



WORKING IN A HOSTILE WORLD

Studies in Nehemiah

Lesson 1

YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN!

I. THE HOSTILE WORLD IN NEHEMIAH'S DAY

A. How the Jews Landed in Persia

1. The fall of Assyria and Judah to Babylon.

When the Israelites entered The Promised Land under Joshua, they were undefeatable. You could say that they were a "superpower" of their day. The Lord was with them, because they were with the Lord. Over time however they became corrupt in the structure of their society, and in their obedience to God. The Lord then left them to the mercy of the many enemies that surrounded them, which of course was no mercy at all. Without The Lord, they were brutally conquered.

After the death of King Solomon, Israel split into 2 kingdoms - "Israel" with their capital up in Samaria, and "Judah" with their capital at Jerusalem.

In 722 B.C.E. (Before Christian Era) Israel in the north (i.e., Samaria) had finally fallen to Assyrian aggression as a punishment by God. Assyria herself was eventually overrun by the Babylonians when they plundered Ninevah, Assyria's capital.

Because of several reformations, Judah held out for 136 years more. But, as with Israel, Judah became deeply involved in paganism, idolatry, and witchcraft - all blatant violations of The Ten Commandments. They ignored all of the warnings that God sent to them through His prophets, including Jeremiah.

The Babylonians repeatedly attacked Judah's capital, Jerusalem, finally laying siege to it and destroying it in 586 B.C.E. Babylonia exiled many of Jerusalem's important people (artisans and craftsmen). This too was a punishment by God just as Jeremiah and the other prophets had predicted.

2. The 70 year reign of the Babylonian Empire.

Jeremiah (Jeremiah 25:12 and 29:10-14) predicted that the Babylonian exile (captivity) would last 70 years. Some have seen this as merely a round number. One problem is that the fall of Assyria was gradual and over a period of time.

The prophet, Daniel, seems to have taken it quite literally. As a student of prophecy, Daniel understood that according to Jeremiah's prophecy, Israel would face seventy years of captivity. Actually it was 70 years of Babylonian rule of which Jeremiah was speaking (See Jeremiah 25:9-12).

It seems clear from the context in both of these chapters (Jeremiah 25:12 and 29:10-14) that the seventy years applies to Babylon itself, not to the period of time that the people of Judah were to spend in Babylon.

Babylon was conquered by Cyrus the Great of Persia in 539 B.C., so this is the end date. Many suggest the beginning of this period to be in 609 B.C. This would make 70 years. Daniel clearly understood that the seventy-year exile was drawing to a close.

The Assyrian empire, after becoming weakened through civil war, fell to the combined forces of the Medes and the Babylonians, finally being extinguished

in 609 B.C. In this final battle, the Assyrians and the Egyptians fought side-by-side.

Prior to being conquered by the Medes and Babylonians, the Egyptians fought against Judah - and Judah lost. This is the battle where Josiah was killed. The chronology of Judah places this event in 608 B.C., but that is close enough to 609 B.C. when a 1 year margin of error is assumed.

The following time period helps to explain the 70 years:

609 BC - Defeat of Assyrian Empire

70 Years of Babylonian Empire

539 BC - Defeat of Babylonian Empire

This is probably the proper fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy.

- (See David Petrie, www.bibleworldhistory.com)

3. The purpose of the Jewish Exile for 70 years.

The purpose of the 70 years was that God would bring about forcibly the Sabbath rests of the land that were ignored by Israel. 2 Chronicles 36:20-23 (NIV) says,

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. 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.

In Leviticus 26:34-35, 43 God had commanded a seven year cycle for the land. It was to lie fallow every seventh year. On the basis of these passages Israel must have broken this commandment for 490 years in order to be punished for seventy years.

B. The End of the Exile under Persian Policy

The Persians maintained a different policy toward conquered peoples than Babylonia, permitting them to return to their homelands. Ezra writes:

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: "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.'" Ezra 1:1-4 (NIV)

Their permissive policy was not all magnanimous. The Persians needed a loyal Judah as a buffer to Egypt. The first return of the Jews came in 538/537 B.C.E. when Zerubbabel and several thousand Jews went up to the city of God to establish the altar and resume sacrifices (Ezra 1-6).

