

Nehemiah 1-2:8 – Chapter Study

INTRODUCTION

Nehemiah is one of my favorite books of the Bible.

Besides telling a great story, it also has a fantastic set of lessons for us in 2 different realms –

1) It's a great manual on godly leadership.

Whatever else you might say about Nehemiah, he was a standout leader.

Anyone who's in a position of leadership would be well served to study this book at length and follow the example Nehemiah gives.

2) The story of Nehemiah's rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem is an incredibly powerful picture of the work of the Holy Spirit in conforming the believer into the image of Jesus Christ!

In the Hebrew Bible, Ezra & Nehemiah were one book, divided into 2 scrolls called 1st & 2nd Ezra.

Though most of Nehemiah is written in the first person from Nehemiah's perspective, it's recognized by most scholars that Ezra actually wrote Nehemiah from the records Nehemiah kept.

Remember that Ezra was an expert scribe who wrote 1 & 2 Chronicles as well as Ezra & Nehemiah.

He was in the best position to do so because he had access to the royal records of the Persian court & had been a close confidant of the Persian king Artaxerxes before he led the 2nd return of exiles to Jerusalem in about 458 BC.

That was 80 years after the 1st return under the governor, Zerubbabel who'd led the first wave of returnees in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem.

When Ezra returned 80 years later, he came with a vast amount of wealth to revitalize the worship & service of at the temple which had fallen on hard times due to the poverty of the region.

You see, though the temple had been rebuilt, the reconstruction of the rest of Jerusalem had languished.

Most notable were the conditions of the walls & the rest of the infrastructure of the city, its roads & water supply.

The people had rebuilt their homes somewhat but their greatest need – secure walls, went undone.

Without walls, the people of Jerusalem were subject to the constant harassment of their enemies to the north & east, the Samaritans & Ammonites, who did not want them to thrive.

These people had exercised control over Judah prior to the Zerubbabel's arrival with the first wave of returnees.

They didn't want to give up their power over the region so were forever conspiring to keep the Jews from asserting themselves.

Building walls around their city would have been the single greatest threat to their influence since it would have provided Jerusalem with defenses & shut them out.

So as we come now to Nehemiah, the temple has been rebuilt, worship has been renewed, & Ezra has installed the Law of God at the heart of Judah. But Jerusalem for all intents & purposes is still in ruins. Though Ezra has been *delegated authority* to rule & apply God's Word to the affairs of the region, because Jerusalem lacks walls, he can't fully implement the authority given him. What Jerusalem needs is walls. It needs *boundaries*. It needs the *identity & authority* only rebuilt walls & gates can provide. That's what Nehemiah will come to do.

Outline

I. FIRST TERM AS GOVERNOR Chs. 1-12

II. SECOND TERM AS GOVERNOR Ch. 13

I. FIRST TERM AS GOVERNOR Chs. 1-12

A. Return & Reconstruction Chs. 1-7

1. Return to Jerusalem Chs. 1-2

a. Hanani's report 1:1-3

¹ The words of Nehemiah the son of Hachaliah.

There's nothing in the Scriptures that gives us a clue which tribe Nehemiah came from.

It came to pass in the month of Chislev, in the 20th year, as I was in Shushan the citadel,

The Hebrew month of Chislev runs from mid-November to mid-December.

The 20th year of the Persian king Artaxerxes was 446 B.C.

Nehemiah was in the Persian palace at Shushan because as v. 11 tells us, he was the *royal cupbearer*.

Now, Nehemiah's role as the royal cup-bearer is what I want to talk about Sunday, so I'll be brief in my comments tonight & save the good stuff for Sunday.

While the royal cup-bearer had several jobs, his most important role was to check for poison in the food served the king.

He did this by tasting the food & wine himself.

Because of the necessary intimacy & trust this role required, the cup-bearer became one of the king's closest confidants & counselors.

The Persian kings had several palaces scattered around their extensive empire.

They spent the *winter* in the fortified palace at Shushan, AKA Susa. That's where our story opens.

² that Hanani one of my brethren came with men from Judah; and I asked them concerning the Jews who had escaped, who had survived the captivity, and concerning Jerusalem.

One day, as Nehemiah was going about his business a small group of Jewish officials arrived from Jerusalem. Among them was Nehemiah's brother.

Curious how things were going among those who'd returned, Nehemiah asked for news.

³ And they said to me, “The survivors who are left from the captivity in the province are there in great distress and reproach. The wall of Jerusalem is also broken down, and its gates are burned with fire.”

