



Finer Grounds

Nehemiah

Lesson 1: Introduction

As we begin a study of the book of Nehemiah, it is vital for us to gain a good understanding of both the historical and religious contexts that bring about the events recorded in this book. The events, religious attitudes, and lessons we find in Nehemiah come immediately after the end of a long downward spiral in the history of God's people. If we can understand the historical circumstances leading up to the writing of Nehemiah, we will better appreciate just how relevant this study will be for us. We don't often devote as much attention to the Old Testament, but my goal with this study is help show how foundational this account is to our modern journey of faith in God's kingdom.

Nehemiah's Place in History

Nehemiah enters the scene as one of the first bright lights in a very dark period of the history of God's people. The good ol' days have long since passed. The "Golden Age" of Israel (under the kingship of David and Solomon) enjoyed great wealth, prosperity, peace, and of course a nationwide devotion to the God who chose them and blessed them. With God's kingdom divided under Solomon's son Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:16-19), the people of God found themselves in a few centuries of religious inconsistency and confusion. Poor leadership, outside pagan influence and unfaithful hearts slowly drove the people further and further from the God who called them to be His holy people. God had enough of the northern kingdom of Israel's rebellion, and by 722 B.C. they were taken into Assyrian captivity (2 Kings 18:11-12). The southern kingdom of Judah lasted

a little while longer, but ultimately they forsook God's covenant and wore out His patience. God granted power to the Babylonian empire and, through king Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonians overthrew Judah, destroyed the city of Jerusalem, demolished God's holy temple, and took the Jews to Babylon as their captives (2 Kings 25:8-21). For their faithlessness, God sentenced the Jews to seventy years of captivity in a foreign land. This meant that God's people were without a home. They no longer enjoyed the physical blessings they enjoyed in the Promised Land. Most importantly they spent seventy years in spiritual disgrace, with no ability to worship their God at His holy temple, no sacrifices for their sins, no joy in knowing they were God's chosen people on the earth. This was the darkest, most depressing period of Jewish history. The Babylonian empire gives way to the rise of the mighty Persians, and the Jews find themselves captives under new management.

By the mid-5th century B.C. however, captivity has ended and God has stirred the hearts of a few of His faithful servants. Two great spiritual leaders rise to the occasion: Ezra the priest, and Nehemiah the personal cupbearer to the Persian king Artaxerxes I. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah are so related to one another that, in the original Hebrew Bible they were both lumped together in one book under the title of "Ezra." It wasn't until the 4th century A.D., when Jerome compiled the new Latin translation of the Bible, that the book of Nehemiah was separated from Ezra by the title we now use today ("Ezra-Nehemiah" ISBE). These two works are truly



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meant to be read together. In order to fully appreciate the lessons of Nehemiah, the Bible student should first familiarize themselves by reading through the book of Ezra.

Please read the book of Ezra at this time.

About the Author

Now that most of the Jews have returned to the land of Judah in wave, and the temple has been rebuilt under Ezra's guidance, we are introduced to Nehemiah. The author plainly states in his opening line "The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachabiah..." (Nehemiah 1:1). The remainder of the book (except for chapters 10-12) is written by Nehemiah from the perspective of a first-person narrative. Not all the Jews had returned from captivity, as many stayed behind. Nehemiah rose in prominence to hold the position of the Persian king's personal cup-bearer (Nehemiah 1:11). Upon hearing a report from his brother that the great city of Jerusalem still remained in ruins, Nehemiah was convicted and turned his heart to God in an amazing gesture of repentance on behalf of the Jewish nation (Nehemiah 1:1-11). Put yourself in Nehemiah's shoes. Jerusalem is supposed to be the center for your faith, and not only was Nehemiah separated by distance, but to also receive the news of the disregard and neglect the Jews in Jerusalem had for God would be heartbreaking.

As a result of Nehemiah's favorable reputation with king Artaxerxes I, he is commissioned as governor over the land of Judah with the authority rebuild the great wall that once protected the city of God (Nehemiah 2:1-9). Throughout the book, Nehemiah actually serves as governor over Judah twice. The first time lasts

about twelve years and occupies chapters 1-9 (Nehemiah 5:14). Here Nehemiah leads the people to rebuild the wall and initiates a great religious restoration movement. His second governorship deals with a special dedication of the wall, as well as further religious restoration to correct the sins of the priests which occurred while he was away in Persia (Nehemiah 13:6-7).