Later, under the reign of Artaxerxes I (465-423), both Ezra (Ezra 7-10) and Nehemiah returned, in 458 and 445 respectively. Nehemiah remained in Jerusalem for at least twelve years though it only took him 52 days to complete the building of the walls (Nehemiah 6:15).

II. JEWISH LIFE IN EXILE

A. Jewish Life in Babylon

Max Demont is speaking of the majority of the Jews in the exile (he calls the

godly ones “zealots”) when he writes:

Many Jewish history books draw a picture of sorrow and desolation when writing of the Jewish captivity in Babylon. Fortunately, this is an inaccurate picture. In the sixth century Babylonia was ruled by a series of enlightened kings who treated their captives with tolerance. Those Jews who “wept by the rivers of Babylon” were but a handful of zealots; the rest of the Jews fell in love with the country, prospered, and became cultured.

Babylonian trade routes took the Jews to every corner of the known world, making them men of commerce and international trade. In the libraries of Babylon the Jews found a world treasure of manuscripts; they acquired a love for books and a taste for learning. They acquired manners, grace, and refinement.

The unknown poet who in Psalm 137 sang, “If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth,” may have expressed a sentiment current at the beginning of the exile, but certainly not a sentiment prevalent fifty years later.

- Jews, God, and History

In The Indestructible Jews, he says:

Babylonian trade routes guided the venturesome Jews throughout the then-known world, transforming them from “parochial men” into cosmopolitan citizens. Their commercial trading outposts became centers for thriving Jewish communities. In the libraries of Babylon, intellectual Jews found a new world of new ideas. Within five decades, exiled Jews bobbed to the surface of the top echelons of Babylonian society, in business enterprises, in the scholastic world, in court circles. They became leaders in commerce, men of learning, advisors to kings. But they remained Jews.

It is no wonder that when Cyrus allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem, relatively few were willing to accept the adventure.

B. Jewish Life in Persia

I.S.B.E. records various customs in Persia that help us to understand better the books of Ezra, Esther and Nehemiah.

1. **Writing:** - ...Writing was introduced from Babylonia through Elam.

2. **Institutions and Customs:** ...The Achaemenian [a dynasty that ruled Persia] kings probably borrowed from Babylon and further developed their system of royal posts (Est 8:14) or messengers (and even the words *aggaroi*, and *astandai*, used to denote them, are almost certainly Babylonian). Of these men's pace it was said, "No mortal thing is quicker." The custom of showing special honor to the "Benefactors of the King" (Herodotos viii.85: *orosaggai* = Av. *uru* + *sanh*, "widely renowned") is referred to in Est 6:1-3, and that of covering the (head and) face of a criminal condemned to death (with a large black cap) (Est 7:8-9) occurs in the *Shahnamah* also.

(1) **The king** was an arbitrary ruler with unlimited power, the council of seven princes who stood nearest to the throne (Est 1:14; compare Herodotos iii. 70-84) having no share in the government.

(2) **The army.** - As soldiers, the Persians were famous as archers and javelin-throwers; they were also skilled in the use of the

slings, and above all in riding. Boys were taken from the women's into the men's part of the house at the age of 5, and were there trained in "riding, archery and speaking the truth" until 20 years old. In Darius' inscriptions, as well as in the Avesta, lying is regarded as a great crime.

(3) Marriage. - *The Persians practiced polygamy, and marriages between those next of kin were approved of. Pride and garrulity are mentioned as distinctive of the Persian character.*

- International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia,

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The tolerant attitude of the rulers at the time allowed personalities such as Ezra, Daniel, Esther, Mordecai, and Nehemiah to play a role in the Persian court. It also allowed Jews complete freedom in trades such as handicrafts, weaving, gold and silversmithing, jewelry, and as merchants.

