



The Bible Challenge

A daily guide to reading the Bible in a year

Nehemiah

Chapters 1-13

Rebuilding and Renewal

The Exile is partially over. But, the walls of Jerusalem are in ruins and the people of Jerusalem are not organized for worship of the Lord. God has put it on the heart of his servant Nehemiah to lead the people of Judea in the rebuilding of the walls of their capital city, Jerusalem. The rebuilding signifies a greater rebuilding of confidence in YHWH's provision and mercy and a renewal of his people's covenant with him.

By the gracious consideration of the Persian king, Artaxerxes, and the providential hand of God, some Israelites are allowed to return to the "land of their fathers" and rebuild their homeland. Nehemiah is the right leader to return, organize and reconstitute a broken people to rebuild a broken city.

Outline of Nehemiah	Chapters
Rebuilding the Walls of Jerusalem	1-7
Renewing the Covenant	8-13

The structure of Nehemiah reveals a two phase approach to Nehemiah's leadership in restoration. The first task is to rebuild and secure the walls of the City of Jerusalem. This is a critical task to fortify not only the Temple complex for worship, but also to fortify the hearts and character of the people of Israel. There would be those who would seek to sabotage the rebuilding of walls, because they would not have the people of Judea regain their strength as a people.

The second half of the book is about the restoration of the spiritual walls of the people through the renewal of their covenant with YHWH. It begins with the reading of the Torah and great offerings of thanksgiving and repentance. This phase also is potentially sabotaged by worldly influences and human sin.

The leadership of Nehemiah is key to keeping both the physical and spiritual restoration projects on track. For this reason the book of Nehemiah is a useful resource to instruct any leader who would seek to reform, renew or rebuild the kingdom of God.



“Those who survived the exile and are back in the province are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been burned with fire.” Neh. 1:3

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The Heart of the Problem (1:1-2:20)

The first two chapters reveal the heart of Nehemiah as YHWH's chosen leader for reform and the challenge before him.

Nehemiah's job is to serve as a cupbearer to the King of the Persian Empire in Susa. Yet, his genuine concern lies with the people of Judah and the city of Jerusalem. He hears news which will form the character of his calling.

Nehemiah's response to this news is to take personal responsibility for the problem. He grieves over the brokenness of his people and is deeply moved to repentance and confession. He calls upon the name of the LORD for forgiveness and restoration. (1:4-11)

I confess the sins we Israelites, including myself and my father's family, have committed against you. --Nehemiah 1:6

The foundation of Nehemiah's reform effort is in repentance and prayer. YHWH providentially removes massive obstacles for Nehemiah because of this personal commitment to seek his face. The first such obstacle is the Persian King! The king not only lets Nehemiah return to Jerusalem he even provides letters for protection and financial support! (2:1-8)

When Nehemiah arrives in Jerusalem to survey the task before him, he quickly is introduced to the local opposition to rebuilding in the persons of Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite. These two were greatly displeased that "someone had come to seek the welfare of the people of Israel." (2:10)

Nevertheless, Nehemiah first takes personal inventory of the scope of the task before him and the people. (2:11-16). He then publically casts a vision for a rebuild Jerusalem:

Then I said to them, “You see the trouble we are in, how Jerusalem lies in ruins with its gates burned. Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem, that we may no longer suffer derision.” Neh. 2:17



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Rebuilding and Resistance

The vision of Nehemiah was compelling. The people set their hearts and hands to the task of repairing the walls of Jerusalem. From all over the region men (and women!) came and section by section, district by district, rebuilt and raised the gates and walls (3:1-32).

Yet their work was not without opposition. There were those who had an interest in seeing that the walls remained in disrepair.

Now when Sanballat heard that we were building the wall, he was angry and greatly enraged, and he jeered at the Jews. And he said in the presence of his brothers and of the army of Samaria, "What are these feeble Jews doing? Will they restore it for themselves? Will they sacrifice? Will they finish up in a day? Will they revive the stones out of the heaps of rubbish, and burned ones at that?" Neh. 4:1-2

Nehemiah encouraged the hearts of the people to stand tall (4:14). He then led the people to resist the opposition in several important ways.

