

Nehemiah Part 1: Welcome to My World

Introduction to Nehemiah:

Nehemiah was a Jew who was born in Persia (modern day Iran) after the Babylonian exile had ended. (*The Persian Empire extended to include part of India, all of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Israel, Egypt and parts of Libya and Greece!*) He was a member of the court of Persia as cupbearer to the king. But he had a heart for God and a faith in God that vaulted him into leadership in Israel at a time of weakness, confusion and stagnancy.

But the message of the book of *Nehemiah*, cannot be well understood apart from a knowledge of the times and place in which he lived. It is like jumping into the “Star Wars” saga at the fifth movie and always wondering “*Who is this Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker they keep talking about?*” We end up missing the point. For example, the Jews view the books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah* as a single book.

I. The Historical Context of Nehemiah:

The Bible is not a collection books but one book about God. There is a unity that is not evident to most people. The story of redemption begins with Abraham in Genesis chapter 12. This is one of the most pivotal chapters in the whole Bible. There are three things needed in order to have a kingdom. You have to have a people, you have to have a place, and you have to have a king. In Genesis 12, God promises Abraham that He would give him a land, and many descendants and a blessing. And He says that Abraham would be the source of God’s blessing on all nations. We call this promise the Abrahamic Covenant. The nature of that blessing is not revealed in Genesis 12. But *Galatians* tells us that God was actually announcing the Gospel in advance to Abraham when he made this promise.

It is 13 years later that God tells him what the blessing actually is. It is this: “*I will be your God and you will be my people.*” This is the promise that God Himself will be their King. So the promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 is the promise of a people, a place and a king. It is the promise of the kingdom of God is “seed form”. And it is the promise of a relationship with God for all nations that would reach its full reality when Christ died on the Cross for all people and then sent the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost to indwell all who would put their faith in him.

The rest of *Genesis* becomes *the drama of the promised descendants*. Will God provide the promised descendants; the people of the kingdom, to Abraham? Thus we keep encountering a strange coincidence: the women of the promise are all barren. Though Abraham is promised many descendants, the women who are supposed to bear these children are unable to have

children. Only the direct intervention of God can make this happen. And God does so again and again. This is a hint that all the descendants of Abraham, the children of that promise, are born through faith, not through the flesh.

Beginnings and ending of books in the Bible are important! The book of *Exodus* begins by repeatedly telling us that the descendants of Abraham had multiplied in the land of Egypt. So much so that Pharaoh wanted Jewish baby boys killed at birth. It is a signal that *the drama of the promised descendants* has come to a close and *the drama of the promised King* is beginning. God takes the initiative to save the people out of slavery in Egypt by the sacrifice of a Passover Lamb. It foreshadows a greater salvation yet to come when the people of the kingdom will be set free from slavery to sin by the sacrifice of the Lamb of God. In the desert, the King reveals that He is a holy God and holiness is required for Him to be their God and they to be His people. Moses led the people through this time in the desert. And the book concludes with the Tabernacle of God being built and the glory of God literally comes down in their midst. It is a very visible fulfillment of the promise that He would be their God, and they would be His people.

In the book of *Joshua*, the focus shifts to *the drama of the promised Land*. Will the King provide a place of rest for His people to dwell? They entered Promised Land around 1400 BC. and it seems like the promise to Abraham has finally been fulfilled. And then it all falls apart!

In *Judges*, the people of the promise repeatedly disobey their God and King in the land He promised them. They are defeated by their enemies again and again. But they find freedom and life whenever they turn back to their king. Finally, the people think they recognize what's wrong. They define the problem as a military and political one, rather than a spiritual one. In *Samuel*, the people demand a human king, completely missing the promised blessing that God would be their king. Surprisingly, God allows them a human king to represent Him as king of their lives. The king is to be *the incarnation* of His rule. The period of Kings begins with Saul about 1000 BC. First Saul, then David and finally Solomon ruled as king over the entire kingdom.