The report wasn't good; things weren't going well at all!

The Jews were being oppressed by their enemies.

And the walls destroyed by the Babylonians 150 years before were still in ruins though that ought to have been *one of the first* works of rebuilding the returnees had accomplished.

This report marked a turning point in Nehemiah's life.

Like a large door, great life-changing events can swing on small hinges.

It was just another day when Moses went out to care for his sheep, but on *that day* he heard the Lord's call & became a prophet (Ex. 3).

It was an ordinary day when David was called home from shepherding his flock; but on *that day*, he was anointed king (1 Sam. 16).

It was an ordinary day when Peter, Andrew, James, & John were mending their nets after a night of failure; but *that* was the day Jesus called them to become fishers of men (Luke 5:1-11).

You never know what God has in store, even in a commonplace conversation with a friend or relative; so keep your heart open to God's providential leading.

A shoe salesman was working one day when a customer made the offhand comment to him as he measured him for a pair of shoes, “The world has yet to see what God can do through one man who is completely devoted to Him.”

Those words dropped like sparks into the dry kindling of that young shoe salesman's heart.

He said, “I want to be that man. God let me be that man!”

His name was *Dwight Lyman Moody*.

b. Nehemiah's reaction 1:4-11

⁴ So it was, when I heard these words, that I sat down and wept, and mourned for many days; I was fasting and praying before the God of heaven.

The report of Jerusalem's distress troubled Nehemiah.

He knew all about the history of his people – how the Babylonians had destroyed Jerusalem's walls, gates, & temple a century & a half before.

But he assumed the previous 2 groups that returned would have rebuilt the city. To hear the walls were still rubble was a blow he had a hard time accepting.

Why would Nehemiah care about people he hardly knew, living a thousand miles away?

After all, he enjoyed a position of great power & privilege in the world's greatest empire.

It wasn't *his fault* his ancestors had sinned against the Lord and brought judgment upon themselves.

150 years before Nehemiah, the Prophet Jeremiah had spoken this word from the Lord:

Who will have pity on you, O Jerusalem? Who will bemoan you? Who

will turn aside to ask how you are doing?" [Jer. 15:5]

Nehemiah was that man.

He cared about Jerusalem and the people living there because he knew God cared about them.

He knew it was God's desire to rebuild the City because it had been foretold by the prophets.

That nearly a hundred years had passed and the walls were still in ruins was contrary to what Nehemiah knew God willed and this bugged him beyond words.

When he first heard the report, his reaction was similar to Ezra's when he heard of the leaders' taking pagan wives; he was ruined!

Nehemiah sat down and broke down – weeping profusely.

He became physically weak with sorrow *over* Jerusalem's condition.

Then he gave himself to a time of fasting and prayer *for* Jerusalem.

What makes people laugh or weep is often an indication of their character.

People who laugh at others' misfortunes are lacking either in culture or character, & possibly both.

Sometimes weeping is a sign of weakness; but with Nehemiah, it was a sign of strength, as it was with Jeremiah (Jer. 9:1), Paul (Acts 20:19), & the Lord Jesus (Luke 19:41).

Nehemiah prayed.

When the burden for Jerusalem didn't lift, he *intensified* his prayers & began to fast.

When the burden *still* didn't lift, he knew he was to do *more* than pray.

He was to do something in helping to rebuild the city & people.

Vs. 5-11 tell us *what* Nehemiah prayed . . .

5 And I said: "I pray, LORD God of heaven, O great and awesome God, You who keep Your covenant and mercy with those who love You and observe Your commandments,

Nehemiah opens with praise, setting his focus on the power of God.

That's always a great place to begin prayer.

6 please let Your ear be attentive and Your eyes open, that You may hear the prayer of Your servant which I pray before You now, day and night, for the children of Israel Your servants, and confess the sins of the children of Israel which we have sinned against You. Both my father's house and I have sinned. 7 We have acted very corruptly against You, and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, nor the ordinances which You commanded Your servant Moses.

As we saw with Ezra, though Nehemiah was a godly, good man, he identified *with* his people & confessed their sins.

8 Remember, I pray, the word that You commanded Your servant Moses, saying, 'If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the nations; 9 but if you return to Me, and keep My commandments and do them, though some of you were cast out to the farthest part of the heavens, yet I will gather them from there, and bring them to the place

which I have chosen as a dwelling for My name.'