Most people practiced Zoroastrianism - the religious system founded by Zoroaster (c. 600 B.C.) and set forth in the Avesta, teaching the worship of their supreme deity, Ahura Mazda, in the context of a universal struggle between the forces of light and of darkness. Although they dominated the country at the time, they had no interest in proselytizing, as did other religions. Zoroaster's dualism influenced the traditions of Judeo-Christian-Muslim faiths, but it did not survive.

The Book of Esther reflects a number of important features of the Persian culture which are also found elsewhere in the Bible, especially in the book of Daniel. These features, in the Book of Esther, include a derisive representation of Persian rites of gluttony, drinking, exuberant public eroticism, abnormal pomp, and display of richness and bowing down to idols or men.

History tells us of the almost unimaginable wealth of the Persian Empire. Herodotus writes, for example, that after the battle of Plataea,

...the Greeks dispersed themselves about the Persian camp and found tents furnished with gold and silver, and beds overlaid with gold and overlaid with silver, and mixing-bowls of gold, and cups and drinking vessels [i.e., rhytons]. They found also sacks laid upon wagons, in which there proved to be caldrons both of gold and of silver; and from the dead bodies which lay there they stripped bracelets and collars, and also their swords if they were of gold, for as to embroidered raiment, there was no account made of it.

- Herodotus, Histories 9.

III. THE BENEFITS OF THE EXILE

A. Cured of Idolatry

The Jews were almost completely cured of idolatry. No matter what their faults and downfalls were in later periods of history, they never returned to the idolatry of the nations around them as they had. The Babylonian Captivity had taught them to abhor the worship of idols. This abhorrence and fear of idolatry is one of the reasons marriages with the Canaanite women was so repulsive to Ezra and Nehemiah – they knew the wives would lead the Jewish husbands into idolatry.

B. The New Order of “Scribes” and Rabbinic Literature

The exile caused them to be separated from Jerusalem and the Temple and

thus there came a new order called the "Scribes." In their earliest stages they served the Jewish colonists in a very valuable way, especially in teaching, guarding and preserving the Scriptures. The Scribes produced the rabbinical literature known as the **Mishna** (God's laws allegedly passed down orally and not recorded in Scripture), the **Gemara** (a commentary on the Mishna and a compilation of accepted traditions). These two volumes were later added to and combined to form the **Talmud** (Babylonian Talmud). There were also other important literature and secular writings.

C. The Synagogues

Since they had no temple and thus no sacrifices, places for assembly, or "synagogues" (the Greek word literally means a "gathering together"), were instituted in order to conduct formal Jewish worship, and to provide schools for education while they were far from their homeland.

Instead of a temple for sacrifice, the Jews built synagogues for religious assembly; instead of rituals for God, the Jews offered prayers to God. The synagogue became the prototype for the church of the Christians; prayer became the universal symbol of devotion to God.

D. The Teaching of the Scriptures

The Jewish people pursued the Scriptures. They compiled the Scriptures and studied them intensely, realizing the reason for the Captivity, and teaching this to their children. Later Ezra, the scribe, taught the Scriptures and gave light to its meaning.

E. Unification of the Jewish People

Similar to the captivity in Egypt, the Babylonian Captivity brought a common hardship and isolation which produced a common sympathy and a closer relationship with each other. They returned united and purified. Anyone who would not learn this lesson remained in Babylon only to become lost in history.

(See http://www.biblehistory.com/map_babylonian_captivity/map_of_the_deportation_of_judah_the_benefits_of_the_babylonian_captivity.html)

IV. INTRODUCTION TO NEHEMIAH: WORKING IN A HOSTILE WORLD

A. Authors: Ezra and Nehemiah (and a Possible Chronicler)

1. In the early Hebrew canon Ezra and Nehemiah was one book (Ezra-Nehemiah).

They were regarded as one by the Babylonian Talmud, Josephus and Melito of Sardis. Perhaps Chronicles and Ezra-Nehemiah were a first and second volume of Hebrew history.

The books were not divided in the Hebrew canon until around the fifteenth century A.D. (1448) when a Hebrew manuscript divided the books into two.