In 2 Samuel 7, we come to another pivotal passage and promise. We call it the Davidic Covenant. God makes a promise and covenant with David promising him that David's son would also be a son to God, that he would build the Temple, and that the throne of his kingdom would be established forever. David's son Solomon did build the temple in Jerusalem, and had an intimate relationship with God like a son with His father. And his throne was indeed established by God. But all of that was a foreshadow of a greater son of David, son of God; who would build God's house with living stones, and whose kingdom will never end. It will be God's promises to Abraham and to David that become the dramatic tension for the book of Nehemiah.

Solomon's many wives turn his heart after other gods. And so Jehovah used the harshness of

Solomon's son to lead to the kingdom being divided into Israel and Judah in 931 BC. And the Northern Kingdom called *Israel* rapidly fell into idolatry and was conquered by the Assyrians as foretold by God in 722 BC. The southern Kingdom of *Judah* also fell into idolatry. God sent the Babylonians to conquer and to take them captive. Jerusalem was conquered in 605 BC and utterly destroyed after a revolt in 586 BC. This is an important date to remember.

II. The Prophetic Context of Nehemiah:

But something very interesting was going on even before the Babylonian Captivity began. God was at work. Through the prophet Isaiah around 700 BC, God declared WHAT would happen to Jerusalem. And over 100 years before its destruction, He spoke through Isaiah of Jerusalem being rebuilt and repopulated and its temple restored through the decree of a king.

*This is what the LORD says— your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:
I am the LORD, who has made all things,
who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself,
²⁵ who foils the signs of false prophets and makes fools of diviners,
who overthrows the learning of the wise and turns it into nonsense,
²⁶ who carries out the words of his servants and fulfills the predictions of his messengers,
who says of Jerusalem, 'It shall be inhabited,' of the towns of Judah, 'They shall be built,' and
of their ruins, 'I will restore them,'*

Then God goes on to tell us WHO will bring it about.

*²⁸ who says of Cyrus, 'He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please;
he will say of Jerusalem, "Let it be rebuilt,"
and of the temple, "Let its foundations be laid."' Isaiah 44:24-28*

God names Cyrus as the king who will decree the rebuilding of Jerusalem and of the Temple nearly 200 years before he even came to power.

And through the prophet Jeremiah, God spoke about the WHEN.

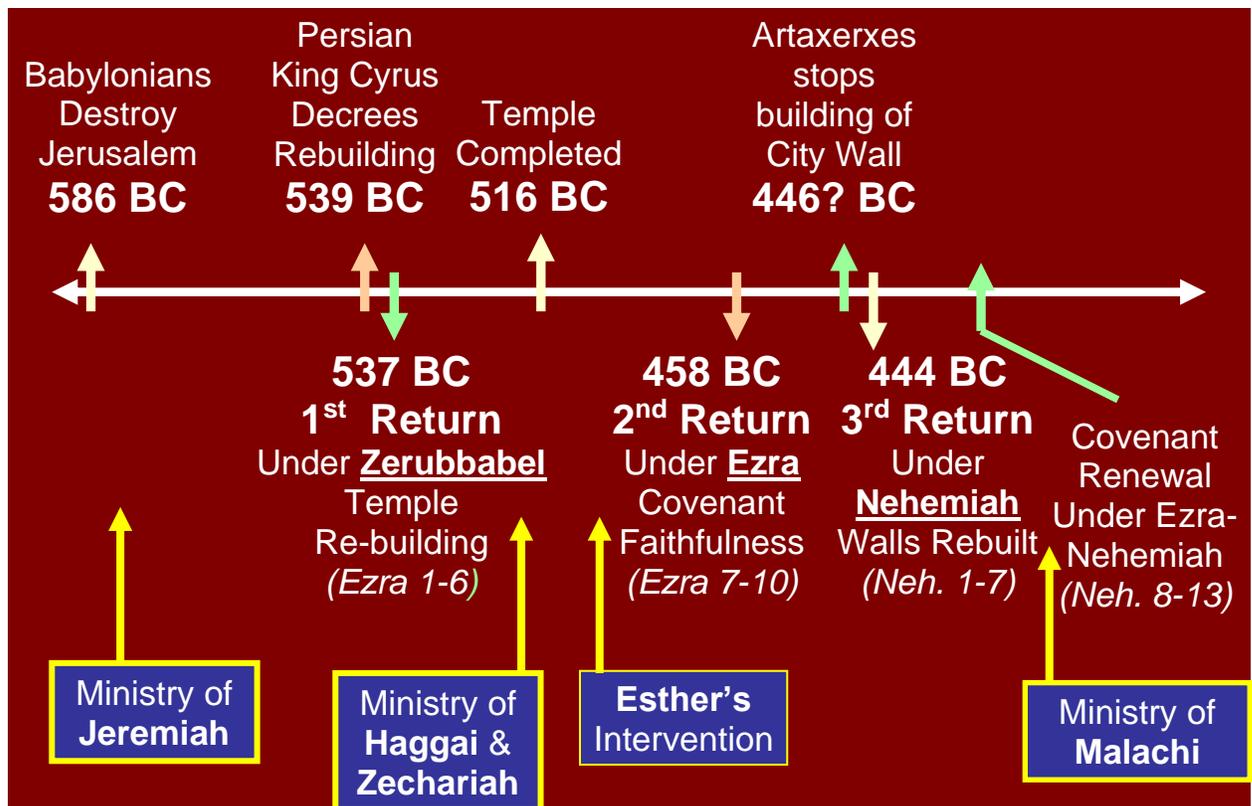
"This is what the LORD says: "When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place. ¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. ¹⁴ I will be found by you," declares the LORD, "and will bring you back from captivity. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you," Jer. 29:10-14