First, they gave over their enemies to the LORD and called on him for protection (4:4-5). Second, they armed themselves and showed themselves ready to defend their work, their families and their homes (4:16). Thirdly, they continued to rebuild thus showing themselves to be strong to the task of rebuilding. (4:15-16)

The second form of opposition came from within the community itself. As Nehemiah, learned of the broken walls, he also learned of the broken relationships because of usury (5:7) and human trafficking in slavery (5:5, 8) within the family of God. Nehemiah called the people to keep covenant with one another and repent of these personal violations to the family of God. (5:9-13) He then addressed the underling need that led to the breakdown of community: famine cause by burdensome taxes. (5:15)



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The final opposition came in the form of a conspiracy against Nehemiah himself. Sanballat and Tobiah staged a last ditch effort at thwarting the rebuilding by seeking to entrap Nehemiah using intimidation, lies and fear. Through false prophesy they attempted to trick him into entering the Holy of Holies to be struck by the Holiness of God. Yet Nehemiah was protected because he feared God more than men:

*But I said, "Should such a man as I run away?
And what man such as I could go into the
temple and live? I will not go in." (Neh. 6:11)*

Despite all of the opposition and resistance to rebuilding the walls, gates and doors of Jerusalem, Nehemiah and the people prevailed in completing the task. Chapter 7 serves as a taking inventory and stock of the people and the resources of a rebuilt Jerusalem. With the boundaries of Jerusalem restored, the Nehemiah's attention now turned to the restoration of the Covenant within the minds and hearts of the people.

Covenant Restoration (8-13)

The rebuilt walls of Jerusalem served to provide a protected and sacred space within which the remnant of Judah could be rebuilt as the Covenant people of God. The real issue is that the covenant relationship with YHWH was in disrepair.

In Chapter 8, we read of the scribe Ezra, assembles the people within the walls to hear again the reading of the Torah of God. The people responded with faith and a teachable spirit. (8:1-8)

The people restored the festival of the booths, something which had not been celebrated in Israel since the time of Joshua. (8:17) The restoration in the Land is akin to a new exodus and conquest. The remnant had wandered through the "wilderness" of the Babylonian exile because of their sin; and yet, God had proved faithful to show mercy to them--just as he had done in the days of Moses. (9:1-38) Following confession, the people recommitted themselves to covenant faithfulness and offerings to the LORD (10:1-39)

*Yet you have been
righteous in all that has
come upon us, for you
have dealt faithfully and
we have acted wickedly.*

--Nehemiah 9:33



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"We will not neglect the house of the House of our God"

--Nehemiah 10:39

Neglecting the House of Our God (11-13)

The testimony of the people was to keep covenant and maintain the Temple through faithful worship, offerings and tithes. Chapters 10 and 11, is another taking of stock of all the people who renewed the covenant and offered to live within and just outside the walls of Jerusalem in faithful service of the LORD: gatekeepers, priests, singers and the like.

However, just as there was opposition to the rebuilding of the physical walls, so too there was opposition and sabotage of the rebuilding of the spiritual walls of Jerusalem. There were several areas of compromise that required the reforming leadership of Nehemiah.

First, the Ammonite Tobiah, was related to Eliashab the priest in charge of the chambers of the Temple complex. He allowed the foreigner to dwell in a room which had a purpose for the Lord's usage. Nehemiah kicked him out and restored the chamber for its godly purpose. (13:4-9)

A second problem was caused by a failure to bring the appropriate offerings to the Levites, forcing them to abandon the service of worship in order to provide for their families. This too was addressed by Nehemiah. (13:10-14)

A third problem was in buying and selling on the Sabbath (13:15-22) and the inner marriage with Ammonites and Moabites. In both cases, Nehemiah led the people to repentance and held them accountable to covenant faithfulness.

³⁰ Thus I cleansed them from everything foreign, and I established the duties of the priests and Levites, each in his work; ³¹ and I provided for the wood offering at appointed times, and for the firstfruits.

*Remember me, O my God, for good.
--Nehemiah 13:30-31*