Nehemiah must have been a student of the Word because he knew about God's promises to Abraham, Moses & the prophets.

He held these promises up before God & asked Him to perform them.

That's the key to effective prayer; Discover the promises of God, then ask Him to fulfill them.

¹⁰ Now these are Your servants and Your people, whom You have redeemed by Your great power, and by Your strong hand. ¹¹ O Lord, I pray, please let Your ear be attentive to the prayer of Your servant, and to the prayer of Your servants who desire to fear Your name; and let Your servant prosper this day, I pray, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man." For I was the king's cupbearer.

Realizing God was calling him to take an active part in rebuilding Jerusalem, Nehemiah prayed for favor with the king to get the necessary permission and resources to accomplish the task

In all of this, Nehemiah becomes a picture of Jesus.

As the royal cupbearer he had power, influence, & privilege in the midst of great luxury & majesty

But when he learned of the desperate plight of his people who were poor & oppressed, he was willing to set it all aside & take on a dangerous mission.

As the leader of the work of rebuilding he would have to make the long trek to Judea & bear the reproach & shame his people were facing from their enemies once he got there.

Then there would be the hardship of living in a city still largely in ruins.

Jesus, the eternal Son of God saw our desperate spiritual poverty & the crushing oppression & was moved with compassion.

Though surrounded by heavenly glory, He left it all and made the long trip to Earth where he suffered all the indignities the enemies of God could heap on Him.

But His goal, His mission was to restore us to God, to rebuild us into the divine image we were originally created in.

So Nehemiah begins by being a picture of Jesus, but that picture changes & turns him into a marvelous type of the Holy Spirit.

Which is what we'd expect because the ministry of Christ was performed by the power of the Spirit.

And Jesus said after His resurrection, He would return to indwell & empower His followers thru the Holy Spirit whom He called the "Comforter."

The name 'Nehemiah' means, '*Yahweh comforts.*' We'll see how this plays out later.

c. Nehemiah sent 2:1-10

In ch. 1 we see Nehemiah as a man of *prayer*. In ch. 2 he's a man of *faith*
Martin Luther said, "Faith is a living, daring confidence in God's grace. It is so sure and certain a man could stake his life on it a thousand times."

In Mark 9:23 Jesus said, "All things are possible to him who believes."

He said real faith can move mountains! (Matt. 17:20)

This chapter describes 3 evidences of Nehemiah's faith.

- 1) Vs. 1-3 = He had the faith to *wait*
- 2) Vs. 4-8 = He had the faith to *ask*
- 3) Vs. 11-18 = He had the faith to *challenge others*

¹ And it came to pass in the month of Nisan, in the 20th year of King Artaxerxes,

This is our March-April of 445 BC.

4 months have passed & the way the story is worded, Nehemiah has been praying all the while.

when wine was before him, that I took the wine and gave it to the king. Now I had never been sad in his presence before. ² Therefore the king said to me, “Why is your face sad, since you are not sick? This is nothing but sorrow of heart.” So I became dreadfully afraid, ³ and said to the king, “May the king live forever! Why should my face not be sad, when the city, the place of my fathers’ tombs, lies waste, and its gates are burned with fire?”

One day as Nehemiah was performing his regular duties, the emotional burden of Jerusalem registered on his countenance.

Artaxerxes knew his friend well & saw the distress. He knew Nehemiah well enough to know he wasn’t physically ill – this was different.

So he asked him what was going on – why he was distressed.

Nehemiah’s reaction was initially to be terrified, which is certainly *not* a reaction born by faith.

But it’s a great evidence of humanity and that as godly as he was, he wasn’t perfect.

The reason Nehemiah was terrified was because of court etiquette.

Persian kings were sheltered from anything that might cause them to be unhappy. (Es. 4:1-2)

Since it was the king’s responsibility to take care of his subjects, when anyone appeared before the king they were supposed to look like they were happy.

If they *weren’t* happy, it was an insult to the king because it could be construed as saying he’d failed to take care of them.

Though Nehemiah was close to Artaxerxes, he knew ultimately that didn’t count for much in the Persian court.

Kings dispatched trusted assistants at a whim, many times on the smallest of mistakes.

So when Artaxerxes questioned Nehemiah’s obvious sadness, Nehemiah had a moment of panic – wondering if this meant the end.

But then his faith in God reasserted itself and he recognized this was the critical moment he’d prayed for.

Everything hinged on this one moment as he spelled out the plans he’d arrived at thru prayer.