III. The Historical Reality of Nehemiah:

So, what happened? By October of 539 BC, the surviving Jews who remained in captivity in

Babylon had little hope of returning to the land promised them by God. But a new power was on the rise. The combined kingdom of the Medes and Persians under a king named Cyrus. Daniel 5 tells the story of sudden defeat of mighty Babylon on the night a hand appeared writing on the wall a message of doom for King Belshazzar of Babylon. The forces of Cyrus slipped into the city by a water gate and conquered it without a siege.

And astonishingly, in the first year of his reign Cyrus ordered the Jewish exiles to return and rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. Zerubbabel, a descendant of David led the first group to return and within 2 years they had begun the rebuilding of the temple. In spite of much opposition the Temple was completed and dedicated in 516 BC, exactly 70 years after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar. (Ezra 1-6)



A little more than 50 years later, Ezra a Jewish scribe who had devoted himself to study, obey and teach the Law to his people arrived in Jerusalem. The Persian King Artaxerxes had ordered him to offer sacrifices to Jehovah on his behalf. Ezra brought with him, priests, Levites, singers, and temple servants to strengthen worship in the Temple. It was 458 BC. (Ezra 7-10)

But Ezra sought to do more. He sought to rebuild the city. So he began rebuilding its wall. The neighboring people complained to Artaxerxes and accused the Jews of plotting rebellion. Artaxerxes ordered the work of rebuilding stopped.

So 14 years after Ezra had arrived in Jerusalem, Nehemiah hears eyewitness reports that the returned exiles are in great distress and the walls of the city remain broken and burned. After much prayer he receives permission to return and rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. He leads another group of exiles back to Jerusalem in 444 B.C. And after a great struggle, he succeeds in rebuilding the walls. Then he and Ezra lead the people in a renewal of their covenant with God.

The nation of Judah had been taken into captivity by Babylon because of their idolatry and sin in 586 BC. The city of Jerusalem was utterly destroyed and the people were carried away into captivity to Babylon.

- Yet God had foretold **what** would yet happen to the nation through Isaiah more than a hundred years before it was destroyed. It would be restored.
- And God knew **who** would bring this about. He named Cyrus king Persia as the one who would decree it's rebuilding almost 200 years before Cyrus even came to power.
- And God knew **when** these things would take place. He foretold the exact time of this restoration through Jeremiah even as they were being carried away into captivity.

God could only declare in advance the WHAT, the WHO, and the WHEN of Judah's restoration if He was the One in control of kings, and armies and nations.