The LXX (Septuagint) originally also grouped Ezra and Nehemiah together as one book calling the canonical Ezra-Nehemiah "Esdras B" or "2 Esdras" with Esdras being the apocryphal book of Esdras. Later, by the time of Origen (Alexandrian writer, Christian theologian, and teacher – c. A.D. 185 - 254), the LXX divided the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The Latin Vulgate divided Ezra-Nehemiah into First and Second Ezra because of the duplicate list in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7.

- 2. Most of the book of Nehemiah seems to have been written by Nehemiah since it is in the first person (cf. Nehemiah 1:1-7:5; 12:31-13:31).**
- 3. Ezra may have incorporated into one work his writings in Ezra and Nehemiah (See Nehemiah chapter 7) as well as Nehemiah's personal memoirs.**

But would one author, e.g. Ezra, have repeated himself as is done in Ezra 2:1-70 and Nehemiah 7:6-70?

- 4. Another possibility is that a later, but not much later, Chronicler combined the works of Ezra and Nehemiah into the canonical work of Ezra-Nehemiah.**

B. Date: About 443 B.C. to 425 B.C.

Nehemiah's first arrival in Jerusalem was probably in 445/444 B.C. Nehemiah 1:1 and 2:1 affirms that the events of Nehemiah occurred in the twentieth year of king Artaxerxes. Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem the first time twelve to thirteen years after Ezra arrived.

Nehemiah's second arrival in Jerusalem was probably in 433/432-420 B.C. Nehemiah 13:6-7 reads, "*But during all this I was not in Jerusalem, for in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes king of Babylon I had returned to the king. Then after certain days I obtained leave from the king, and I came to Jerusalem and discovered the evil...*"

Nehemiah left Jerusalem in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes. (He may also have returned to Jerusalem in the thirty-second year of Artaxerxes. This is not certain since the text reads, "*After some time,...*").

Conclusion: While portions of Ezra and Nehemiah were probably written earlier during the lives and events of their authors, it seems that they were combined and canonized some time after Nehemiah's second return to Jerusalem in 433/432 B.C. The events cover a period of about 12 years.

C. Title of the Book

Though Ezra and Nehemiah was originally one book, the last half of that book draws its name from the prominence of Nehemiah, contemporary of Ezra and cupbearer to the king of Persia. Nehemiah's name means "*Jehovah consoles or comforts.*"

D. Themes and Purpose

The book of Nehemiah continues the history of the Jews who returned from exile. Although cupbearer to Artaxerxes, the Persian king, Nehemiah gave up his position to become governor of Jerusalem and lead the people in repairing the city walls.

Ezra and Nehemiah were contemporaries (see Nehemiah 8:2, 9) and were both men of God, but served Jehovah in different capacities. While Ezra was a priest and involved more with the religious restoration of the returning remnant, Nehemiah was a layman and served in a political capacity as governor in the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem.

Nehemiah was also written to show the obvious hand of God in the establishment of His people in their homeland in the years after their exile.

E. Key Words

With the rebuilding of the walls being the key element, the key words are "wall"

and “walls,” used some 33 times and “build,” “building,” “rebuilding,” etc., are found more than 20 times.

F. Key Verses

4:6 “So we built the wall and the entire wall was joined together to half (its height), for the people had a mind to work.”

6:15-16 “So the wall was finished on the twenty-fifth [day] of Elul, in fifty-two days. And it happened, when all our enemies heard (of it,) and all the nations around us saw (these things,) that they were very disheartened in their own eyes; for they perceived that this work was done by our God.”

8:8 “So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped (them) to understand the reading.”

G. Key Chapters

Chapters 1-2 - Nehemiah’s prayer and God’s answer.

Chapters 3-7 - The work on the walls, the opposition, and its completion.

Chapter 9 - The confession of the people and their reaffirmation of the covenant.

H. Key People

Nehemiah, Artaxerxes, Sanballet, and Ezra.