Nehemiah waited patiently & prayerfully for 4 months till this day finally came.

Hebrew 6:12 says that it’s “*through faith & patience*” that we inherit the promises.

Faith in God brings a calmness of heart that keeps us from rushing about trying to do in our own strength what only God can do.

God knows our tendency to rush into action & take matters into our own hands. We think it's our responsibility to ***DO*** something - lest God find us a lazy.

So God's given us 3 passages to calm our hearts & call us to seek the Lord in quietness -

Ex. 14:13 "Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord"

Ruth 3:18 "Sit still . . . until you know how the matter will turn out"

Ps. 46:10 "Be still, and know that I am God"

When we wait on the Lord in prayer, we are not *wasting* our time; we're *investing* it.

Then, when the right time arrives for us to *act by faith*, we dare not delay. Faith is not an excuse for inaction.

As Hebrews 11 makes clear, faith will always *end up* producing action on our part.

But action not *preceded* by quiet confidence in God is *presumption*.

4 Then the king said to me, "What do you request?" So I prayed to the God of heaven.

Artaxerxes asked him, "What do you want?" What an opportunity for Nehemiah!

All the power & wealth of the kingdom were wrapped up in that question! Nehemiah shot a quick prayer up to the Lord.

But keep in mind that this "emergency prayer" was backed up by 4 months of fasting & praying.

Short, pointed, emergency prayers are entirely appropriate when the need arrives.

But they can't be the only prayers we make.

If all I ever say to Lynn is, "Luv u!" Just those 2 words, nothing else – she's not going to have tremendous confidence in my care for her.

"Luv u" only means something if it comes from the context of a mutually shared life with lots & lots of other communication & loving tenderness.

When reading the Bible, I try to use a sanctified imagination and picture the scene.

When I read this, I see Nehemiah standing before 2 thrones - 1 on earth, the other in heaven.

He'd waited for an invitation before he could share his burden with the earthly king.

But he'd already spent 4 months pouring out his tears & heart & cries to the throne of grace where a higher ruler sat enthroned in a glory that made the Persian court look like a flea market fire sale.

Nehemiah had to be careful to say *just the right thing* before Artaxerxes, but he could speak without hesitation or reservation before Yahweh.

Heb 4:16 - Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

That word *boldly* means to have freedom of speech.

5 And I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, and if your servant has found favor in your sight, I ask that you send me to Judah, to the city of my fathers' tombs, that I may rebuild it." 6 Then the king said to me (the queen also sitting beside him), "How long will your journey be? And when will you return?" So it pleased the king to send me; and I

set him a time.

It would not be easy for Artaxerxes to let Nehemiah go since he'd proven himself so trustworthy.

Installing a new cup-bearer would provide a potential opening for any palace conspiracies to put one of their agents in that place.

Artaxerxes agreed to let Nehemiah go, but only for a season. It wasn't an indefinite assignment.

Nehemiah had already done the calculations and knew about how long it would take him to accomplish the task of rebuilding.

So he was able to tell Artaxerxes when he'd be back. Keep that in mind, we'll come back to it later.

7 Furthermore I said to the king, "If it pleases the king, let letters be given to me for the governors of the region beyond the River, that they must permit me to pass through till I come to Judah, ⁸ and a letter to Asaph the keeper of the king's forest, that he must give me timber to make beams for the gates of the citadel which pertains to the temple, for the city wall, and for the house that I will occupy." And the king granted them to me according to the good hand of my God upon me.

Not only had Nehemiah *prayed* for this opportunity, he'd also *planned* for it and had answers ready to any questions the king might ask.

During those 4 months of waiting, he'd thought the matter through & knew exactly how he would approach the project.

His reply to the king can be summarized in 2 requests:

- 1) Send me! = vs. 4-6 //
- 2) Give me! = vs. 7-10

Nehemiah could not leave his post without the approval of the king, nor could he work in Jerusalem without the authority of the king.

Pressure from local officials had stopped the rebuilding once before (Ezra 4) & Nehemiah didn't want history to repeat itself.

He asked Artaxerxes to appoint him governor of Judah & to give him the authority he needed to rebuild.

Nehemiah knew he needed letters of introduction that would guarantee safe passage between Susa & Jerusalem.

He also requested written permission to requisition the materials needed for the reconstruction.

Because Nehemiah was an excellent leader, he'd done his research well.

He even knew the name of the keeper of the king's forest.