IV. The Biblical Context of *Nehemiah*:

How does *Nehemiah* and these prophecies fit in with *Kings*, *Chronicles*, and *Ezra*.

1. The book of *Kings* was written during the Exile.

- It tells the story of God's dealing with the Jews from the reign of Solomon up to the middle of the Babylonian Exile.
- The Key Question it answers is: "How did we get here?"
- The obvious answer was their idolatry and sin. But *Kings* has an important theme that points us to another answer. The theme is this: "As the king goes, so go the people!" When righteous kings ruled, the people sought God. When unrighteous kings ruled, the people forgot God. Who the king is in your life, is critical. The kings of Israel were to incarnate the blessing of God's rule over His people. The blessing promised to Abraham had taken on flesh and blood. Who the king is in your life sets the direction for where you end up. Whatever or whoever has primary authority in your life, will determine what direction your life goes. And it remains so today.

2. The book of *Chronicles* was written after the Exile. It was written to the people who had just returned from the Babylonian exile. They had lived under God's judgment in Babylon. Jerusalem had been destroyed. The Temple had been burned and leveled. And even when they returned to Judah, they faced great opposition and hardship. What question do you

think people living under such conditions would be asking themselves?

The Key Question they were asking was: Are we still a part of God's plan? Will God ever forgive us? Will his hand of blessing on us ever be restored? Do the promises made to Abraham and his descendants still apply to us? Will the throne of David be established forever? *Chronicles* was written to answer those questions. Two important themes arise in the book:

- 1) God's continual willingness to have mercy and bless those who repent.
- 2) The heart of the people toward the Lord is reflected in the condition of the Temple.

Beginning and endings of books of the Bible are VERY important. *Chronicles* begins with a series of genealogies from Adam to those who returned from the exile. One purpose of that genealogy is to emphasize that they are still God's chosen people and the recipients of God's promises. And *Chronicles* ends with a restatement of the fulfillment of both Isaiah and Jeremiah's prophecies emphasizing the end of judgment and the promise of blessing.

²⁰ He(Nebuchadnezzar) carried into exile to Babylon the remnant, who escaped from the sword, and they became servants to him and his sons until the kingdom of Persia came to power. ²¹ The land enjoyed its sabbath rests; all the time of its desolation it rested, until the seventy years were completed in fulfillment of the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah.

²² In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing:

²³ "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says: "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Anyone of his people among you—may the LORD his God be with him, and let him go up." 2 Chronicles 36:20-23

Chronicles ends by emphasizing that their return is not a fluke. It is God's program. God is working on their behalf moving the heart of heathen kings. They are still part of God's program and He is ready to bless them once again. The promises to Abraham and his descendants, and David and his descendant are still in effect.

3. **Ezra**: Now here is an interesting thing, how does Ezra begin? The book of *Ezra* begins with the same words the *Chronicles* ends with!

In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing: ² "This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

“The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. ³ Anyone of his people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the LORD, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem. ⁴ And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide him with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.” Ezra 1:1-4

Like a TV episode that picks up the story from the previous episode, *Ezra* starts with a recap of how *Chronicles* ended. The Holy Spirit is picking up from *Chronicles*. One of the themes of *Chronicles* is that the condition of the Temple is a reflection of the condition of people’s hearts toward God. The book of *Ezra* is about rebuilding that Temple. God’s people do this despite great opposition. Opposition is a constant in *Ezra*.

A second theme emphasized in *Ezra* is captured in a phrase throughout the book, *“The gracious hand of the Lord was on us.”* The Holy Spirit tells us the real reason for their success in overcoming opposition is because God’s gracious hand was upon them. This is a direct answer to the question of whether they are still a part of God’s plan and promises. The answer is a resounding “YES!” But God’s hand of blessing is experienced in the midst of difficulty, not in the absence of difficulty. The presence or absence of hardship is not the test of God’s blessing.

