years later)

“. . . Hanani’s use of ‘remnants’ in Neh 1:3 demonstrates that he and Nehemiah understood the Judeans to be a fulfillment of Yahweh’s prophecies through Isaiah that he would restore a remnant of his people to the land. It also implies that Hanani and Nehemiah understood the messianic import of these prophecies . . .” (Steinmann, 389).

4. Nehemiah identifies with the remnant in his confession (1:6)

“Nehemiah takes full responsibility for his part in the guilt of corporate Israel. This shows his awareness of (1) original sin, inherited from Adam, with which all people are born; (2) his actual sins, since due to their sinful nature all people,

² cf. Ezra 9:3-5; 10:6, Ezra mourns over Israel’s sin.

including justified believers, commit sins during this life (see Romans 7); and (3) the corporate character of the people of God as one body of believers, so that all may suffer as the result of the sin of a few” (Steinmann, 384).

Note: The people, the land, and the city are all critical to the covenants God had made with Israel – the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, the Davidic, and the New Covenants. We will see the covenants surface further in the next section.

II. Nehemiah is a Man of Prayer

Nehemiah is a practical man, but he is not pragmatic. He could rely on his skills and his position. He does use what God has provided, but his reliance is clearly on the Lord. One of the ways this is evident is Nehemiah’s prayer life. Interestingly, 46 of 406 verses are prayers (11%). Twelve separate instances of praying are recorded.

We are not told if Nehemiah, like Daniel in exile before him, prayed toward Jerusalem (Daniel 6:10), but it might help us to visualize that devotional exercise in this prayer.

A. Nehemiah is Not a Lawgiver, but He Prays Like One

*... for the LORD your God is in your midst, a **great and awesome God** (Deuteronomy 7:21)*

*O LORD God of heaven, **the great and awesome God** (Nehemiah 1:5; cf. 4:14)*

*... He is God, the faithful God, **who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments** (Deuteronomy 7:9; cf. 7:7-9)*

*who **preserves the covenant and lovingkindness for those who love Him and keep His commandments** (Nehemiah 1:5)*

B. Nehemiah is Not a Prophet, but He Confesses Like One (cf. 1:5-11; Daniel 9:4ff) in a very similar context.

*⁴ I prayed to the LORD my God and confessed and said, “Alas, O Lord, **the great and awesome God, who keeps His covenant and lovingkindness³ for those who love Him and keep His commandments,** ⁵ we have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly and rebelled, even turning aside from Your commandments and ordinances. ⁶ Moreover, we have not listened to Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings, our princes, our fathers and all the people of the land. ⁷ Righteousness belongs to You, O Lord, but to us open shame, as it is this day--to the men of Judah, the inhabitants of Jerusalem and all Israel, those who are nearby and those who are far away in all the countries to which You have driven them, because of their unfaithful deeds which they have committed against You” (Daniel 9:4-7).*

³ *chesed* – “that quality which will accept an obligation and honour it, come what may” – definition by L. H. Brockington, quoted in Kidner, *Ezra & Nehemiah*, c. 1979, 130 and c. 2009, 143).

- C. Nehemiah is Not a King (though he'll be accused of trying to be one), but He Can Intercede Like One:

*Solomon – Now, O my God, I pray, **let Your eyes be open and Your ears attentive to the prayer offered in this place** (2 Chronicles 6:40).*

***let Your ear now be attentive and Your eyes open to hear the prayer of Your servant** . . . (Nehemiah 1:6)*

*Hezekiah – ¹⁵ Hezekiah prayed to the LORD saying, ¹⁶ “O LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, who is enthroned above the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth. ¹⁷ **Incline Your ear, O LORD, and hear; open Your eyes, O LORD, and see; and listen to all the words of Sennacherib, who sent them to reproach the living God** (Isaiah 37:15-17).*

- D. Nehemiah's Prayers are Steeped in God's Covenantal Promises (1:5b; cf. Exodus 20:6; Psalm 89:2 – both the Old and Davidic covenants incorporate this language). See a very good section on Nehemiah's prayer life in J. I. Packer, *A Passion for Faithfulness*, c. 1995, 78-81).
1. God Preserves the Covenant and Lovingkindness (1:5)
 2. It is also important to note that Nehemiah's prayers may have been steeped not only in the past covenants with Moses and David, but in the promises of the New Covenant. Perhaps he envisioned a reunited Israel (strongly implied in the New Covenant, Jeremiah 31:31, restored in the land).
 3. The longest prayers (1:5-11; ch. 9) are confessional in nature.

- III. Nehemiah Correctly Interprets Israel's History (cf. Leviticus 26:14-46, see 26:33; Nehemiah 9:7-38)

Nehemiah's prayer recounts Israel's history the way God would recount the story of His people. He not only gets the facts correct, but he understands their connection with each other. Ultimately, he comprehends that God has been faithful to His word and His people, while the people were unfaithful to His word and to Him.

CONCLUSION: Often it is difficult to get the details of a story correct, and in these post-exilic books, God hangs these events on the lives of individuals for us in a very helpful way. We are privileged to see them through the eyes of characters involved in the story in significant ways.

In this installment, we will get very well acquainted with Nehemiah. His personal story is a story of faith . . . he is being tested and transformed in the circumstances that unfold, and God will use him to bring other individuals and the entire remnant to further tests of obedience and trust.

Adapted from the Chronological Chart: Period of the Exile and the Restoration (from *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., Gaebelien, Frank, ed., "The Chronology of the Old Testament," ©1988, 1:372).

Nebuchadnezzar	605-562
His years of insanity (c. 582-575)	
His second (?) invasion of Egypt (567)	
Nabonidus	555-539
Belshazzar as viceroy	550(?) - 539
Cyrus the Great	558-529
<i>Zerubbabel and High Priest Joshua's return with 42,360 (558)</i>	
His subjugation of the Medes (550)	
His conquest of the Lydian Empire (547)	
Fall of Babylon (539)	
Darius the Mede as viceroy	539-538
Cyrus assumes the crown of Babylon	538/537
<i>Foundations of the 2nd Temple at Jerusalem (536)</i>	
Death of Daniel (c. 530)	
Reign of Cambyses	529-523
His conquest of Egypt (526-524)	
Usurpation by Bardiya (Smerdis) (523-522)	
Darius the Great	522-485
Ministry of Haggai (520/519)	
Ministry of Zechariah (520-475)	
<i>Jerusalem Second Temple dedicated (516)</i>	
The Greek Ionian Revolt against Persia (500-493)	
Battle of Marathon – Athens vs. Persia (490)	
Xerxes (Ahasuerus)	485-464
Invasion of Greece	
(Battles of Salamis and Plataea) (480-479)	
Queen Esther (c. 478/477)	
Artaxerxes I Longimanus	464-424
Ezra sent to Jerusalem (457)	
Nehemiah's first term as governor (446/445)	
Ministry of Malachi (c. 435)	
Nehemiah's second term as governor (433-430)	