I. Christ as Seen in Nehemiah

Nehemiah portrays Christ in His willingness to leave His high position in order to bring about His work of restoration.

Nehemiah 13:5-9 reminds one of Christ cleansing the Temple (See John 2:13-16).

Additionally, the decree of Artaxerxes marks the beginning point of Daniel’s prophecy of seventy weeks of years which, though interrupted by an unspecified time, begins the countdown for the return of Messiah (Daniel 9:25-27).

J. Outline

1. Overall:

Nehemiah also falls into two specific issues:

a The rebuilding of the walls (1-7)

b The restoration of the people (8-13)

2. Specifics:

I. The Rebuilding of the Walls (1-7)

A. Preparation for Rebuilding (1:1-2:20)

B. Rebuilding (3:1-7:73)

II. The Restoration of the People (8:1-13:31)

A. The Renewal of the Covenant (8:1-10:39)

B. The Obedience of the People to the Covenant (11:1-13:31)

V. PLAN OF STUDY

A. Each Week We Will Answer the Previous Week’s Questions.

B. Plan

Chapters

1. Introduction and Background of Nehemiah

2. A Sense of Mission -The Third Return -	1-2
3. A Sense of Community -“We Will Arise and Build!”	3-5
4. A Sense of Manliness -The Completion of the Wall	6-7
5. A Sense of Obedience to the Word of God	8
6. A Sense of Revival	9
7. A Sense of Covenant	10-12:26
8. A Sense of Dedication	12:27–13:31

SUMMARY AND APPLICATION

The book shows how to work in the midst of opposition. Under Nehemiah’s leadership, the people accomplished in fifty-two days what had not been done in the previous ninety-four years or since the first return under Zerubbabel. By obedient faith they were able to overcome what appeared to be insurmountable opposition.

The walls rebuilt by Nehemiah could represent strength and protection. In ancient cities the only real means of defense were the walls. Sometimes these walls were tremendously thick and high. The walls of the city of Babylon, as recounted in the story of Daniel, were some 380 feet thick and over 100 feet high - massive, tremendous walls. Therefore, the city of Babylon considered itself very safe.

What does it mean, then, to rebuild the walls of your life? Nehemiah is the account of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. And Jerusalem is a symbol of the city of God, God's dwelling place and the center of life for the world. In an individual life, then, the rebuilding of the walls would be a picture of re-establishing the strength of that life. We have all met people whose defenses have crumbled away. They have become human derelicts, drifting up and down the streets of our large cities, absolutely hopeless and helpless. But God in grace frequently reaches down and gets some of those people and brings them out to rebuild the walls. This is the picture of the way the walls of any life, of any local church, of any community, of any nation, can be rebuilt into strength and power and purpose again.

– Ray Stedman, “Nehemiah: Rebuilding the Walls”,
Discovery Publishing, a ministry of Peninsula Bible Church.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Read Lesson 1.

1. Underline what you found interesting about the history of Israel or about life in the Exile. Read Nehemiah Chapters 1 and 2
2. What grieved Nehemiah?
3. Hanani reported two things to Nehemiah. What were they and why were they important? (1:3)
4. Nehemiah's response was quite dramatic! He did four things. Make a list of them. How do you usually react to problems?
5. Most of chapter 1 is about prayer. Read through the prayer and write down:
 - a. What Nehemiah calls God.
 - b. What does he say that God does for His people?
 - c. How did Nehemiah view himself as he prayed?
 - d. What did Nehemiah ask God to do for him? On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is tiny and 10 is huge, how big was this request?
 - e. What challenge to your own prayer life do you find from analyzing Nehemiah's prayer?
6. Who opposed Nehemiah coming to help the children of Israel?
7.
 - a. When the king gave him all he asked for, who did Nehemiah attribute the gifts to?
 - b. What does this teach us about how God works in the circumstances of our lives?
 - c. Share a time when God did something like this in your life.
8.
 - a. What does chapter 2 tell us about Sanballat and Tobiah, vs.10 & 19?
 - b. Why do think God allows opposition in our lives?