Chronicles and *Ezra* are the biblical context for the story of Nehemiah. The ending of one and the beginning of the other emphasize the fulfillment of the prophecies of restoration given by Isaiah and Jeremiah. This means that the Nehemiah we are about to be introduced to in Chapter 1, is not merely a servant of the King of Persia; he is a servant of the King of History. The One who knows *the What, and the Who, and the When*, is still in control. He is directing events in this world and invites them and us to participate by faith in what He is doing. And because that is so, we are not discouraged or disheartened to hear reports from Jerusalem about broken walls and gates burned with fire. They are still the recipients of the blessing promised to Abraham; *“I will be your God, and you will be my people.”* The throne of the king in David’s line will be established forever.

So Ezra and Nehemiah became co-leaders of Israel. Ezra led as a teacher and priest. Nehemiah led as governor. Together, led and empowered by God, they will help reestablish God’s people in the land of Israel. This will happen because they sought God and *“God’s gracious hand was upon them”* to accomplish His purposes in history.

V. Conclusion:

The book of *Nehemiah* begins with a report of devastation and discouragement. More than 90

years have passed since the decree was given by Cyrus to return and rebuild Jerusalem. Yet the report declares, *“The wall of Jerusalem is broken down and its gates have been burned with fire.”* I’m sure that report made many people want to give up and quit.

We see the *walls broken down* around us too.

- Marriages are broken. Kids and families are shattered.
- Gambling destroys people’s lives while government rakes in the revenues.
- In January of this year, the opioid epidemic led to 5.3 deaths per day in BC, or 165 deaths in a single month. This is not a “homeless people in downtown Vancouver” problem. This is a “professional and working class people in Langley” problem. It is parents like the single dad in our basement suite a couple of years ago who survived only because someone administered CPR until the paramedics arrived.
- People literally put on digital masks these days by “photoshopping” their picture and lying about their marital status and age on dating sites.
- And affair matching websites seem to be thriving ventures.

The destruction of lives is taking place on a vast scale in Canada today. The people of this church have personally experienced this devastation too. If you listen to their stories, you will hear the heartache. And the influence of the church on Western society has also diminished greatly. Many people are discouraged and want to quit.

But this is not a time for despair or to throw in the towel. It is not time to bemoan the woes of our age or of the next generation. Because the One who knows the What, and the Who, and the When; is not on vacation nor is He asleep. He knows the plans that He has for us; and for our neighbors, and friends, and co-workers, and classmates who are wounded and broken. *“Plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.* We have a word for this. We call it “the sovereignty of God”. He is still sovereign and He is still on the throne. COVID has not surprised Him and I suspect He has purposes in this far beyond what we can see. He is not surprised by political polarization, or race riots, or the latest viral craze on the internet.

In the midst of it all He whispers His invitation; *“Call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. And I will be found by you,” declares the LORD.*” We have much to learn from Nehemiah. He will teach us look more closely at the broken walls and the burned gates in our city. He will challenge us to call upon God more, and to hunger for Him more. *Nehemiah* makes us long for *“the gracious hand of God to be upon us,* and for Him restore what has been burned and broken. Nehemiah will challenge us to see with the eyes of faith that which has not yet come to pass. And we will discover together with Ezra and Nehemiah that, opposition is a constant for those who follow God. And while people provide the visible opposition; ultimately Ephesians tells us the problem

is not people but the powers of darkness. And if that is true no effort no matter how noble or energetic will overcome that opposition apart from prayer. We will need action. But first we need prayer.

Reflection Questions:

- 1) What *“broken walls or burned gates”* bother you the most about our world today? What has touched you or your family personally?
- 2) How have you been praying about these matters? What would God have to do to deepen your prayer life?
- 3) Where have you seen answers to prayer and where are you enduring in prayer for something that God has placed on your heart?
- 4) Bonus question: How do you go about listening for God to direct you specifically to pray? Can you give an example?

“The walls are broken down and the gates are burned with fire.” There are times when I suspect, God allows evil to flourish because He is trying to awaken His people to humble themselves, to weep and mourn and fast, confessing their sins; not the sins of the world, and to pray. Perhaps now is our time.