Geographical Setting

The events of Nehemiah are spread out between two primary locations. The book begins with Nehemiah serving in the Persian royal court in the capitol city of Susa, which is a little over an 800-mile trip from Jerusalem ("Shushan" ISBE). In chapter two, Nehemiah travels from Susa to Jerusalem in 444 B.C. ("Nehemiah" ISBE) to begin construction of the city wall around Jerusalem. He returns to Susa 11 years later in 433 BC to give a report to King Artaxerxes (13:6). Nehemiah soon returns back to Jerusalem upon hearing reports of religious corruption in the priesthood. All in all, Nehemiah puts in nearly 2,500 miles of travel on horseback in his journeys between Susa and Jerusalem.

Major Events in Nehemiah

The main events Nehemiah's record is concerned with basically fall into three categories: the rebuilding of the wall around Jerusalem, the restoration and appointment of the Levitical priesthood, and the religious restoration of the Jewish faith. It is important for us to understand that a city wall was no mere 'privacy fence' or simply a distinction of property. This wall was crucial to defending God's people, His temple, and the Jews' religious epicenter from hostile outside forces. With constant battles and



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territorial wars, a city wall promised peace and security to its inhabitants. Jerusalem without a wall would be like you not having a front door to your home. Can you imagine the emotional and physical insecurity you would feel if you had no doors to your home? The wall also served a vital symbolic role as it maintained a clear separation between God’s holy people and the corrupting influences of the world around them. While much is made about the rebuilding of the wall in this book, that process only takes fifty-two days (Nehemiah 6:15). The remainder of Nehemiah’s thirteen-year governorship is primarily devoted to restoring God’s people to the original faith given in the Law of Moses and restoring the worship God legislated during the reign of David.

Seeing the Big Picture

Now that we understand more of the background of Nehemiah, it is important to identify the main theme of his book. To accomplish this, it is best to read the entire book of Nehemiah all in one sitting (at least once). This takes some time, but there is no better way to see an overall flow for the book.

Read the whole book of Nehemiah at this time.

After reading this book the whole way through, you probably identified several themes. Now, go back and carefully read the five following passages again to see if you can pick up on what may be the one main theme that drives the entire book of Nehemiah.

- **Nehemiah 2:1-8**
- **Nehemiah 8:13-18**

- **Nehemiah 10:39**
- **Nehemiah 13:6-14**
- **Nehemiah 13:29-31**

When you compare these five passages together, what can you conclude is the overarching theme of the book?

As we study this book some of the key themes we see repeated is the concept of restoration, although the actual word does not appear that often. It is especially important to note the difference between reformation and restoration.

Many scholars, when commenting on the book of Nehemiah often use the term “reformation” to describe Nehemiah’s efforts in rebuilding the wall and getting the people back on track spiritually. Why would it be incorrect to describe Nehemiah’s work as “religious reformation” rather than “religious restoration”?

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a “reform” is to “Make changes in (something, especially an institution or practice) in order to improve it.” Whereas “restore” means to

“Bring back or re-establish (a previous right, practice, or situation)...to repair or renovate (a building, work of art, etc.) so as to return it to its original condition.” It’s clear by looking at



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Nehemiah's efforts, he wasn't merely trying to reform a broken religion by making improvements. Rather, Nehemiah worked tirelessly to fully restore the Jewish faith back to the original form, function, and attitude God originally intended for His people. Like Nehemiah, it must be our primary goal to constantly focus on restoring our Christianity back to God's original intent, rather than being content with minor reforms and changes here and there.

How is Nehemiah Relevant to Me?

Now that we have a broader understanding of this book, we can try to answer the question that we often try to attempt to answer first and that is "So What?" How is an in-depth study of Nehemiah relevant to the lives of Christians in the 21st century? By spending time reflecting on the lessons found in this great book you will certainly find many powerful, and timely, applications for God's people today. Nehemiah is a book all about restoration; God's desire to bring His people back to His original intent for them when He first entered into a covenant relationship with them. In Nehemiah we see:

1. God's desire for us to restore our worship to how He originally intended
2. God's desire for us to restore the form and function for how His will is to be conducted in the house of God
3. God's desire to restore His rightful place as the center of families
4. God's desire to restore the proper balance of priorities in His people's lives

5. God's desire to restore an attitude of reverence and commitment among God's people

As we dig deeper into this book we will try to identify the cultural, historical and religious significance for the original audience in order to see how Nehemiah's efforts toward restoration are still relevant to us today.

Works Cited

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