Artaxerxes gave him what he asked, but Nehemiah knew the hand of God was the ultimate cause of favor.

There's an important lesson here for us, especially leaders & those engaged in any kind of ministry.

Nehemiah was a man of great faith and prayer.

He knew he could do nothing without prayer & waiting on God first.

But he wasn't so spiritually focused that he failed to make concrete plans.

He knew the day would come when faith had to be turned into action and was ready with a specific set of blueprints to "git 'er done!"

I've known a few people over the years who've had the attitude that *planning* is a work of the flesh.

They think faith means sitting on your hands and praying until God move miraculously on His own without any participation on our part *except* to pray.

Have you heard the story of the man in Texas whose house was flooded?

The water rose & rose so he ended up on his roof praying for God to rescue him.

The waters got higher and he prayed harder.

Then a boat came by with some rescue personnel in it telling him to climb in.

But he declined, saying he was praying for the Lord to rescue him.

They couldn't get him in the boat so they left to rescue others who wanted their help.

The waters rose higher and the guy drowned.

When he stood before God in heaven he asked, God why didn't You rescue me?"

God said, "I sent you a boat!"

Again – faith in God doesn't prohibit our making plans.

It just recognizes that our plans cannot succeed apart from God's good hand of favor – as Nehemiah says here in v. 8.

Nehemiah provides another great lesson in that he shows us how believers should relate to unsaved officials as we seek to do the work of God.

He respected the king & sought to work within the lines of authority that existed in the empire.

He didn't say, "I have a commission from the Lord to go to Jerusalem & I'm going whether you like it or not!"

When it comes to matters of conscience, we must always obey God rather than men (Acts 5:29); but *even then*, we must show respect for authority (see Rom. 13 & 1 Peter 2:11-25).

There are some wonderful lessons on leadership we see in the story so far:

- 1) Prayer has to be the highest and first priority of the one who would lead
 - 2) The effective leader is one who gains a vision for what needs to be done
 - 3) The effective leader prayerfully develops a plan and thinks it through
 - 4) The leader recognizes open doors and takes them
 - 5) The leader is able to clearly communicate to others what they need to get the job done
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But there is another level to our story that we have to touch on before we can move on . . .

And that is to see Nehemiah as a picture of the Holy Spirit.

Again, his name means *Yahweh comforts* or the *Comforter of Yahweh*.

Consider what we've seen in Nehemiah so far & how it parallels what we know about the Holy Spirit in the life of the believer.

As the story opens, the temple & altar have been rebuilt in Jerusalem.

The worship of God has been restored, but the walls of Jerusalem are still in ruins & as a result the people are suffering at the hands of oppressors.

When Nehemiah heard of this, he wept & mourned over the city & people.

This is a picture of the Holy Spirit who *yearns* for us to be conformed to the image of Christ.

James 4:5 - Or do you think that the Scripture says in vain, "The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously"?

Like Jerusalem with its rebuilt temple, the moment we're born again, the worship of God is established in our lives.

But a life of sin has beaten down the walls of our personality & left us in ruins. The Holy Spirit desires to rebuild us & to restore the image of God in which we were originally created.

Just as Nehemiah got a vision for rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit has a vision for conforming you & me to the image of Jesus Christ.

And just as Nehemiah received all the authority & resources needed to accomplish the task of rebuilding, so the Holy Spirit has all that's needed to do the work of rebuilding us.

Nehemiah's mission was clear - Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.

The people were suffering oppression from their enemies because of a lack of walls.

The walls were *defensive*. They provided strength against attack & the ability to halt further harassment.

Walls also gave *identity* to the city - they defined where the city began & ended - they gave definition & content to the city.

The gates, which were a part of the walls, were the points of both access into & exit from the city.

Because gatekeepers *controlled* entrance & exit, the gates were places of *authority*.

All of this pictures how the Holy Spirit wants to work in our lives

Because we're born again, worship of God has been established in our hearts.

But God wants to do a work of rebuilding in us to give us a *new identity*, *authority*, & the ability to defend ourselves against the enemy who wants to oppress & harass us.

The Holy Spirit wants us to know who we *really are* in Christ.

He wants us to understand the *authority* that's ours as His people.

And He wants us to give us the strength to say "yes & no" to what we allow in & out of our lives.

Keep all of this in mind as we read each verse because in many ways Nehemiah's work of rebuilding Jerusalem is parallel to the Holy Spirit's work in us.